



Physical Space Impacts the Founding of Sexual Assault Cases

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Many studies have investigated how different factors affect the way police handle sexual assault cases. Some factors have included the race of the victim and whether the offender and victim knew each other. However, very little research has looked at how community-level factors can also affect police decisions.



Figure 1 Photograph by Brett Sayles: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/orange-leaf-on-chainlink-fence-1550131/> CCO.

Highlights

Communities with a greater number of Black, Latinx, and Asian residents, as well as wealthier communities, had higher rates of founding, but the effect was geographically uneven.

Physical space can affect police decisions in sexual assault cases.

Interventions addressing gender-based violence and systemic biases are needed so lower-resourced individuals or individuals part of minoritized groups aren't unduly harmed when increasing police response to sexual assault.

“it is necessary for researchers to examine local effects to fully understand how variables influence police decision-making in sexual assault cases.”

Previous research on intimate partner violence has found that police decisions to arrest are influenced by community-level factors like wealth and the racial make up of the community. Other criminal justice and public health research has shown that the physical environment—for example, urbanicity—can also play a role in police decision-making. Thus, it's important to consider that community-level factors could have different effects on police decisions depending on where the crime took place.

Sexual assault case attrition, or the dropping of cases as they move through the criminal justice system, is still a problem in the United States. Founding is the first decision made by police in sexual assault cases and determines the outcome of the case. Founding a case means police believe the victim and have enough preliminary evidence to conclude a crime took place. If police don't found the case, it will be dropped. Given the importance of this decision, we wanted to find out if community factors, like the demographic makeup of a community, would impact police decisions to move forward with a sexual assault case. We also wanted to see if these factors varied depending on where the assault happened.

Methods

The midwestern study city (unnamed to protect their privacy) provides publicly available data on crime. We used these data, as well as publicly available data from the [American Community Survey](#), to examine whether community-level factors influenced police decisions to found sexual assault cases. We then examined whether the effect of these factors differed depending on which community in the city the crime took place.

Results

- Communities with a greater percentage of Black residents, Latinx residents, and Asian residents had higher founding rates.
- Wealthier communities had higher founding rates.
- Differences in founding rates were only seen in some city communities, namely the northern communities. The effects diminished when moving toward the central and southern communities in the city.
- Although police are affected by community characteristics, they appear to be even more influenced by where the sexual assault took place.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community Psychology is all about context. Our work demonstrates space is an important aspect of community context related to police response to sexual assault cases.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Our research demonstrates that we need to examine police decisions at multiple levels of analysis—individual, case, law enforcement agency, and community, etc. Also, Community Psychologists should explore how space may influence their work.

Higher founding rates are usually perceived as a good thing. However, our findings demonstrate law enforcement may be influenced by factors that shouldn't affect how they found a case (for example, the wealth of the community). It is also unclear why law enforcement are only influenced in certain communities, and not others. For example, some communities in the southern part of the city are wealthy, but only wealthy communities in the northern part of the city had higher founding rates.

Practice: Interventions that address gender-based violence and systemic biases are needed so lower-resourced individuals or individuals part of minority groups aren't harmed when increasing police response to sexual assault.

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