



End Violence Against Women International
(EVAWI)

EXCERPT: Informational Report vs. Crime Report

FROM: Opening Doors: Alternative Reporting Options for Sexual Assault Victims

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Informational Report vs. Crime Report

Before we go any further, it is important to differentiate *informational reports* and *crime reports* because they become inextricably linked with alternative reporting options.

- While the terminology varies, we use the phrase **informational report** to refer to a written report of a sexual assault (or other incident) that *does not meet the elements of a criminal offense* – at least not with the information available at the time. Agencies across the country use a variety of official and unofficial names when referring to these types of reports. But regardless of what they call it, this type of report is used by law enforcement agencies to document various types of information such as intelligence about possible criminal activity.
- A **crime report** is used for incidents that *meet the elements of a criminal offense*, although they may be called an “offense report,” “case report,” “scored case,” etc.

Implications for Alternative Reporting Options

These concepts are critical to understand in the context of alternative reporting options, because agencies may increase their use of informational reports to record information submitted by victims through these alternative pathways.

Regardless of which path a victim takes, **a crime report should be completed when the elements of a sexual assault offense are met, and the victim’s identity is recorded.**¹ This report should be included in departmental statistics, just as it would if the victim reported a sexual assault but later withdrew participation in the investigation. It would not serve the community if these cases were improperly recorded as informational reports and excluded from agency statistics – because these statistics are used to inform the public about the full range of crimes perpetrated in the community.

On the other hand, an **informational report should be used when the elements of a sexual assault offense have not been met with the information obtained so far**, and the victim does not want, at least initially, to officially identify themselves for the purpose of a report and investigation. An informational report may later be converted to a crime report, if the victim decides to be identified or additional information is revealed. Law enforcement systems should be flexible enough to accommodate such changes.

What is most important is that investigators consider how an investigation unfolds *one step at a time*, and recognize that the initial contact with a victim does not need to provide all the information needed to launch an investigation, let alone present a case to the prosecutor. If we really want to protect community safety and hold perpetrators

¹ Although the victim must be identified for a crime report to be filed by law enforcement, many states have laws that can shield the victim’s identity from the public. These laws allow law enforcement to remove the victim’s name from public files and records concerning the offense, including internal reports submitted to supervisors, press releases, and records of judicial proceedings. In some states, a pseudonym (fictitious name) can also be used instead of the victim’s name in all public files and records concerning the offense. More detailed information on the use of pseudonyms is provided in [Appendix C](#).



accountable, then we shouldn't be forcing victims into an *all or nothing* scenario when they are first contacted. This approach shuts down many victims, even those who were initially willing to talk with law enforcement, leading them to withdraw their participation. Informational reports can be used to capture whatever information victims are willing to provide at the time, and then converting it to a crime report if the situation later changes.

Crime Reports: Clearing or Suspending

The implications then extend to how these reports are closed or cleared. When the information received through an alternative reporting path is recorded as a crime report, it will be cleared/closed based on agency policies and practices, as well as nationally established guidelines for the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program.² However, if the victim is not participating in the investigation, it will not typically move forward, and the suspect will not be arrested, or if a suspect was arrested, the suspect will be released from custody. In that scenario, the **crime report should be suspended or inactivated, not cleared (e.g., unfounded)**. This indicates that a crime was reported, but the investigation will not move forward unless the victim decides to participate.



Suspending Reports Not Failure to Investigate

The practice of suspending or inactivating crime reports based on a victim-centered, non-investigative reporting philosophy could raise concerns by the public and command staff, if it is seen as a reflection that the law enforcement agency is unable to clear or close a high percentage of their sexual assault cases. It must be clear that **this practice is the result of respecting victims' wishes, not a failure to investigate sexual assault cases**.

Informational Reports: Retention Policies

When the information received by the agency is recorded as an informational report, the procedures are different. Typically, an informational report will only be reviewed for the information or intelligence provided; **no follow-up investigation is conducted, and it does not need to be cleared or closed following UCR guidelines**. The specific policies and practices of law enforcement agencies vary quite a bit. However, they may need to be re-examined if the agency intends to implement alternative reporting options.

Some agencies destroy informational reports (and any associated evidence) after a limited period of time, such as one year. Yet destroying these records and evidence could create future problems if victims later decide they are able to participate in the investigation and possible prosecution of their report, or the suspect is investigated for another crime at a later time. **The retention period for informational reports may need to be extended for a certain number of years, or the statute of limitations.**

² The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program is a voluntary data collection program for criminal offenses reported to law enforcement, operated by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). For more information, please see EVAWI's OLT module on [Clearance Methods for Sexual Assault Cases](#).





Need for Written Policies and Procedures

Investigative journalists have uncovered problems in some communities with law enforcement agencies routinely downgrading sexual assault reports to lesser offenses or even non-criminal records such as informational reports.

For example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* revealed that the **Philadelphia Police Department** was routinely downgrading sexual assault reports or categorizing them as "2701," a police code used to designate a non-criminal call for service. As many as one-third of all sexual assaults reported to the Police Department in the 1980's ended up in this non-criminal category. Once classified, the report was not investigated further, and it disappeared from the agency's criminal offense statistics and active caseload. The process was so ingrained in departmental culture, it earned its own euphemism; "going down with crime."³

The same problem was uncovered by the New Orleans by *Times-Picayune*. Officers at the **New Orleans Police Department** were also downgrading sexual assault reports to lesser offenses or non-criminal codes referred to as a "Signal 21." Again, these reports were not investigated and were dropped from agency statistics. In 2008, as many as 60% of all rape reports were classified as Signal 21 cases. Changes were not seen until the US Department of Justice conducted their own investigation, resulting in a consent decree and mandated reforms.⁴

In the **St. Louis Police Department**, officers were using informal "memos" to document information about many sexual assaults reported to them, rather than official crime reports.⁵ The **Atlanta Police Department** was reported to use a "secret sex crimes file" as a dumping ground for sexual assault reports that investigators viewed as difficult or dubious.⁶ Although different names are used by agencies across the country, the practices mean that reports will not show up in agency statistics or receive any follow-up investigation. They simply disappear.

These examples illustrate the critical need for written policies and procedures. Inappropriate practices are less likely when protocols are clearly spelled out in written documents, which are used to guide training, supervision, accountability, and recognition for high quality work. For more information, see the OLTJ modules on (1) [Clearance Methods for Sexual Assault Cases](#) and (2) [False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate Sexual Assault](#).

³ Fazlollah, M., Matza, M., & McCoy, C. (1998, November 1). How to Cut City's Crime Rate: Don't Report It. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

⁴ Maggi, L. (2009, July 11). [NOPD downgrading of rape reports raises questions](#). *The Times-Picayune*; US Department of Justice (2001, March 16). *Investigation of the New Orleans Police Department*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division.

⁵ Kohler, J. (2005, January 17). What Rape? Series Special Report: Crime Statistics. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; Kohler, J. (2005, July 23). Police Revise Rape Figures Upward by 58 Percent. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; Kohler, J. (2005, August 29). Waivers Wipe Out Reports of Rape. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

⁶ Good, J.B. (2001, October 24). Secret Sex Crimes File: Atlanta Police Failed to Report Rape Cases. *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*.

