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A Comparative Study on the Developing Impact of Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners in Utah

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Introduction

In 2016, a case report was published revealing that the prosecution rate of adult sex crimes in Salt Lake County from 2003-2011 was a shockingly low 6% (Valentine, Shaw, Lark & Campbell, 2016). This research quickly became a front news story, with one local news station launching their own investigation and arriving at the same disturbing statistic (Headrick & Mashburn, 2014). The research findings and subsequent news coverage sparked a state-wide conversation concerning the far-reaching implications of sexual assault and the responsibility of each branch of government in stopping sex-crimes. In the years that followed, multiple new trainings and procedures regarding sexual assault cases were implemented by Salt Lake County’s district attorney’s office and law enforcement agencies.

Two years later, I, along with a research team at BYU, sought to determine if any improvement had been made in the prosecution rate of adult sex crimes in Salt Lake County since the initial findings had been published. Due to unpredicted political circumstances, this research has taken longer than anticipated and is expected to be complete by the end of 2019. The purpose of this report is to explain the progress made thus far and what this research has taught me about the scientific process.

Methodology

Our research is modeled after the original study in the 2016 case report. Both studies were conducted using a toolkit developed by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) designed to track the number of sexual assault cases that are successfully prosecuted. We chose 50 random Salt Lake County sexual assault cases from each year in our study (2012-2016). We plan to then follow those 250 cases through the court docket system to determine whether they have been successfully prosecuted.

We received IRB approval in July 2019 and immediately began reaching out to law enforcement agencies to establish memorandums of understanding (MOU’s). MOU’s are signed documents necessary for us to collect the case number related to our sexual assault victims. The case number will then be used to track the case through the court docket system. If the case was not referred to prosecution, the MOU’s establish the expectation that we will collect a brief statement from the law enforcement agency as to why the case was not referred.

Due to a tense political atmosphere and uncertain election results, the MOU’s took considerably longer than anticipated to obtain. Over many months, we corresponded with Salt Lake County law enforcement agencies through multiple emails, phone conversations, and meetings. We are still in the process of convincing law enforcement officials that this study is critical for learning if any of the actions taken to combat the low sexual assault prosecution rates since the previous study have been successful.

Discussion & Conclusion

Research and development are the cornerstone of all science disciplines, including nursing. However, I have learned that turning scientific discovery into actionable outcomes is far more difficult than obtaining
knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Government and bureaucracy, society and culture, and communication and disorganization can completely impede the process of turning knowledge into action. In this case, a discovery was made in 2016 that brought a scrutinious public eye onto the way Salt Lake County has handled sexual assault cases. The far more difficult part has been turning that piece of knowledge into action and then measuring that action to determine our success.

Scholarly Sources


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