

Sexual Attitudes & Reporting Sexual Assault to Law Enforcement

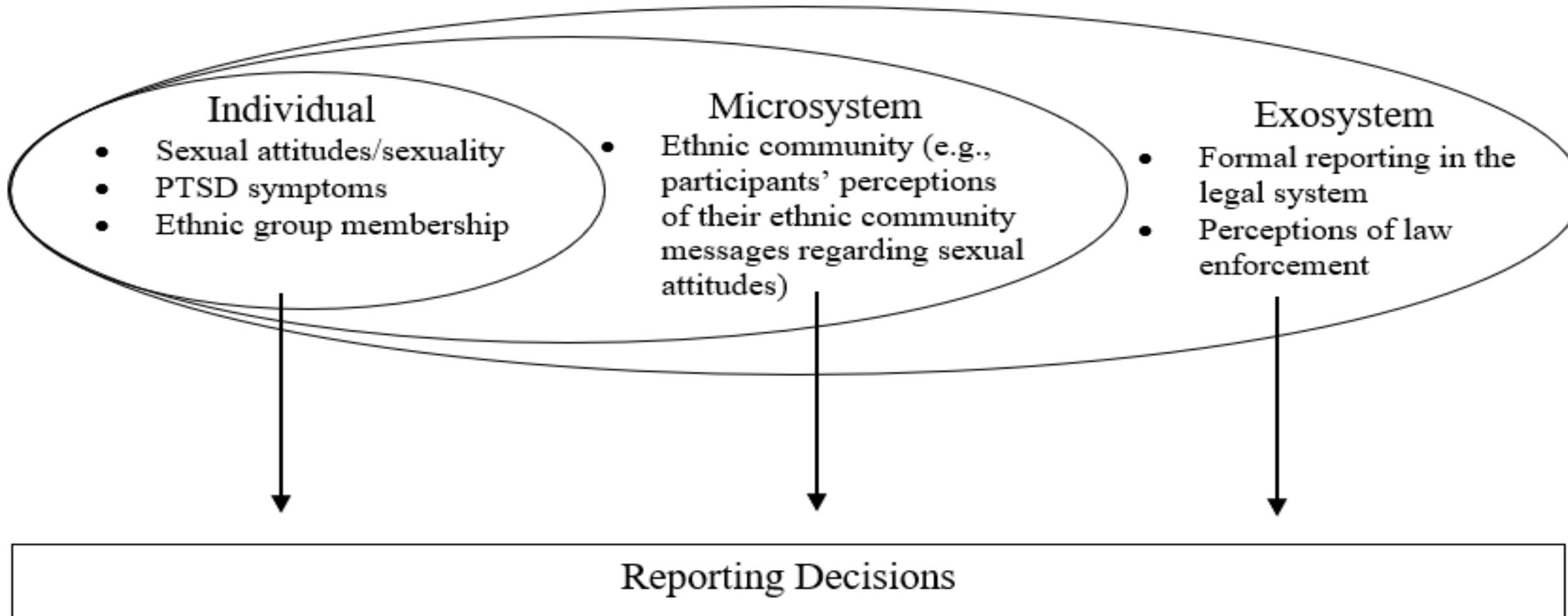
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Introduction

Most sexual assault goes unreported to law enforcement.¹ Though barriers to reporting have received research attention, studies have yet to assess the role that sexual attitudes may play in reporting decisions. The current study used an ecological framework to examine the link between perceptions of sexual attitudes – personal and from one’s ethnic community – and reporting sexual assault to law enforcement while accounting for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom severity, ethnicity, and perceptions of the police. Understanding the links between sexual attitudes and reporting decisions is important to guide practices that may help women see law enforcement reporting as an option.

Figure 1

Contributions of Individual, Microsystem, and Exosystem Factors on Reporting Decisions



Method

Data were from a larger study on social reactions to sexual assault disclosures made to formal supports (e.g., healthcare providers, the police).²

Inclusion Criteria: Women ages 18 years and older who had a recent unwanted sexual experience that was disclosed to a formal support in the past year; residing in a Mountain-West city.

Procedure: Recruited from community-based and criminal justice agencies.

Analysis: A binary logistic regression analysis was used using SPSS to determine whether perceptions of sexual attitudes were associated with reporting sexual assault to law enforcement. The model included personal and ethnic community sexual attitudes as well as other key study variables (PTSD symptoms, ethnicity, and perceptions of law enforcement). Four additional logistic regression models were performed to examine whether any patterns differed within groups defined by race and ethnicity.

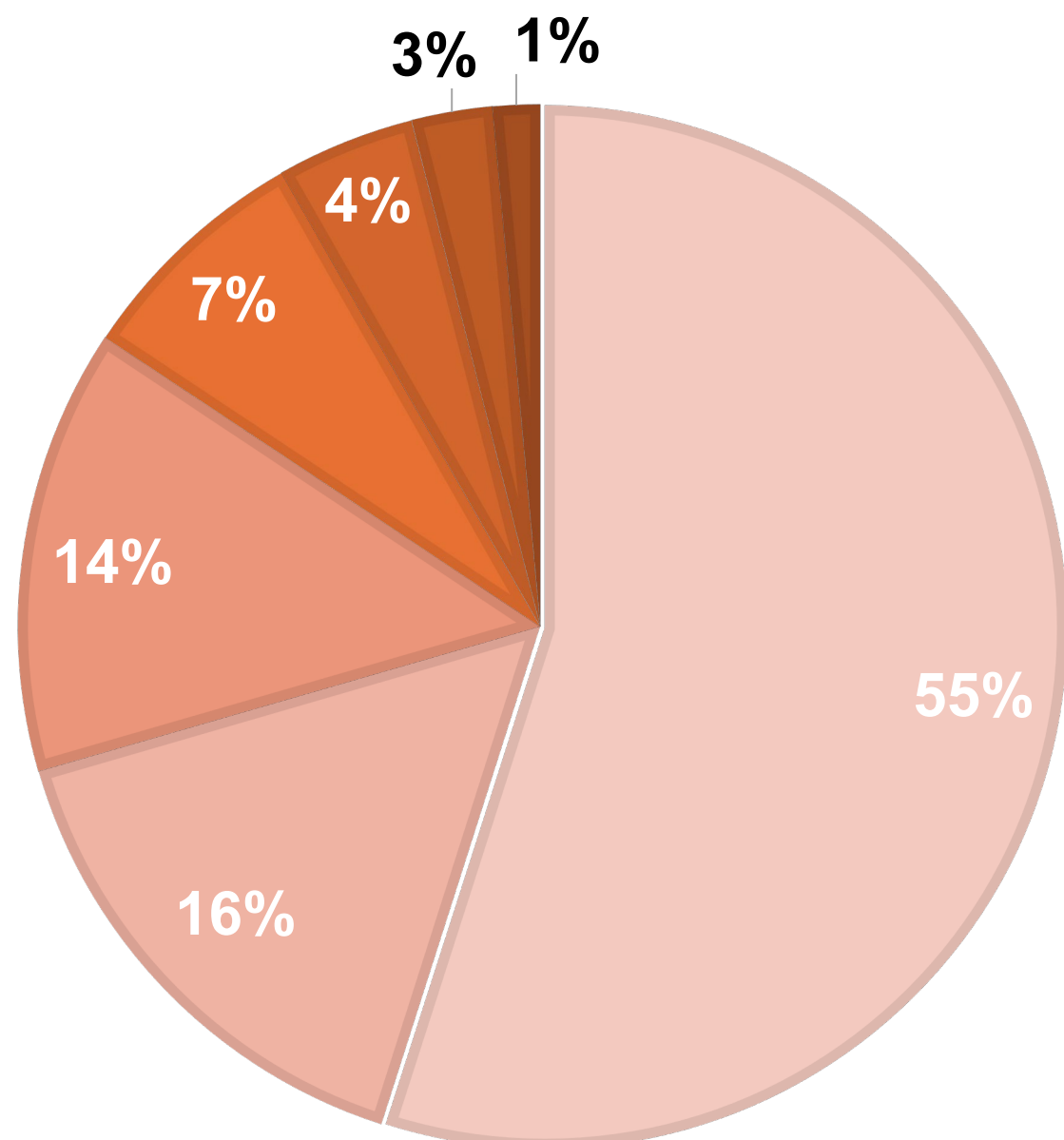
Variable	Measurement
Demographics	Age, ethnic and racial background, education, and occupation
Law Enforcement Reporting ³	Reporting sexual assault to the police (yes/no).
Victim Engagement ³	Perceptions of the police, including beliefs about being blamed, not believed, or not receiving help (regardless of reporting decision; range 1-5).
Posttraumatic Diagnostic Scale ⁴	PTSD symptom severity in the past month related to the sexual assault (range 1-3).
Women’s Sexual Attitudes ⁵ (WSA)	Attitudes toward sexual behavior, including beliefs about sexual intercourse, sexually explicit content, sexual activity, and marriage (range 1-5).
Ethnic Community Sexual Attitudes ⁵ (ECSA)	Attitudes toward messages received about sex and sexuality from their ethnic communities (range 1-5).

Results

Participants ($n = 228$)
Age: average = 34.88 years ($SD = 11.78$, range = 18-62)

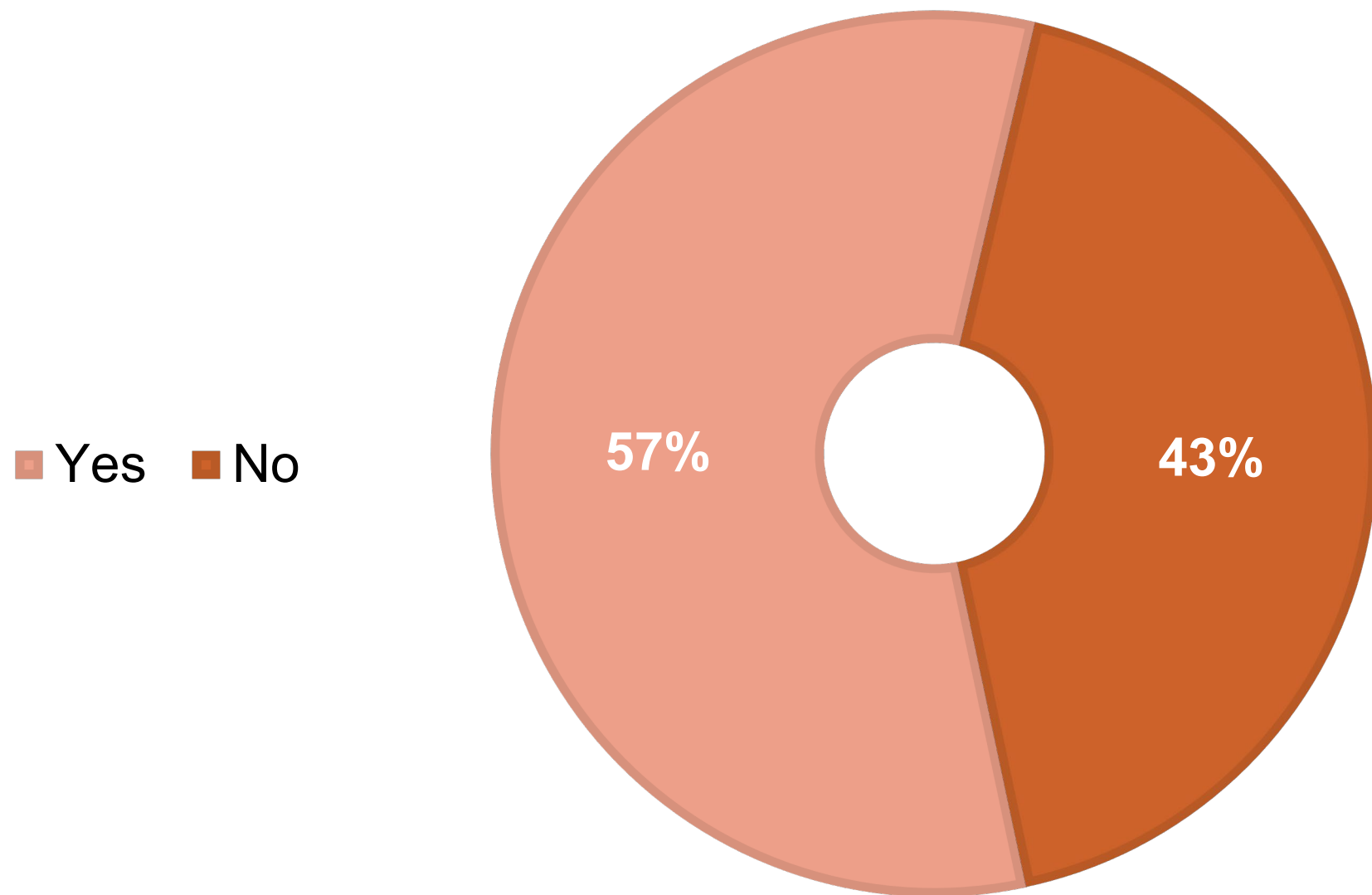
RACE & ETHNICITY

- White
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latina
- Native American/Alaskan Native
- Other
- Asian
- Pacific Islander



Results (cont.)

Sexual Assault Reporting to Law Enforcement

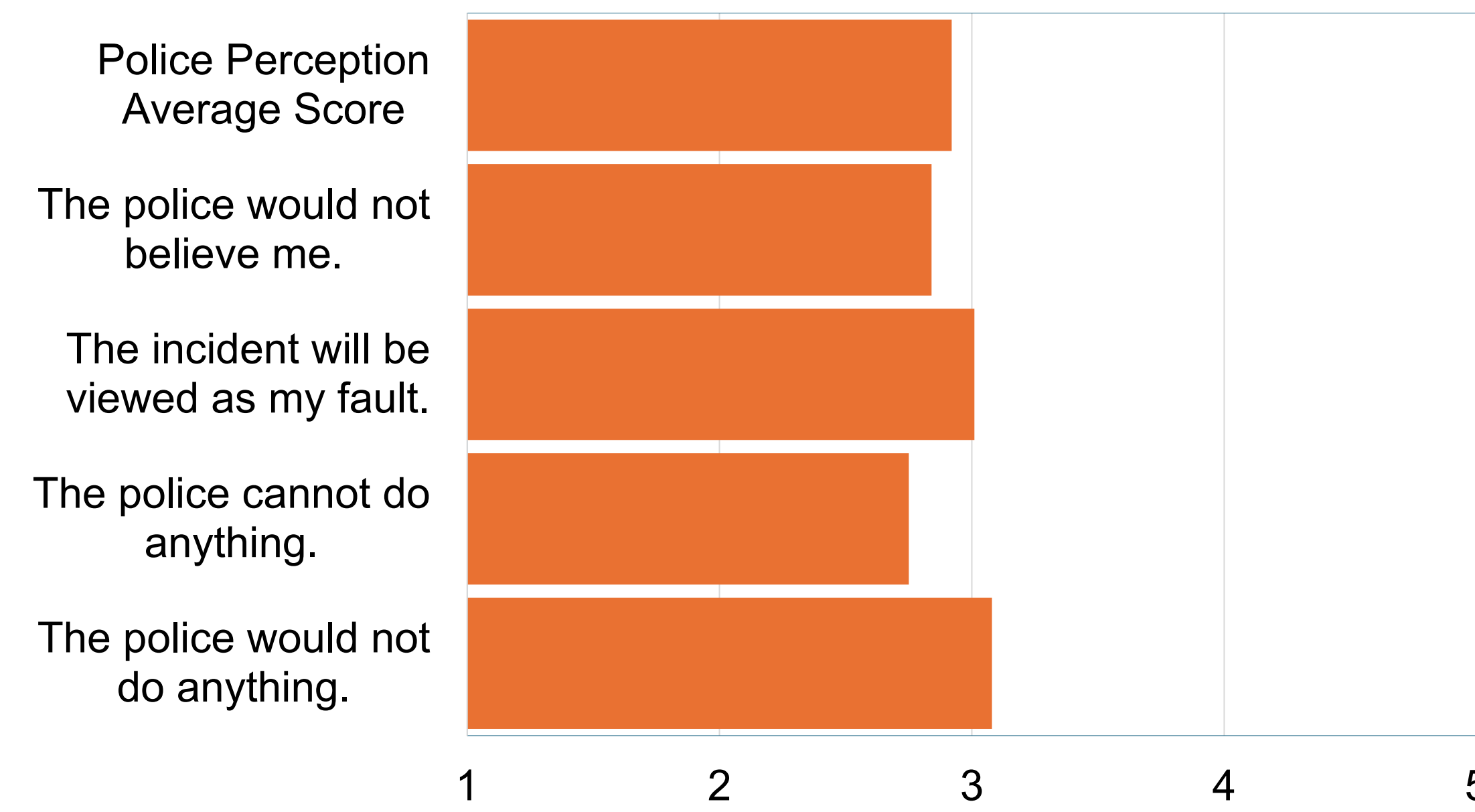


Logistic Regression for Women Reporting Sexual Assault to Law Enforcement

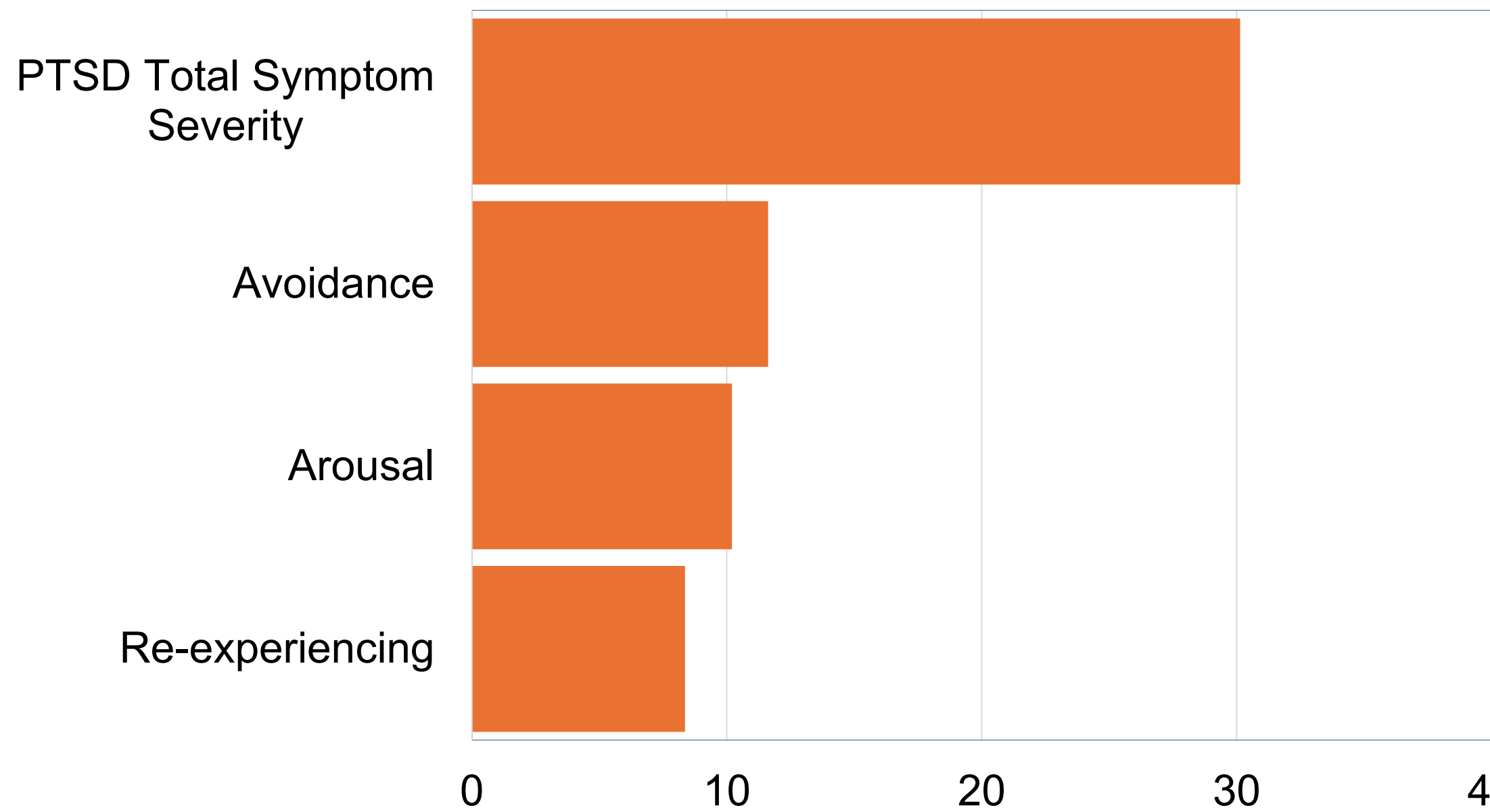
Variable	B	SE	Exp(B)	95%CI
Black/African American Women				
PDS: PTSD Total Symptom	-.00	.04	.10	[.93, 1.07]
WSA Average Score	-.46	.45	.63	[.26, 1.52]
ECSA Average Score	-.43	.48	.65	[.26, 1.67]
Police Perception Average Score	-.94	.32	.39*	[.21, .74]
Constant	5.28	2.99	196.51	
White Women				
PDS: PTSD Total Symptom	.035	.02	1.04	[.10, .11]
WSA Average Score	-.036	.25	.97	[.59, 1.58]
ECSA Average Score	-.11	.26	.90	[.54, 1.50]
Police Perception Average Score	-.80	.19	.45***	[.31, .65]
Constant	2.24	1.25	9.39	
Hispanic/Latina Women				
PDS: PTSD Total Symptom	.091	.06	1.10	[.98, 1.22]
WSA Average Score	.32	.72	1.38	[.34, 5.67]
ECSA Average Score	-.25	.71	.78	[.19, 3.17]
Police Perception Average Score	-1.06	.44	.35*	[.15, .83]
Constant	.48	3.65	1.62	
Ethnic Minority Women				
PDS: PTSD Total Symptom	.038	.05	1.04	[.95, 1.13]
WSA Average Score	.29	.56	1.34	[.44, 4.03]
ECSA Average Score	-.32	.61	.72	[.22, 2.38]
Police Perception Average Score	-.89	.43	.41*	[.12, .95]
Constant	2.20	2.80	8.99	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Police Perception Average Score



PTSD Symptom Severity Average Score



Discussion

Perceptions of the Police

- More negative perceptions of the police were linked with a lower likelihood of having reported the sexual assault to law enforcement.
- Not reporting sexual assault to law enforcement was linked with stronger held beliefs that women would be blamed, not believed, or that the police could not and would not do anything.

PTSD Symptoms: Higher PTSD symptoms were linked with greater likelihood of having reported sexual assault to law enforcement.

Personal & Ethnic Community Sexual Attitudes: There were no significant associations between women’s reports of their own sexual attitudes and those of their ethnic communities and law enforcement reporting.

Groups Defined by Race or Ethnic Identity

- The more negative perceptions of the police, the less likely women were to report sexual assault to law enforcement regardless of racial or ethnic minority group.
- PTSD symptoms and both women’s perceptions of sexual attitudes and those of their ethnic communities were not significant in any of the four additional models tested.

Implications

Perceptions of the Police: Women have few options for justice outside the criminal legal system. Reporting decisions for both Women of Color and White women were linked with their perceptions of law enforcement. When women anticipate that they will be blamed, not believed, or not receive help, they are less likely to report. Therefore, communities that want to keep doors open to law enforcement reporting should focus on trauma-informed law enforcement policies and practices that increase the likelihood that women’s reports are taken seriously.

PTSD Symptoms: PTSD severity may lead individuals to recognize the harm caused by the assault and interpret what happened to them as more serious, which may encourage them to report their assault to law enforcement. Additionally, the emotions and symptoms associated with PTSD, such as avoidance, re-experiencing, and arousal, may motivate women to seek formal intervention via reporting to law enforcement.

Limitations

- Lack of differences across models should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. For example, analyses were conducted on archival data from a primarily White sample. The dataset did not include measures of experiences of marginalization or discrimination by law enforcement or other formal support based on race, ethnicity, and other intersecting identities.
- This cross-sectional study cannot establish causality. While data revealed that higher PTSD symptoms increased the likelihood of reporting decisions, we could also have considered the inverse – reporting to law enforcement can lead to increased PTSD symptoms. For example, stress related to reporting and navigating the criminal justice system or negative social reactions to law enforcement may contribute to greater PTSD symptom severity.

Future Research

- Focus on survivor-centered services that support survivors regardless of their decision to report to law enforcement.
- Increase community-based participatory research to provide better care and supportive interventions for women directly impacted by victimization.

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Acknowledgements

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