False Reports

Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute Non-Stranger Sexual Assault

Course Outline

February 2006, Last updated July 2023

Course Description

This module directly confronts the difficult question of false reporting and challenges many "red flags" that often raise suspicion among criminal justice professionals and members of the general public yet nonetheless represent the realistic dynamics of sexual assault crimes. The module answers questions that have historically created a bigger hurdle for sexual assault victims than any lack of training or experience on the part of law enforcement professionals before moving on to successfully investigate and prosecute non-stranger sexual assault.

Estimated time for completion: 5 hours

OVW Grant Funding

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Expert Contributions

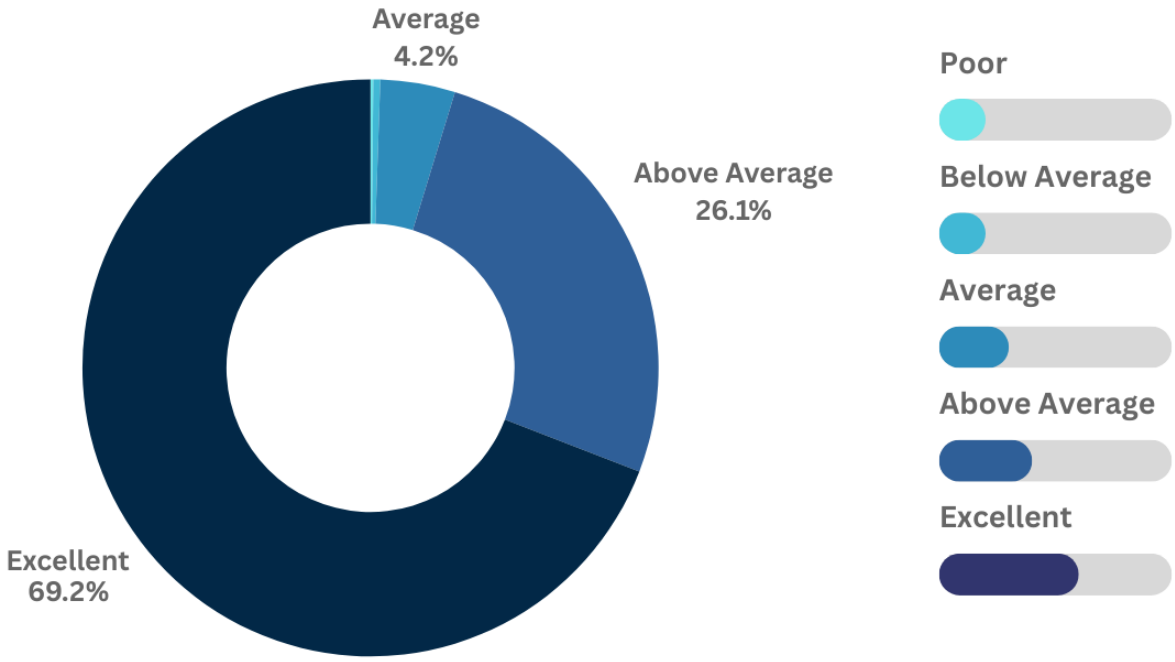
OLTI training content was created with input from professionals in a variety of disciplines, including law enforcement, prosecution, healthcare, victim advocacy, and related fields. Please see the acknowledgements page of each module for a list of contributing authors and expert reviewers.

Course Evaluations

In sum, after taking the course, participants said that they had learned how to better identify false reports, the importance of believing victims and thoroughly investigating sexual assault claims, and how trauma can affect victim behavior. Participants also said they felt better equipped to offer victim-centered care, they were more aware of their own biases and the stereotypes around “real rape,” and they believed that taking the course would improve their investigative skills, especially in complex cases.

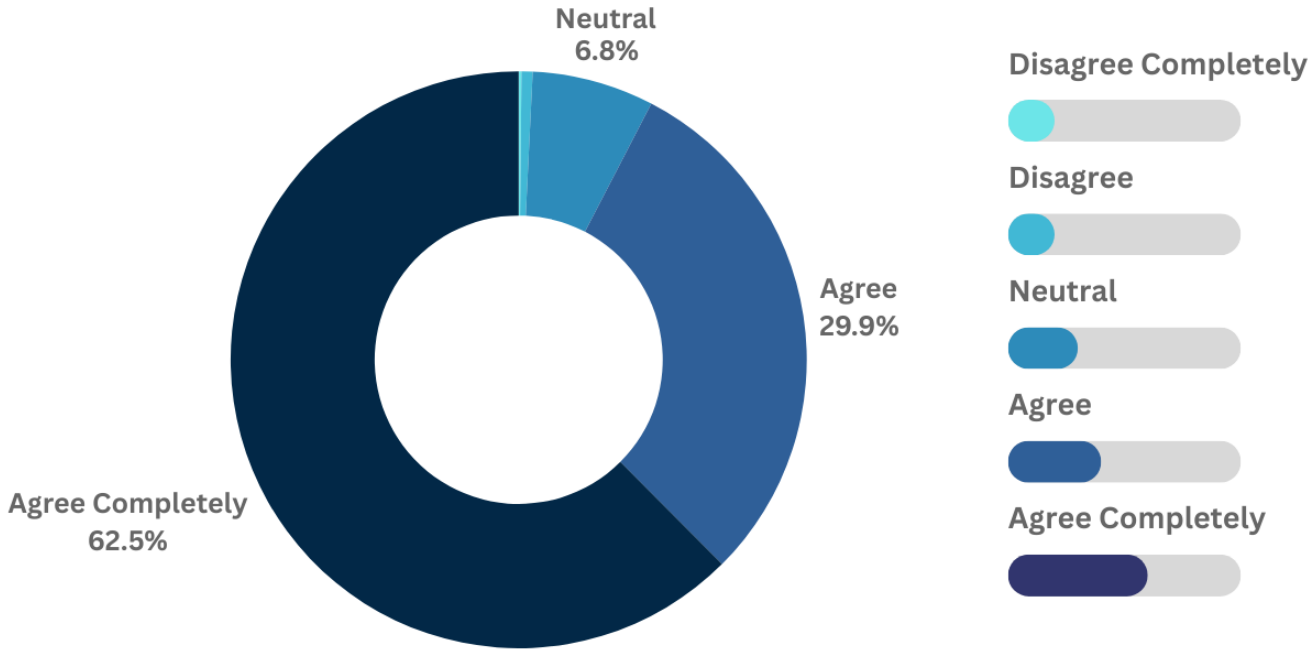
At the end of each module, participants are asked a number of questions about the overall quality of the module as well as its difficulty. They are also asked to indicate how likely they are to apply the information they learned on the job. Their responses are summarized in the following charts.

I would rate the overall quality of this training module as:



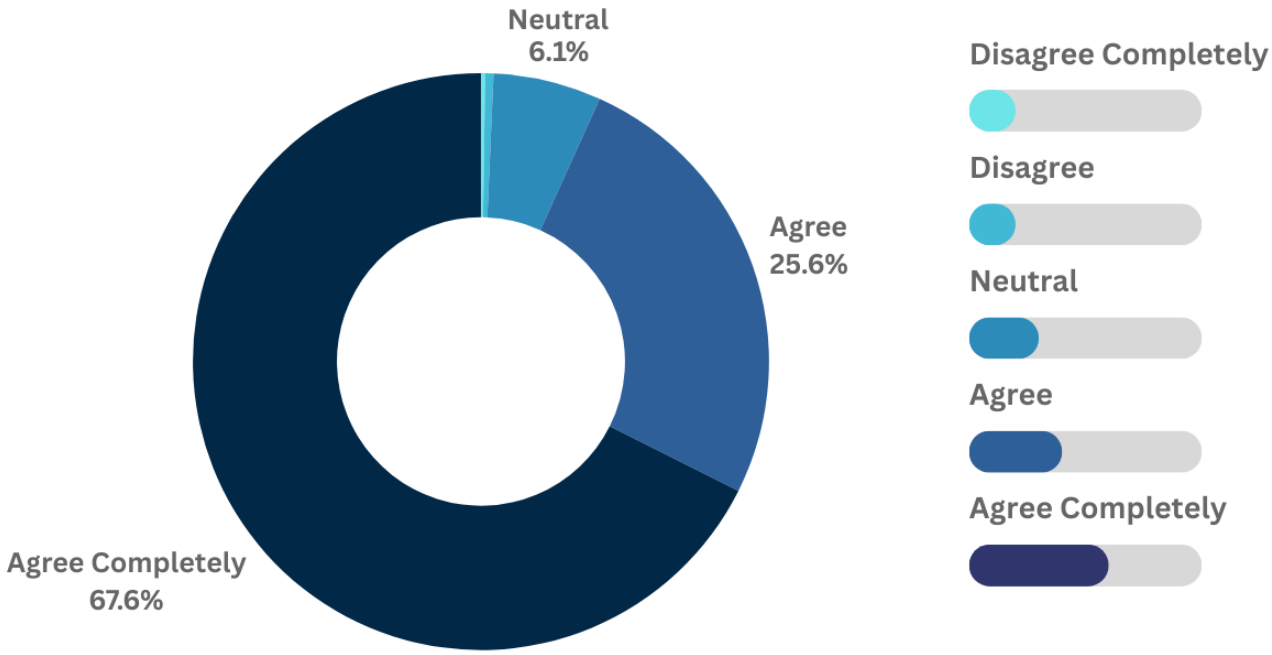
95% rated the overall quality of the module as either “excellent” or “above average.”

I feel this course offered new techniques or concepts:



92% either “agree completely” or “agree” that the course offered quality training.

I can apply the information learned through this course on the job:



93% "agree completely" or "agree" that they can apply what they learned on the job.

Course Objectives

At the end of this training module, the learner will be able to:

- Identify the "red flags" that raise suspicion of a sexual assault report
- Recognize our gut reaction to these "red flags"
- Recognize that these "red flags" are based on cultural stereotypes of "real rape"
- Define a false report
- Recognize that some information provided by the victim may not be accurate, but this does not necessarily indicate a false report
- Recognize how law enforcement professionals can create a "false report"
- Reverse the cycle of suspicion that creates a "false report"
- Identify how many sexual assault reports are actually false
- Effectively handle the frustrating reality of "real" false reports

Course Outline

I. Introduction
   a. Confronting the issue of false reporting
II. Red flags that trigger suspicion
III. Our gut reaction to red flags
IV. Stereotypes of "real rape"
   a. How the stereotype of "real rape" affects the law enforcement investigation
   b. How the stereotypes make successful prosecution less likely
   c. How to confront the issue of false reporting

d. Cases that may seem to be “unbelievable”

V. What is the actual definition of a false report?

VI. But what if part of the report is false?
   a. A few examples

VII. How investigators can create a “false report”
   a. The cycle of suspicion against survivors
   b. The “cycle of sympathy” for suspects
   c. Where the “cycle of suspicion” and “cycle of sympathy” converge

VIII. Signed release waivers and similar tactics

IX. Polygraphs, voice stress analysis, and other methods for “lie detection”
   a. Concerns regarding the polygraph
   b. Prohibition in federal law known as VAWA 2005
   c. Similar limitations with other techniques
   d. Evidence that polygraph has been routinely used

X. So how many sexual assault reports really are false?
   a. Prior “research”: The Kanin study
   b. Methodologically rigorous research finds 3-8%

XI. How to handle the frustrating reality of “real” false reports
   a. Potential indicators of a false report
   b. Responding to a suspected false report
   c. To prosecute or not to prosecute?
   d. The importance of stress management

XII. How to reverse this cycle of suspicion
   a. Use caution with media portrayals and “war stories”

XIII. Just for supervisors
   a. When the report really is false
   b. Establish a multi-disciplinary review board