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**JUSTICE REVISITED FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS: A QUALITATIVE  
ANALYSIS OF THE INITIAL PHASE OF MOBILE, AL'S PROMISE INITIATIVE**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of South Alabama  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Clinical Mental Health Counseling

by  
Savannah A. Rommel  
B.S., University of Mobile, 2014  
August 2022

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ADA	Assistant District Attorney
CQR	Consensual Qualitative Research
MDT	Multi-Disciplinary Team
MFE	Medical Forensic Examination
RCA	Rape Crisis Advocate
RCC	Rape Crisis Center
RPP	Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships
SAFE	Sexual Assault Forensic Exam
SAK	Sexual Assault Kit
SAKI	Sexual Assault Kits Initiative
SANE	Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner
STS	Secondary Traumatic Stress
SVU	Special Victims Unit
VAWA	Violence Against Women Act

## **ABSTRACT**

Rommel, Savannah, A, M. S., University of South Alabama, August 2022. Justice Revisited for Sexual Assault Victims: A Qualitative Analysis of the Initial Phase of Mobile, AL's Promise Initiative. Chair of Committee: James R. Stefurak, Ph.D.

The purpose of the current study was to understand how stakeholders involved in the support of survivors experienced the impact of the preliminary implementation of a Sexual Assault Kits Initiative (SAKI) program.. Interviews were conducted with several participants, including rape crisis advocates, sexual assault nurse examiners, special victim unit detectives, and assistant district attorneys involved in the project called “The Promise Initiative” in Mobile, Alabama. Four major domains—reference to the grant, what contributed to the original problem, stakeholders, and sexual assault—and corresponding core ideas emerged that highlighted both positive and negative experiences stakeholders had with the grant. One of the overarching themes that stakeholders collectively experienced was related to trust or lack thereof within their own capabilities, between other stakeholders, and for the system.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sexual assault has been and remains a rampant, invasive violent crime within the human experience—occurring on average less than every two minutes (Morgan & Thompson, 2021)—and while the human population is on the cusp of 8 billion people, not one individual has shared an exact replica of physical, mental, spiritual, or experiential components. The same holds true regarding how survivors may experience and response to their sexual assault—that there should not be the existence of notions that imply there is only one “right way” to react to being stripped of one’s sense of safety and self-worth. However, the way that societal systems have historically engaged with survivors sends the exact opposite message.

In a criminal victimization report conducted by Morgan & Thompson (2021), rape was considered one of the most prevalent violent crimes within the United States. The best available data suggest that 1 out of every 5 women and 1 out of every 14 men experience rape within their lifetime (Planty et al., 2013)—yet despite the scale of these occurrences, research has also found that the rate of survivors not reporting their assault to the legal system was at staggering 67% to 78% (Morgan & Thompson, 2021). These non-disclosures typically occur for assorted reasons related to internal experiences: feeling embarrassment or shame; believing that their assault was not important enough,

and/or believing that it did not warrant a report (Planty et al., 2013). However, one of the leading reasons as to why survivors decide to not disclose is the anticipation of negative social responses towards their assault from professionals, such as suspicion, denial, or victim-blaming (Campbell et al., 2009).

Following an assault, survivors may pursue services from a myriad of systems that are in place (e.g., community-, medical- and legal-based). Although survivors have access to these professionals, studies have suggested that many survivors still find these system processes to be difficult (Campbell et al., 2009) and even neglective of the provision of proper services (Campbell, 2006)—highlighting the continuous need for systematic processes that are affirming for and supportive of the survivors. Some of these difficult processes have been tied to the absence of resources or inadequate policies (Campbell, 2017), other points of difficulty have been tied to professionals' negative responses or perceptions of sexual assault.

The criminal justice system that was meant to protect and provide justice for sexual assault survivors historically have failed all too frequently. Due to the history of inaction, a national crisis was discovered within the last decade involving the existence of an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 unsubmitted and untested sexual assault kits (SAKs) (Strom et al., 2021). This revelation led the creation of several federal grants (e.g., Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, Sexual Assault Forensic Exam, Violence Against Women Act) to address this backlog by reducing the accumulation of unsubmitted SAKs and implementing reform to the policies and procedures within the state, as well as local jurisdictions (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022).

## **1.1 Need for the Study**

Researchers have been exploring various avenues related to sexual assault survivors and the systems that interact with them since the 1970s. Within the last 15 years, current research has predominantly focused on exploring and understanding the occurrence of SAK backlogs within various jurisdictions across the United States. Considering the necessity to engage and implement comprehensive reform within jurisdictions' response towards sexual assault, eradicate the reoccurrence of a backlog of unsubmitted kits, and ultimately provide justice to survivors—Mobile, Alabama stepped forward to begin taking the appropriate steps towards reconciliation of their failures towards their community and reconstruction of institutional policies—as 1,412 unsubmitted SAKs were founded within this jurisdiction.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the current study was to understand how stakeholders involved in the support of survivors experienced the impact of the preliminary implementation of a Sexual Assault Kits Initiative (SAKI) program. Through a series of grants awarded to the Mobile Police Department in Mobile, Alabama, a project called the “Promise Initiative” emerged. The Promise Initiative partnered with several stakeholders within the community to address the dilemma of unsubmitted, untested SAKs; provide trauma-focused, evidence-based trainings; and create a comprehensive sexual assault response reform program. The following research questions were explored:

1. How do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted the policies and procedures of the handling and processing of SAKs?

2. How do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted the work they do?
3. How do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted their corresponding agencies and/or their own views on sexual assault?

### **1.3 Definitions**

The Alabama Statute §13A-6-60 (2012) characterizes **sexual assault** as an occurrence of attempted or completed penetration (rape), the private parts of one individual to the mouth/anus of another (deviant sexual intercourse), and/or the touching of private parts (sexual contact) without explicit consent.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Stakeholders' Role within Sexual Assault Cases**

There are a myriad of interdependent systems that were designed to serve and protect the communities they are placed in. These systems are composed of several professional personnel, depending on how survivors choose to move forward. Depending on state statutes, there are different methods of reporting which can include the involvement of rape crisis advocates; medical providers, with or without legal investigation; law enforcement; and/or prosecution (Lorenz et al., 2019). For the purpose of this paper, the stakeholders that were focused on included rape crisis advocates, sexual assault nurse examiners, law enforcement, and district attorneys.

##### **2.1.1 Rape Crisis Advocates**

Rape crisis advocates (RCA) are one of the first stakeholders that survivors can turn to after an assault. These RCAs are commonly housed at a community-based rape crisis center (RCC), which are filled with both staff and volunteers who aim to provide survivors with an abundance of services. These services include providing information for survivors to make informed decisions, as well as emotional support and crisis intervention (Martin, 2005). One of the primary roles of RCAs is to provide medical and legal advocacy by informing survivors of their opinions and supporting them throughout

the process of evidence collection, investigation, and prosecution. However, current studies have continued to emphasize the need for improved access to these community-based approaches, as many women do not know about nor utilize RCCs enough (Campbell et al., 2001; Lorenz et al., 2019).

RCAAs can be a particularly valuable ally in the post-assault process for both survivors and corresponding personnel. Survivors have voiced both anticipation and experience of negative reactions towards their assault from the legal system, such as disbelief and/or dismissal (Campbell, 2006; Campbell et al., 2009). These reactions feed into what is known as secondary victimization, which further exacerbates feelings of the survivor's primary trauma from the assault (Condry, 2010). Although studies have yet to catalog the full extent to which advocates can mitigate the effects of negative reactions, providing accessibility to these advocates during the systematic processes can help counter the effects of self-blame or victim-blaming tendencies (Campbell, 2006; Lorenz et al., 2019).

### **2.1.2 Medical System**

Following a sexual assault, survivors may choose to seek out services from hospital emergency departments and/or health care clinics. Considering the significant amount of individuals who are physically affected by sexual assault, the medical system plays a key role in the evaluation, management, and advocacy for survivors (Vrees, 2017). In the utilization of these services, it was found that only 17% to 43% of survivors choose to receive help from the medical system (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006; Feldhaus et al., 2000) and even described the processes as more traumatizing than the assault itself (Campbell et al., 2009). Furthermore, studies found that survivors often received



inadequate treatment from hospital emergency departments (Sievers et al., 2003) or were even denied services altogether (Martin, 2005; Fehler-Cabral et al., 2011)—hence, the necessity of having programs that train medical personnel in the intricacies of handling sexual assault.

Depending on the profession, healthcare providers have the opportunity to become a sexual assault forensic examiner (SAFE) or Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE). Through these programs, medical professionals receive specialized education and clinical trainings in order to provide patient-centered, trauma-informed intervention and care, as well as the collection of high-quality evidence (Shaw et al., 2016). This process of evidence collection, called a sexual assault kit (SAK), is known to be an intrusive step-by-step process (Campbell, 2017) that tends to dominate the survivors' interactions with the medical system (Martin, 2005). While the optimal time frame for the collection of as much forensic evidence as possible is within three days of the assault, collection can still occur up to seven days post-assault due to advancements in DNA technology (Ladd & Seda, 2022).

SAKs are usually conducted by SANEs (Linden, 2011) and are a part of an overall medical forensic examination (MFE). Within the exam is a detailed manual filled with instructions for each step, which should be thoroughly explained to the survivor, as the survivor holds the autonomy to decline any and every step throughout the examination (Ladd & Seda, 2022). As for the equipment, SAKs hold all the necessary materials needed to complete the MFE. This process of collection generally includes the completion of forms, thorough documentation of the survivors account of the assault, a full head-to-toe examination (e.g., a visual assessment of genitals and potential injuries,

lesions, or secretions), controlled swabs (e.g., blood, saliva, genitalia, anus, potential points of contact from the perpetrator), combings of hair and pubic hair, toxicology test, and the collection of clothing and foreign materials (Shaw & Campbell, 2013; U.S. Department of Justice, 2013; Vrees, 2017). After an MFE has been completed by a healthcare provider, generally the kit is then transferred into law enforcement custody.

### **2.1.3 Legal System**

The legal system is a network composed of pillars (e.g., law enforcement and prosecutors) that aim to embody and implement both public safety and health by investigating and judging criminal offenses objectively (Turvey & Crowder, 2013). When it comes to sexual assault, these crimes are universally known to be challenging in both the investigation and prosecution (Seelinger et al., 2011)—yet survivors have reported that the legal process itself was difficult, and even expressed feelings of shame, anxiousness, and hesitancy to seek further help after interacting with the legal system (Campbell & Raja, 2005; Campbell et al., 2009).

Depending on the jurisdictions, the protocols of when and where law enforcement send SAKs vary. Some agencies would automatically submit kits to be tested in forensic laboratories or hold onto the kits for a certain amount of time, while other submissions depend on whether or not prosecutors would request analysis (Hanson, 2022). Regardless of these set protocols, the significance behind examining the reasons there was a staggering amount of unsubmitted kits became evident—because at this point of the process, the responsibility of submission rested on the shoulders of law enforcement (Campbell, Feeney, et al., 2017). Sometimes survivors were denied justice altogether when the legal system collectively failed to consistently test sexual assault kits.

## **2.2 Contributing Factors to the Backlog Phenomenon**

Researchers have attempted to explore why kits have gone unsubmitted—and hence, untested—for so long, as the utilization of forensic evidence has the ability to contribute to the overall investigations and prosecutions of sexual assault cases (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). The benefits of testing can identify offenders within other crimes, confirm identities of known offenders, provide convictions, and exonerate those who have been wrongfully accused (Campbell, Fehler-Cabral, et al., 2017). However, these benefits have not been occurring. Studies have progressively explored the legal system’s culture and handling of sexual assault cases, proposing that several individual, organizational, and systematic factors may have contributed to the backlog phenomenon.

### **2.2.1 Individual Factors**

#### **2.2.1.1 Perceptions of Sexual Assault**

There has been ample amount of evidence throughout the years that the overall general attitudes and beliefs about sexual assault survivors can predict stakeholders’ perception of the survivors, as well as their intentions with the case (Campbell, 2017; Venema, 2016). Studies have argued that people mostly rely on heuristics when it comes to making conclusions about rape (Bohner et al., 2009). Bohner and colleagues (2009) explained that these “shortcuts” help reduce the mental effort that is required when it comes complex decision-making, concluding that many individuals tend to rely on their preexisting social attitudes when it involves sexual assault. Common preexisting social

constructs that have been explored within literature includes rape myth acceptance and attributions of blame.

Rape myth acceptance (RMA) is known as a series of widespread beliefs and attitudes that can indirectly or directly influence an individual's perception. In RMA, an individual ends up disaffirming and ridiculing sexual assault survivors, while pardoning the actions of the perpetrator (Bohner et al., 2006). This can include but is not limited to common phrases such as "they wanted it," "they asked for it because," "it wasn't really rape if they didn't fight back," and "men will be men." One study conducted by Page (2008) found that despite the reforms to rape laws, law enforcements attitudes towards women and sexual assault were not significantly altered. Although studies have varied on the acceptance of these myths, the extent to which RMA influences law enforcements handling of sexual assault cases is still unclear (Campbell, 2005; Venema, 2016).

Further elements of RMA include a complementary construct called attributions of blame. These attributions involve biases that feature internal, individualized characteristics of what a "credible, ideal, or genuine victim" should hold, while simultaneously not considering the external factors (See Table 1). Page (2008) found that law enforcement who had high RMA were less likely to believe survivors who did not match their set of ideal victim characteristics. However, Ayala and colleagues (2015) argued that "researchers have not yet determined how the combination of RMA and these factors [attributions of blame] simultaneously affect levels of victim blame" (p. 96).

**Table 1**

*Characteristics that Influence Attributions of Blame*

Characteristics	
Age and Race (Shaw & Campbell, 2013)	Relationship to the perpetrator
Unambiguous violence and injury (Jordan, 2008)	Risk taking behavior (Page, 2008)
Relationship to the perpetrator	Intoxicated*
Number of perpetrators involved	Revealing clothing (Sleath & Bull, 2012)
Use of weapons (Patterson & Campbell, 2012)	Respectability (Cohn et al., 2009)

*\*Note: Directionality examples include the more a survivor is intoxicated, the less believable they are.*

**2.2.1.2 Emotional Impact**

Despite the crime fighting stereotype law enforcement holds, little research has been conducted on the emotional impact sexual assault cases have on their personal and professional lives (Morabito et al., 2021). As studies have shown, sexual assault can affect not only the survivors but also the stakeholders who are repeatedly responding to these crimes (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2017). As an individual is repeatedly exposed to sexual assault, whether directly or indirectly, they become at-risk for experiencing vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and ultimately burnout. Common signs can transpire quickly and unexpectedly, and involve a wide range symptoms such as cynicism, emotional dissonance, overextending, and/or intrusive thoughts/memories (Turgoose et al., 2017).

In the investigation of these crimes, law enforcement are expected to manage and control their emotions, shelving and switching between the different roles they hold. On one hand, law enforcement are encouraged to show compassion toward survivors and

their families. On the other hand, they are then expected to flip to neutrality in order to objectively investigate, implicitly compartmentalizing their own feelings in the process (Bakker & Heuven, 2006). This “switching” can be an exhausting type of emotional labor and the negative effect of this exposure is a contributing factor to the high rates of burnout and turnover experienced (Williams et al., 2012).

## **2.2.2 Organizational Factors**

### **2.2.2.1 Perception of Roles**

Law enforcement and prosecutors tend to differentiate in some of their goals and motivations, which in turn may influence their approaches towards sexual assault cases and attitudes towards sexual assault survivors (Ask, 2010). For law enforcement, reward structures place value in high clearance rates and solving crimes, whereas prosecutors experience pressure when it comes to the number of convictions they receive. When it comes to adjudications for the submission of SAKs, one of law enforcements stated reasons was due to no request from prosecutors to submit kits for evidence (Strom & Hickman, 2010). Likewise, the processes and perceptions of other stakeholders involved also hold the ability to further influence law enforcements decision-making (Campbell, Feeney et al., 2017). Another factor found by Ask & Landström (2010) was the potential conditions (e.g., time pressure and heavy workloads) law enforcement were under, which afforded them little to no room for the potential physical and emotional energy required to investigate cases. Signifying that law enforcements have external factors that can influence them beyond just their own personal perceptions.

### **2.2.2.2 Downstream Orientation**

Downstream orientation is known as a trickling, top-down effect amongst the legal process when it comes to sexual assault cases. Prosecutors are forced into predicting how the survivor, the suspect, and the incident will be viewed and evaluated by the judge and the juror, thus influencing which cases they tend to take on. Furthermore, law enforcement may consider how a prosecutor would respond to each case, thus influencing how they may conduct interviews or complete paperwork (Spohn et al., 2014). Some research suggests that law enforcement often determine the credibility of the case before they put effort into investigating, rather than beginning the investigation and determining based on the merits of the case (Campbell et al., 2012, Shaw, 2014).

### **2.2.3 Systematic Factors**

#### **2.2.3.1 Resources**

Campbell (2017) pointed out that while law enforcement has made decisions throughout the years that were harmful to survivors, they were also tirelessly working with depleting resources. It was found that professionals overall who assess credibility operate in environments where resources are scarce and there are not enough personnel to track and ensure the kits were handled thoroughly (Ask & Landström, 2010). Furthermore, forensic departments that handle the testing of kits rely heavily on federal funding to continue operating (Hurst & Lothridge, 2010). Overtime such depletion can cause both individual and organizational behavior to shift (Campbell, 2017).

#### **2.2.3.2 Technology**

Technology used for DNA testing have changed rapidly within the last 20 years (Butler, 2012). When a SAK is submitted, any resulting DNA profile can be uploaded to the national forensic DNA database (CODIS), which holds the profiles of offenders and

samples from crime scenes (Butler, 2005). This proves as a useful tool because if the DNA sample from a SAK matches a profile from CODIS, the legal system has promising investigative and prosecutive leads (Campbell, Feeney et al., 2017). However, DNA evidence did not always hold the same cultural weight as it does now.

Campbell and colleagues (2017) found that the benefit of testing SAKs greatly outweighed the decision not to—as it could help confirm identities of known offenders and identify new offenders in unsolved crimes. However, SAKs continued to go unsubmitted and untested despite the tremendous utility that DNA evidence brought to survivors and legal system personnel (Shaw & Campbell, 2013).

### **2.3 Comprehensive Reform Through SAKI Programs**

The National Sexual Assault Kits Initiative (SAKI) program, managed by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), provides grant funding to support comprehensive reform of the communities approaches towards sexual assault cases (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). One of the key components of SAKI is their holistic approach towards ensuring justice for sexual assault survivors. Core elements that the program looks to address include enhancing the legal systems responses towards sexual assault by survivor-centered, trauma-informed practices; providing communities with resources to prevent the conditions that lead to the backlog of submitted SAKs; and the submission of the backlog of kits, with the proper opportunity of investigation and prosecution (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017).

Through SAKI emerged the development of national best strategies involving policies on the handling of sexual assault kits and trauma-informed, survivor-centered



trainings. One of the policy reforms involved the “test all kits” or “forklift” approach, where the submission of all SAKs for DNA testing becomes mandatory (Campbell, Feeney et al., 2017) - and the U.S. Department of Justice (2017) stated that this is the best practice. As for trauma-informed, survivor-centered trainings—this approach focuses on the needs of the victim while providing non-judgmental investigation, in order to minimize the effects of secondary victimization.

Researchers have begun to locate potential reasonings behind why so many kits went untested, which highlights how instrumental stakeholders are in the processing of sexual assault cases: “because when rape advocates cannot advocate for the survivors; when law enforcement are unable and/or unwilling to objectively serve and protect the community; and when prosecutors struggle to feasibly manage the excess number of cases—the fairness and quality of our criminal justice system suffers” (Campbell, Fehler-Cabral et al., 2017, 465).

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

Consistent with action-oriented approaches that were utilized within previous studies on the backlog of SAKs, a team of researchers focused on building researcher-practitioner partnerships (RPP) while utilizing consensual qualitative research (CQR) methods. These two approaches were appropriate for a qualitative study because the researchers were more interested in developing a deeper, detailed understanding of the stakeholder's perceptions of the SAKI implementation, further bridging the science-practice gap that exists within sexual assault services (Shaw et al., 2016). Furthermore, these methods are ideal for studying in-depth experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of complex, emotionally charged topics that are often hidden from public view (Hill & Knox, 2021). Ultimately, the goal was to understand sexual assault case processing from the point of view of stakeholders whose decisions have impacted survivors.

#### **3.1 Consensual Qualitative Research**

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) is composed of several elements incorporating phenomenological and grounded theory; discovery-oriented methods; and consensual process analysis. The essential features of CQR consists of the (a) utilization of several researchers in order to foster multiple perspectives, minimize groupthink, and

bracket biases and expectations; (b) recruitment of a small numbers of participants; (c) development of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, which allows for organic responses from the participants; and (d) development of domains and core ideas, through consensus from the research team about the meaning of data (Hill et al., 2005; Hill & Knox, 2021).

### **3.2 Theoretical Lens**

Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research can provide context for how researchers experience the utilization of methods in their study (Creswell, 2009). During this study, the theoretical lens was drawn from constructivism, with elements of postpositivism which remain consistent with CQR methods. Constructivism adheres to the assumption that there are multiple, equally valid “true” realities that are constructed in the mind of an individual (Hill et al., 2005; Hansen, 2004), whereas postpositivism acknowledges that humans are flawed, and human experiences are uncontrollable. Thus, it is difficult to fully capture a “true” reality (Ponterotto, 2005). Although the enmeshment of these two paradigms seems counterproductive, the utilization of both in this study allows researchers to understand that while we accept that there are multiple, valid “true” realities, it can only be measured imperfectly.

Another distinguishing characteristic of constructivism and postpositivism is the relationship within researcher-practitioner partnerships. Constructivists view the relationship amongst RPPs as having mutual influence during the interviewing process, where the stakeholders teach researchers about their experiences and the researchers help the stakeholders further explore their experiences (Hill et al., 2005). Similarly,

postpositivism recognizes the researchers' potential influence on the study and emphasizes the need to remain objective and to have researcher-practitioner independence (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, researchers see value in implementing various members within different teams throughout the process of the collection and analysis of data.

### **3.3 Trustworthiness**

Ensuring trustworthiness and consistency within qualitative research involves the establishment of four constructs: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Shenton, 2004). Throughout the process, researchers within all teams sought to establish trustworthiness using a mixture of methods and techniques that have been utilized successfully in previous studies (Shenton, 2004). For example, studies conducted by researchers who hold experience in this realm (Campbell, 2017; Campbell, Fehler-Cabral et al., 2017) used qualitative methods, which are well-suited for capturing complex, divergent points.

Arguably, one of the most important constructs is credibility, ensuring that the study conducted measured what it was intended to. Prior to the collection and analysis of data, members of the interviewing and coding teams had developed familiarity within the culture of the stakeholders by participating in the monthly MDT meetings and/or consulting previous literature and documents. Furthermore, throughout the study each research team wrote notes and reflexive memos of the key information conveyed within their corresponding processes.

Another form of establishing both credibility and confirmability is the use of triangulation, which can be achieved through different modes. Researchers applied triangulation through selecting participants from different agencies; conducting both individual interviews and focus groups; and comparing data across the respective research teams (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the use of triangulation aided in reducing the effect of researcher biases and further established confirmability when the admission of these biases and expectations were included in the methodology (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability relates to the provision of background data to help establish context, whereas dependability involves the documented implementation of intersecting methods. In order to establish these paradigms, researchers documented and included all possible information to the best of our abilities. With that in mind, one form of credibility that was not implemented were the member checks: meaning that the stakeholders who participated in the study were not given a chance to review their transcripts in order to make edits; nor were they given the opportunity to take a look at the set of founded themes.

### **3.4 Research Questions**

The following three research questions were explored to understand how the preliminary implementation of a Sexual Assault Kits Initiative (SAKI) grant had impacted the perceptions of the key stakeholders involved:

1. How do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted the policies and procedures of the handling and processing of SAKs?
2. How do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted the work they do?

3. How do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted their corresponding agencies and/or their own views on sexual assault?

### **3.5 Participants**

The current study involved 18 stakeholders directly involved in The Promise Initiative project. The selection of these participants aligned with the goal of CQR methods, allowing there to be a rich quality of data collected, pertaining to the stakeholders' first-hand experiences, attitudes, and beliefs (Campbell, Feeney et al., 2017). The participants were one rape advocate representative who directly serves and supports survivors; nine sexual assault nurse examiners who conduct trauma-focused, patient-centered medical examinations; seven special victim unit detectives who lead sexual assault investigations; and one assistant district attorney who may represent survivors, if their cases went to trial. Each participant is a part of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) that meets monthly. Sample recruitment procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board.

### **3.6 Data Collection**

The interview protocol (see Appendix) was developed by both the interview team and the stakeholders to ensure that the information collected from each interview remained consistent across participants (Hill et al., 2005). The general structure of the interview followed a phenomenological approach, emphasizing the lived experiences of the stakeholders involved and the ways in which their experiences may have influenced their perceptions in relation to sexual assault. Interviews were semi-structured and

examined eight overall sections to gain an understanding of the stakeholders' perceptions of the problem behind untested kits; how their participation in the project has impacted their views about sexual assault, as well as the work they do; and recommendations for the project as it moved forward. Each section of the protocol had several follow-up prompts, in the event that stakeholders did not spontaneously answer that section's core objective. The team of interviewers consisted of a professor, who was the main interviewer, as well as two doctoral students who attended and alternated responsibilities (i.e., keeping track of the protocol, handling of the recordings, and writing memos of key information shared during the interview).

Prior to conducting interviews, there was a year of preliminary implementation of the SAKI grant, where the interviewers attended monthly MDT meetings alongside the stakeholders. During one of these monthly meetings, interviewers were able to inform all of the stakeholders—except the SANE unit—about the purpose of the study, the data collection procedure, confidentiality, and disposition of data. Considering that the SANE units were not present during this particular MDT meeting, interviewers decided to reach out to their employer and provided the same set of information given during the missed meeting. All stakeholders voluntarily chose to participate and were not required by their employers nor the project to take part: however, no one declined.

The majority of the interviews were conducted individually, with the exception of two: a focus group of seven SANE nurses and a group of two SVU detectives. Each interview was recorded auditorily with permission of the stakeholder(s) and lasted between 30 to 65 minutes. After each completed interview, a summary was written that incorporated major ideas generated, general impressions of the participant, and any

nonverbal or emotional cues that could not be portrayed within transcripts. Audio recordings were transcribed by undergraduate students that were involved in procedural team meetings conducted by the main interviewer. The data collected was stored in a secured, private drive with controlled access.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Researchers constructed their interpretation of the transcribed data using a consensual coding process (Hill et al., 2005). As the implementation of phenomenological approaches and grounded theories were utilized, coders were able to (a) interrupt preconceived, individual assumptions by intentionally engaging with the lived experiences of each stakeholder (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), to then (b) develop a theory of how those stakeholders may perceive and serve sexual assault survivors.

When it comes to CQR, the practice of multiple perspectives is critical when interpreting the data due to the inherent biases that can interrupt the process of understanding others' experiences (Hill et al., 2005). Thus, there were a total of seven researchers and one auditor involved in the different phases of analysis (i.e., interviewing, transcribing, coding, auditing) throughout this study (see Table 2).





CQR to review and discuss collectively, and numerous meetings held prior and during the coding process to review and revisit the methodology of CQR.

### **3.7.1.1 Coding Team I**

Following transcription, Coding Team I met to discuss and develop the emerging domains and core ideas. This process included multiple trials of coding and refinement in consultation with both the interview protocol and transcripts (Lorenz et al., 2019).

Coding Team I went through two full rounds of coding. Once they established a set of domains in the first round, it was submitted to an external auditor for feedback. Once feedback was provided, Team I began the second round of coding in order to refine the themes. The corresponding result was a coding scheme that included nine domains and thirty-six core ideas (See Table 3).

While the main objective behind constructing core ideas in CQR is to summarize the primary domains within each interview (Thompson et al., 2012), the auditor determined that the domains developed by Team I were not developed sufficiently and reflected more of the interview protocol, than the data from the interviews. Additionally, it was noted that the majority of the research teams involved the same two doctoral students, who may have become so immersed in the culture that their professional judgements were influenced—in connection with the need to interrupt potential biases influencing the analysis of data. Thus, it was a collective decision from the interviewer, coders, and auditor that a second set of coders were needed to further dissect the coding scheme.

**Table 3***Original Coding Scheme from Coding Team I*

	Domain	Core Ideas
1	Reference to the Grant	Grant has made a positive difference in department / culture / handling of SAKs Grant / Feds requirements / procedures still unclear / difficult to follow Future sites can learn from us
2	Policy	Test all kits Workflow of sexual assault case is clear Concern that new gains / policies will not be maintained Public perception influences department decisions Policies must be clear & consensual among departments Need for new policy Peer review is occurring / important New policy / accountability implemented
3	Contributors to Original Problem	Lack of accountability / supervision / case checks / resources Laziness among officers Combination of problems contributed to original problem
4	Collaboration	Inter-agency hostility and/or difficulties Different viewpoints / roles among agencies / departments Positive cooperation / experiences among agencies Inter-agency cooperation as a goal
5	Training	Formal training is important Misunderstanding of sex crimes by other departments / agencies Lack of training contributed to the original problem Initial response by LE is important
6	Personnel Strain	Additional work / being pulled away from regular duties Need for more personnel / specialized personnel Burnout Some LE / staff do not want to handle sex crimes We have investment from current sex crime personnel
7	Victim	Victim-centered statement Concern about re-traumatizing victim Victim as not believed
8	Leadership	There is clear leadership now Leaders must have buy-in Need for accountability from leadership to ensure clear workflow
9	Prioritization of Sex Crimes	Sex crimes should have equal priority as homicides / other person-on-person crime There are differences in priority within sexual assault cases Sex crimes competing for resources / prioritization

### **3.7.1.2 Coding Team II**

The second coding team consisted of three new individuals who had no extensive involvement with the preliminary implementation of the Promise Initiative. Considering that this is archival data, the coding that occurred from Team II was conducted after the continuation of the Promise Initiative project. The only student that had minimal involvement with the subsequent phase of the Promise Initiative was the doctoral student. The second coding team collectively focused on cross-cutting themes with the understanding that the first set of major themes were overtly tied to specific interview questions from the protocol. We utilized the prior memos, notes, audio recordings, coded transcripts, and coding scheme from Coding Team I.

Prior to proceeding towards coding, we met to go over our independent and collective processes. Once a transcript was picked, we would independently read the originally coded transcript along with the original coding scheme to gain perspective of how Team I developed their themes. Afterwards, we would then re-read a clean version of the transcript and begin coding ourselves. As we were interpreting the data, we would apply more emphasis on approaching the transcripts inductively (allowing the results to emerge from the data) rather than relying heavily on the original coding scheme. Once we independently completed a transcript, we would then attend group meetings to collectively code and reach consensus on corresponding domains and core ideas.

Arriving to consensus is an integral part of CQR (Hill et al., 2005). To attain consensus, we first held a mutual understanding of respect towards our differing viewpoints and experiences. As we met collectively, each potential point of coding was held as a discussion regarding the reasoning behind our interpretations and whether there

was collective agreement or the expression of ambiguity or disagreement from at least one member. If there was ambiguity or disagreement, further discussion was held about whether or not there was the need to re-code or dismiss the code altogether. Throughout this process of interpreting the data and arriving to consensus, the coding scheme began to shift as codes were either renamed, redefined, combined and/or added (Lorenz et al., 2019). Once the coding scheme began to shift, notes were made on which transcripts and codes needed to be revisited in previous coded transcripts. These previously coded transcripts were revisited once all transcripts had been coded. We went through one full round of coding, followed by auditor feedback. The auditor deemed that the codes were sufficient and did not require another round of coding.

### **3.7.2 Bracketing of Biases and Expectations**

As both researchers and humans, we acknowledged that our biases are inevitable and hold the potential to impact the study. Hill et al. (2005) heavily emphasizes the need to acknowledge, discuss at length, and to “bracket” value biases, rather than eliminating them. As constructivists, we require there to be close, interpersonal researcher-practitioner partnerships in order to facilitate the studying of the stakeholders’ lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005): therefore, the attempt to eliminate biases in these relationships would be a misjudgment on our part. For the reasons stated above, the background, biases, and expectations of the researchers involved in this study are documented within this study (see Table 2; see Table 4).

**Table 4***Bracketing Researchers' Biases and Expectations*

Researcher	Potential Biases	Expectations
Doctoral Student A	Extensive experience working in the criminal justice system, primarily correctional psychology*	
Doctoral Student B	Survivor-focused lens	Law enforcement would have prominent biases that may show up in their work with sexual assault victims, inadvertently dehumanizing survivors in the interests of closing cases
Doctoral Student C	Previous experience working with identified stakeholders Current work on SAKI grant may influence how interviews are interpreted	Stakeholders would be excited about the work and not yet overwhelmed or burnt out Law enforcement would have fewer biases than average due to the grant work and trauma-specific training
Graduate Student I	Unable to get in contact with individual	
Graduate Student II	Survivor of sexual assault Distrust and unhelpful in the systematic structures' ability to provide protection	Law enforcement would hold prejudices and biases; but that their biases were not the sole reason for the lack of submitting kits
Undergraduate Student	Prior experience in coding variables related to sexual assault research Tends to believe more men than women are accepting of rape myths	Law enforcements were going to have negative attitudes towards the grant and sexual assault; and were less likely to take the cases seriously due to downstream orientation

*\*Note: Doctoral Student A was unreachable, Doctoral Student B provided information considering they were on the same team and discussed potential biases*

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

There were nine original major theme domains and thirty-six core ideas. From these original domains and themes from Coding Team I, Coding Team II established four major theme domains with fifteen code ideas (see Table 5). This section will explore the stakeholder's perceptions and experiences within each theme.

#### **4.1 Reference to the Grant**

In reference to the preliminary implementation of the grant, three core ideas that kept reoccurring within the stakeholders' interview were that the grant was either of benefit, a drawback, or brought no significant change.

**Table 5**

*Major Theme Domains and Core Ideas*

	Domain	Core Ideas
1	Reference to the Grant	Benefits of the grant Drawbacks of the grant Nothing has changed
2	Contributors to Original Problem	Policy was not clear Workload and/or workflow was not clear Lack of accountability Lack of resources Improper role assignment
3	Collaboration	Positive collaboration Negative collaboration Different perspectives
4	Sexual Assault	There are differences of priority in sexual assault cases Survivor-centered statement(s) Sexual assault crimes are complex Sexual assault requires specialized personnel

**4.1.1 Benefits of the Grant**

Stakeholders perceived the grant held numerous benefits. One of the most recurring benefits for all stakeholders was the grants development of clear leadership and communication between departments. The creation and continuation of MDTs were “non-negotiable” to SANEs, as they mentioned it allowed everyone to “work hand in hand” and that “a lot of progress has been made.” Law enforcement mentioned that their leader had “really paved the way for [them] to be more open-minded” towards changing the culture of the process of handling sexual assault cases.

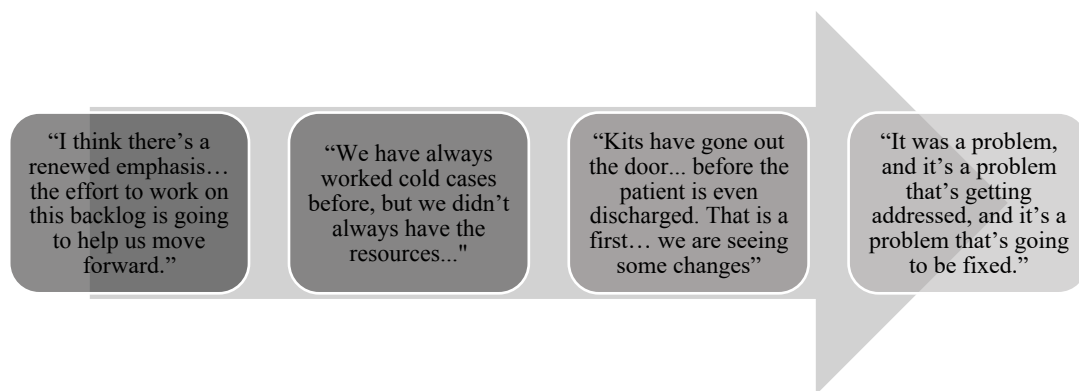
Another benefit of the grant was the advancement of new policies that began addressing the problems related to SAKS, which in turn spurred greater investment and



involvement of stakeholders' handling of sexual assault cases (see Figure 1). SANEs stated that "a lot of our kits have gone out the door with the detective before the patient is even discharged. That is a first... we are seeing some changes, so that's a big plus." Coincided with the handling of cases was the impact the grant held for both survivors and the public. The prosecutor stated that collectively they "may not know [it] at the time... but that offender could be a serial offender or could still be offending, so certainly it would be worth the time, money, and resources to investigate these kinds of cases."

### **Figure 1**

#### *Perception of New Policies That Address the Backlog*



#### **4.1.2 Drawback of the Grant**

Stakeholders experienced that the grant brought significant drawbacks that involved additional work on top of their regular duties (e.g., investigating cold cases from unsubmitted kits while simultaneously applying new procedures to new sexual assault cases); limited additions to staffing, and the creation of policies that either lacked clarity or were overly excessive (See Figure 2). Some stakeholders "struggled back and forth" with the "test all kits" policy. The Rape Crisis Advocate expressed that there are some

situations where testing kits “seems like a waste of time to everyone and harmful to the survivor.” One recommendation that the advocate had about the “test all kits” policy was to “collectively meet as a MDT, and every player [can]look at the case. [If] there is 1 [out] of 3 who feels like there’s a chance that there may be something there, then test it.”

## Figure 2

### *Drawbacks of the Grant*



### 4.1.3 Grant Had No Effect

Some of the experiences that stakeholders had with the grant had little to no effect on their roles and the lack of resources. The rape crisis advocate state that there is still a “shortage of manpower” and the remainder of “just the typical under-resourced and understaffed problem.” Another consistent finding was that sexual assault crimes were still fighting for prioritization, as “I think we [sexual assault] sit third... [below] robbery and homicide.” One detective was adamant that “they should be more on an equal playing field. I think any kind of person-on-person crime should be. It should be the same because someone was harmed.”

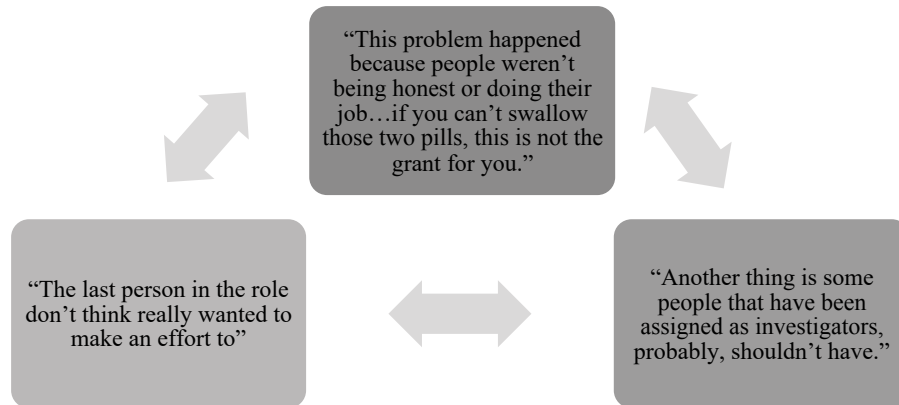
#### **4.2 Contributed to the Original Problem?**

Stakeholders expressed various contributions that may have created the backlog, such as vague policies, the disorganization of stakeholders' assignments, the lack of supervision and accountability, the scarcity of resources, and improper role assignment. One detective mentioned that one of the biggest issues with policy that they saw was "that it was not mandatory to have all kits tested... I'm not exactly sure if they actually set a time period, but they needed to." As for the disorganization of the workload that is assigned to personnel, law enforcement mentioned that "even if someone's not lazy and [had] work ethic it [SAKs] could still get lost just because of the workflow... because they're integrated. You know, when you have sex crimes and assaults that until, last Friday, were together and integrated [with other crimes]. I mean, typically Mobile has just about a shooting or something every single night."

Another contribution to the original problem of the backlog of kits was the lack of accountability as one detective expressed that when kits "did receive a hit, they [law enforcement] didn't do anything with it. It was just put aside. I think accountability is huge and they aren't held accountable for anything, and it is easier to just say, 'Hey I don't believe her,' we're not going to do anything with this, let's just stick it in property and let's just move on with it." Alongside unaccountability was the improper assignment of certain stakeholders in the role of sexual assault (See Figure 3). One last core idea that came out of this domain was the scarcity of resources, as the rape crisis mentioned "it's hard for us to carry that burden [submitting SAKs and tracking cases] if you don't have [the] adequate resources to effectively monitor."

**Figure 3**

*Improper Role Assignment*



**4.3 Stakeholders**

Core ideas that emerged for stakeholders were the existence of positive and negative collaboration, as well as differing perspectives amongst one another. One of the themes that emerged was the general consensus amongst stakeholders regarding the most difficult points of their partnership. One of these points involved the hostility that occurred between stakeholders during the beginning of implementation due to their difference in perspectives and values—law enforcement stated that the “tension was more between... how the kits were going to get tested, so I definitely saw the frustration in the room between other members.” Another detective mentioned that they “think it improved, that we’ve worked out the kinks, but I wasn’t expecting it to be that hostile.” Furthermore, an additional point of negative collaboration occurred with the forensic science department, who frequently held different perspectives on the scope of testing because they “operate on a strictly scientific model and they’re scientists; they don’t want to deviate from any thought process other than the scientific method.”

Despite the existence of negative collaboration, the rape crisis advocate mentioned that there is “always going to be challenges within MDT. But I think that I found that I am closer now to law enforcement than I ever been in my career.” Through the grant, prosecution experienced increased physical proximity with other agencies, making it “a lot easier to discuss things and get ahold of each other... in the past it we would email or call and leave voicemails. It was just a lot of running around.” Through “effort to coordinate and network with other agencies here locally,” law enforcement mentioned that they are now able to do “a lot of networking, a lot of sharing of information, working in-house.” Through collaborating with one another, SANEs have voiced that overall, everyone has “made huge leaps in the way [they] get along and understand each other.”

#### **4.4 Sexual Assault**

In reference to the sexual assault, four core ideas kept reoccurring within the data that involved differences of priority in sexual assault cases, survivor-centered statements, the complexity of sexual assault crimes, and that sexual assault requires specialized personnel.

##### **4.4.1 There are Differences of Priority in Sexual Assault Cases**

When it comes to sexual assault, findings revealed that there are still differences of importance in sexual assault cases. The grant spurred reflection on the attitudes and inherent biases among stakeholders. SANEs expressed that it angered them to hear law enforcement make comments about how a survivor was dealing with their assault, and further established the need to “get everybody on the same page and change their mindset.” The grant also encouraged law enforcement to re-evaluate their process of

evidence collection: “I think it’s at the very beginning with the initial response... that is where I see the biggest disconnect between recognizing what is important and realizing the need to observe everything and to do it in a non-judgmental fashion. Save whatever evidence there is, don’t try to make a determination on whether or not you think this really happened or didn’t happen.” Another factor was the prosecutability of the cases, and how prosecution had to make inferences about the reactions to the cases in order to increase the chances of prosecution: “asked specified and directed questions during sexual assault cases about people’s perception of sexual assault and... sexual assault victims.” Another means that stakeholders recognized in increasing the prosecutability of sexual assault cases was the use of DNA. SANEs were adamant that “DNA, to me, is absolutely one thing that does seal the deal when you’re in court [otherwise] without the DNA, it’s a ‘he said, she said’ game” and “nothing would have ever happened... it probably would have been dead in the water.”

#### **4.4.2 Survivor-Centered Statements**

Appearance of survivor-centered statements occurred several times throughout various stakeholders. Through these statements emerged conflict among law enforcement acknowledging that while all cases are important to a survivor, as “every box has the same value. I try to point out, there is the story behind every box”—some cases are still more shocking and prosecutable than others. Another consistent theme involved the inclusion of survivor-centered perspectives in the creation of policies to investigate cases more objectively and effectively (see Figure 4). The utilization of DNA was also recognized as beneficial to clients who may have been “intoxicated of any substance and... doesn’t know what happened to them. Obviously they weren’t able to give

consent... [so] I think DNA would be critical in that way because that would mean that if someone found DNA on them, someone sexually assaulted [them].” Furthermore, advocates expressed that DNA is “a great tool in trial to move the cases forward and have a better shot toward successful prosecution.” However, it can be a “double-edged sword depending on what the situation is” because “if there isn’t any DNA... that can’t be obtained, that may invalidate survivors... just because there wasn’t any DNA doesn’t mean there wasn’t a sexual assault.”

#### **Figure 4**

##### *Objectively Investigating Cases with Survivor-Centered Perspectives*

"That is not why I'm here. And I'm not here to pass judgment. So much of it is boundaries. I am here to collect the evidence, so this case can move forward."

"If there isn't any DNA... that can't be obtained... you know what they know happened. Just because there wasn't any DNA doesn't mean there wasn't a sexual assault."

"And so, if you believe the victim and investigate from that perspective... there's no question on whether or not you should do those kits."

#### **4.4.3 Sexual Assault Crimes are Complex**

When it came to the handling of sexual assault crimes, stakeholders understood that “there is not case that’s the same...” and that because these cases are so complex, the rape advocate was adamant that “you totally have to treat them differently.” Included in this understanding is the acknowledgement that sexual assault is culturally diverse and “can happen to anyone... it’s not limited to any race, genders, [or] social classes.” Another complexity that emerged was the recognition that in sexual assault crimes, survivors prosecutability heavily relies on their credibility: “I mean I think they really are

tough to prosecute than probably anything else because... in a sexual assault case, it's always on the victim." Unlike other crimes, the testimony or circumstances of a survivor can diminish their credibility, because "in a sexual assault case, it's always on the victim and as a prosecutor you have to go in thinking offensively on how they are going to blame your victim and what they can do to blame your victim and I even think of questions that the defense is going to ask so that they're not able to blame my victim when it's their turn." Furthermore, during the trial the prosecutor expressed that "the jury is looking at the credibility of the victim so it's very important at the grand jury level to look at the credibility of that victim."

#### **4.4.4 Sexual Assault Requires Specialized Personnel**

Stakeholders expressed acknowledgement that sexual assault requires specialized personnel that needed formal training, certain personal characteristics, and burnout prevention. One of the reasons the grant developed trainings was "to eliminate that conflict we had between investigators that weren't trained, that weren't focused on sexual assault victims." These opportunities helped to increase skill and foster a shared survivor-centered, trauma-focused perspective across stakeholders. As some detectives reflected, they could "certainly see where mistakes were being made and those mistakes often were attributed to a lack of training, or a solid knowledge based on what the issues were when working these types of crimes."

When it comes to personal characteristics, the prosecutor mentioned that "depending on your personality, some don't want to take on rape cases," whereas SANEs stated that working in this field is "our job... to serve." Law enforcement found that there is "a privileging of investment, energy, [and] work ethic over experience... [that



they] would rather have people doing the job that gave a damn” because “the difference in a sexual assault case is in most cases you have a living victim.” Consistent with working alongside survivors is the potential for stakeholders to experience burnout. Stakeholders were quick to mention that the job is “very taxing... very stressful” and that the “burnout is there... just like everybody else, [we are] overworked and understaffed.”

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The current study was focused on understanding how the preliminary implementation of a Sexual Assault Kits Initiative (SAKI) grant had impacted the perceptions and work of the key stakeholders involved. Primarily, the research questions were (a) how do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted the policies and procedures of the handling and processing of SAKs; (b) how do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted the work they do; and (c) how do stakeholders perceive the SAKI to have impacted their corresponding agencies and/or their own views on sexual assault. Major domains and core ideas emerged during the analysis and highlighted the experiences stakeholders had.

Page (2008) pointed out in their study that the enactment of legal reforms did not guarantee compliance with them nor altered the way stakeholders within the system viewed sexual assault survivors and their cases. However, various stakeholders within this study experienced tremendous benefits and reoccurring drawbacks during the implementation of the grant. Portions of the original problems that contributed to the past backlog of SAKs were still regularly mentioned as persistent obstacles for stakeholders, one of those obstacles being jurisdictional resources. Recent studies have argued that proper funding and resources were integral to the successful submission and investigation

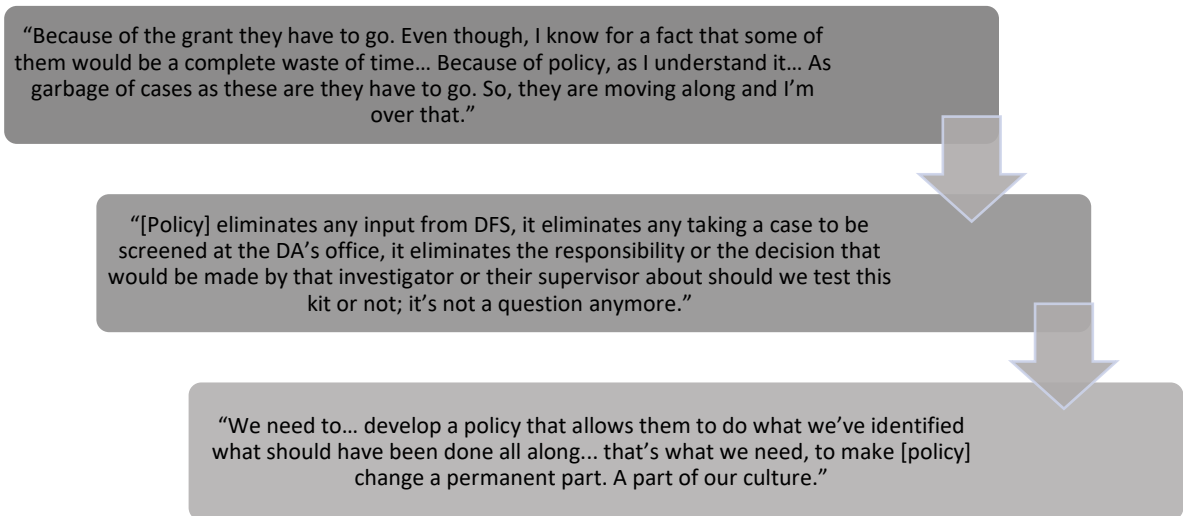
of SAKs (Mourtgos et al., 2021). Although the grant did provide funding, stakeholders still expressed that there was limited resources to provide adequate workflow, job assignment, and staffing.

On top of law enforcement's regular duties of investigating new sexual assault cases, the grant added extra duties involving the investigation of cold cases that resulted from testing all the unsubmitted kits—versus solely assigning designated individuals to only one placement. Furthermore, stakeholders collectively agreed that everyone was overworked and understaffed. Overtime, these aspects experienced by the stakeholder's could lead to burnout and overtime, change the behaviors and attitudes of both the individual personnel and agency (Campbell, 2017). While some stakeholders continue to hold or witnessed victim-blaming tendencies, there was still a reoccurring emphasis behind the growth and improvement of the law enforcement's perceptions of sexual assault survivors and handling of these kits. Researchers have argued that the tendencies themselves have not changed, rather that they have been carefully contained internally (Temkin & Krahe, 2008; Venema, 2016).

Despite whether these tendencies exist or not, stakeholders mentioned a new policy that utilized a “fork-lift” approach, where all kits were sent to testing—which eliminated the decision-making about which previously unsubmitted kits to now submit from the stakeholder's set of duties (see Figure 5). However, there were some stakeholders who voiced a strong dislike of the “forklift” approach, or depending on the situation, expressed that the approach could potentially cause more harm for some survivors

## Figure 5

### *Grants Trifecta in the Policy of SAK Submission*



Even though the implementation of new policies had not necessarily brought change for all of the original problems at hand, stakeholders have equally expressed that it brought tremendous positive change too. These policies spurred a greater investment and involvement of stakeholders’ roles in the handling of sex crimes. As law enforcement began to attend specialized survivor-centered, trauma-informed training, reflection occurred on the reasons behind why there was a backlog in the first place. There were also shifts within some of the law enforcements perceptions of sexual assault survivors, developing the skillsets required to bring back their focus to objectively collecting evidence regardless of their belief about what may or may not have happened. Stakeholders recognized the tremendous utility that DNA evidence could bring for both investigation and prosecution (Shaw & Campbell, 2013), but also for survivors.

Another consensus amongst stakeholders was both the negative and positive collaboration that emerged from the grant. One of the best practice policies involved the

development of multidisciplinary teams to work as collective units in the handling of sexual assault cases (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). All stakeholders consistently voiced that while at the beginning there was hostility and disharmony on the policies and procedures at hand—and that there will always be some form of disagreement—there was also massive growth in the way everyone worked alongside and understood each other.

### **5.1 Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. Although researchers took measures to bracket their biases whenever possible, there is still the potential for those predispositions to influence the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The interview protocol was based on previous research related to the application of SAKI programs, which may have influenced how the interviewers conducted the semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, social desirability may have influenced stakeholders' responses in the interview seeing as they were not unanimous and had built researcher-practitioner relationships with the interviewers.

Another potential limitation is the risk of CQR methods during the coding phase. Researchers may create an echo chamber due to similar predispositions or backgrounds, or desire to keep peace amongst the team. One last limitation that was not utilized was member checks. When Campbell (2017) conducted member checks and presented the information from the data to leadership, the conversation that followed led to a productive dialogue about the long-standing problems that existed within the unit. Not only would member checks have strengthened the credibility of this studies results, but it

also would have allowed for a continuation of conversation regarding the stakeholders' experiences and how to create substantial change.

## **5.2 Personal Commentary**

I wonder to what extent the domains and core ideas provided a well-rounded reflection of the lived experiences of the stakeholders. If I were asked questions directly attached to the grant, it would make sense that majority of my answers would be attached to the “grant” theme itself. Even after meticulously looking at the themes alongside the transcripts, I saw the missed opportunity to complete another round of cross-analysis. It was clear to me that the domains and core ideas were still bound to the interview protocol and lacked the emotional and thought-provoking experiences that were experienced throughout the grant. In trying to uphold objectivity and fear of straying far away from the original themes, I ended up inhibiting my responsibility as a researcher to uncover the underlying themes that occurred beyond the grant and original problem itself. While I still view the results as extremely valuable information—I simultaneously view the results lacking.

## **5.3. Implications for Policy and Practice**

Through the perspective of stakeholders who were the front-runners of the implementation of new policies, some of the key takeaways would be the continuation of the MDT model and the need for organizational solutions to provide further training and burnout prevention. Considering how important collaboration was to the participants within this study, a suggestion would be the continuation of MDTs with a focus of taking

the time to develop team unity before working collectively on sexual assault cases. Once MDTs begin moving forward towards collaboration, there should also be an emphasis behind taking the time to thoroughly walk through, comprehend, and discuss that procedures of handling sexual assault via the hostility that the stakeholders originally experienced.

Another necessary suggestion that may be hard to address is reallocating resources to balance workload and burnout prevention (Morabito et al., 2021). Majority of the trainings, understandably so, were geared towards law enforcement and how they handle sexual assault. However, other stakeholders voiced desire to be involved in similar trainings, or even trainings that are more geared towards their specific roles. Alongside these trainings is the need to provide burnout education and prevention with the means to help combat it. These means can be found through proper allocation of funding, in order to provide proper time off, self-care practices, and the minimum amount of personnel required. One last essential proposal is to address the perceived lack of prestige and prioritization of sexual assault compared to other major crimes.

#### **5.4 Future Research**

This study emphasizes that on a larger scale, there has been positive change stemming from the comprehensive reforms that targeted the backlog of SAKs—at the same time, there is still plenty of room for improving these policies in order to best serve sexual assault survivors. Goldberg-Ambrose (1992) notes that it can be difficult to gauge the effectiveness of comprehensive reforms considering that law and attitudes are reflexive constructs. As such, we call for future research to consider assessing how these

reforms effect the group process amongst stakeholders, the rate of burnout, and the different amount of trust that occurs within various levels. Suggested research questions would tie more into understanding related thoughts and feelings they have about their profession within the different levels versus direct questions related to the grant or sexual assault.

As this study comes to an end, it goes to say that there are certainly processes within it that could have been conducted more effectively. First and foremost, the final codes that derived from the data could have been further deconstructed. Considering that this entire study centered on the lived experiences of stakeholders, the codes themselves deserved to be further explored as there were higher, transferable themes involved. One of the overall developed themes that stakeholders seem to be collectively experiencing was trust: trust within their own capabilities, trust between each other, and trust within the system.

Secondly, it would have served the stakeholders and the study itself if there was one individual involved within every process from start to finish. Despite not being able to join this project several years ago, a part of me deeply wishes to have further involvement. Gathered from what is now known, the intricacies of the interview protocol, data collection, and data analysis could have been handled with more care and conducted within a closer time frame versus spanning across years. Last but not least, there is still hope for Mobile. Based off of the findings of the stakeholders intimately involved in these comprehensive reforms, there was tremendous growth with also room for improvement. As the ultimate goal of these reforms is learning how to better serve sexual assault survivors while upholding the personnel who are serving them.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Stakeholder Interview Protocol

#### Stakeholder Interview Protocol

##### Introduction and Overview

- **Purpose:** to conduct analyses on the problem (unsubmitted kits) and to gain a better understanding of how this project (Promise Initiative) has impacted the work of core/collaborative partners.
- **Overview:** provide time frame, confidentiality, and the ability to take breaks, ask questions, and/or not answer any of the following questions

##### SECTION 1: Background Information

In this section, I would like to ask you about your thoughts regarding the utility of SAK testing and the importance and impact of DNA results in your work.

- What is your role in the Promise Initiative (SAKI)? What are your responsibilities?
  - How long have you worked in... (law enforcement, law, sexual assault services, crime lab)?
  - What are your primary concrete duties and responsibilities of this position?
  - How long have you been in this position?
- To what extent have you worked with sexual assault cases and/or victims? What is your involvement in sexual assault cases and/or sexual assault victims?

##### SECTION 2: General Perceptions about SAK Testing and DNA Evidence

In this section, I would like to ask you about your thoughts regarding the utility of SAK testing and the importance and impact of DNA results in your work.

- How do you think SAK testing can be helpful to victims/survivors?
- What are your thoughts about whether to test all vs. some of the unsubmitted SAK's?
- In which circumstances is DNA evidence essential to the successful prosecution of the case from your perspective?
- Are there differences in the outcomes of cases with and without DNA results in your experience?
- What case elements, including DNA evidence, do you find most often lead to arrests and prosecutions?
- Role Specific: Can you describe how SAK testing can be useful to the work of individuals in your role?
  - **Prosecutor:** describe the procedures for the use of DNA in the prosecution of a sex crime

- **Law Enforcement:** describe the procedures for the use of DNA in the investigation of a sex crime
- **SANEs:** describe the procedures for collecting DNA samples from sex crime victims
- **Other:** describe any procedures in your role that involves collecting, handling, or utilizing DNA evidence

**SECTION 3: Procedures for Victim Notification**

I would now like to talk to you about victim notification procedures in the course of SAK testing.

- In your professional opinion / experience, how / when should victims be notified about SAK testing?
- What recommendations do you have for creating victim notification protocols?
- What were key confidentiality, privacy, and safety concerns that ought to be attended to when creating victim notification protocols?

**SECTION 4: Promise Initiative’s Impact on You**

I would like to talk about how being part of the Promise Initiative has impacted your work and your overall thoughts about how this project is going

- How has participating in this project impacted your work outside the project?
- Has your participation affected the way you go about your regular work? How so?
- Overall, how do you think the project is going? What were the biggest challenges for you personally?
- How do you think the different groups are working together? Is this what you expected when working with a multidisciplinary collaborative group?

**SECTION 5: Agency / Organizational Role in Processing SAKs**

In this next section, I would like to ask you about your agency’s role in processing sexual assault kits. I want you to think about your organization as a whole (policies and procedures), not about the individuals who make up your organization.

- Historical: Can you identify any gaps in the historical policies / procedures that may have contributed to the large quantities of untested sexual assault kits?
- Present: Which procedures are the most effective in making certain the sexual assault kits are processed appropriately (going forward)? Which procedures are the most ineffective?
- Who oversees such policies and procedures?
- What resources (e.g., personnel, equipment, etc.) are available to help make these procedures work?
- Are there resources (that are not part of current procedures) that would be useful in making sexual assault kits process more effectively?
- In your organization how is it determined who works with sexual assault victims and cases (particularly relevant for police interviewees). What determines who works or has contact with sexual assault cases?

- How does your organization work/collaborate with other agencies in processing sexual assault cases/kits? How well do you think your organization is collaborating with other agencies to make this process work?
- How does the processing of sexual assault cases compare to other crimes in terms of your organization's priorities?

### **SECTION 6: Individuals' Roles RE: Processing SAKs**

This next section is about your perception of how individuals within your organization process and handle sexual assault cases and kits. Here we will be discussing individuals' skills and abilities to perform their respective roles in processing sexual assault kits.

- How many people are typically involved in handling sexual assault cases in your organization? Do people have specific roles that they adhere to? What are they?
- Do these individuals have supervisors? Do you think there is a gap in how these individuals were/are monitored/supervised that may have contributed to untested kits?
- Would you say these individuals are knowledgeable about sexual assault in particular? (i.e., the impact of sexual assault on victims? Current stats on sexual assault incidents? Prevalence? How sexual assault cases are prosecuted? Etc.)
- What are the attitudes and beliefs that individuals in your organization hold about sexual assault victims? Do you think these beliefs have changed over time? If so, how? How have these attitudes affected how sexual assault cases/kits are handled?

### **SECTION 7: Professional Development and Self-Care Working with Sexual Assault**

- Have you received training specific to the neurobiology of trauma? If so, what impact has this had on your work?
- Have you received training on trauma-informed aspects of your particular discipline's practices in working with victims of sexual assault? If so, what impact has this had on your work?
- Keeping any trauma-related professional development experiences you have had in mind; how do you find that you assess victim credibility? What are indicators for you that a victim's credibility is questionable?
- Describe how you have typically dealt with times when the emotional strain of working with sexual assault victims and cases have begun to affect your life beyond the workplace? To the degree you have experienced such problems, are there any policies or professional development experiences that have helped you address these concerns?

### **SECTION 8: Final Thoughts and Conclusions**

I would like to give you the chance to share any final thoughts and provide recommendations to the group.

- Knowing what you know now, are there things you think the group should have done differently to respond to the untested SAK kit problem?

- What are the major strengths of your organization in handling sexual assault cases/kits? What are the major weaknesses?
- What are the major strengths of the individuals within your organization in handling sexual assault cases/kits? What are the major weaknesses?
- What do you foresee to be the most difficult task in responding to this problem? Both within your organization and across other responsible agencies/organizations?
- As you know, what is done in this project will have national impact across other jurisdictions going through the same problem. Do you have any advice for how other cities respond to the problem of untested kits?

## Appendix B: IRB Approval

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### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD October 11, 2016

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Principal Investigator: Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Ph.D.  
IRB # and Title: IRB PROTOCOL: 16-260  
[933274-1] Analysis of Mobile's Initiative to Test Untested Sexual Assault Kits  
Status: APPROVED      Review Type: Expedited Review  
Approval Date: October 6, 2016      Submission Type: New Project  
Initial Approval: October 6, 2016      Expiration Date: October 5, 2017  
Review Category: Category: 45 CFR 46.110 (6):  
Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for  
research purposes.

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*This panel, operating under the authority of the DHHS Office for Human Research and Protection, assurance number FWA 00001602, and IRB Database #00000286, has reviewed the submitted materials for the following:*

1. *Protection of the rights and the welfare of human subjects involved.*
2. *The methods used to secure and the appropriateness of informed consent.*
3. *The risk and potential benefits to the subject.*

The regulations require that the investigator not initiate any changes in the research without prior IRB approval, except where necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the human subjects, and that **all problems involving risks and adverse events be reported to the IRB immediately!**

Subsequent supporting documents that have been approved will be stamped with an IRB approval and expiration date (if applicable) on every page. Copies of the supporting documents must be utilized with the current IRB approval stamp unless consent has been waived.

**Notes:**

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Name of Author: Savannah A. Rommel

Graduate and Undergraduate Schools Attended:

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Degrees Awarded:

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Awards and Honors:

- Dean's List, University of Mobile: Fall 2015, Fall 2016
- President's List, University of Mobile: Fall 2015, Fall 2016, Spring 2015-Spring 2018