

SEXUAL ASSAULT INVESTIGATOR TRAINING: PERCEPTIONS FROM JUVENILE AND ADULT SEX CRIMES INVESTIGATORS

A Report to the Houston, TX Sexual Assault Kit Action-Research Working Group

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2011, the National Institute of Justice funded the Houston Police Department to form a multidisciplinary team to study the problem of sexual assault kits (SAK) that were collected but never submitted to a crime lab for screening and testing. The Houston Action-Research Project sought to understand the factors that produced the volume of unsubmitted SAKs, the way forensic evidence is used during criminal investigations and prosecutions of sexual assaults, and what stakeholders should expect when large numbers of previously unsubmitted SAKs get tested. The project adopted a holistic approach and considered the broader issue of responses, beyond testing the kits, to sexual assaults in the community.

Houston's Action-Research Project Working Group includes representatives from the following organizations:

- Houston Forensic Science Center ¹
- Harris County District Attorney's Office
- Harris Health System
- Houston Area Women's Center
- Houston Police Department Sex Crimes Investigative Units
- Memorial Hermann Health System
- Sam Houston State University – Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology
- University of Texas at Austin – Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

The group has been working collaboratively and collecting data that has allowed for an understanding of multiple aspects of the local response system. The organizations that have been working on this project have also been implementing and evaluating reforms that are meant to improve the response to sexual assaults. Action research entails an iterative process in which research evidence informs responses and for this reason the project has generated multiple research reports. This is one of a number of reports and presentations that will be released to help other jurisdictions learn from our experiences as they seek to better understand and improve their own practices.

Learn more about the project at www.houstonsakresearch.org

¹ During the course of the project the crime lab was re-organized so that, in April 2014, the crime lab was no longer part of the Houston Police Department.

BACKGROUND

The project working group has recently held several discussions about potential uses for supplemental project funds. One potential use for a portion of supplemental funds is to provide specialized training for criminal investigators. This report describes sex crimes investigators' perceptions of the training they have received. This information will be useful for understanding the extent to which additional training may be valuable. The report summarizes information obtained through interviews with crimes investigators in the summer of 2011. Data were collected from 44 investigators, including 13 from the adult sex crimes unit and 31 from the juvenile sex crimes unit. Two interview questions directly addressed training and two additional items generated responses about training. The results show that many investigators have not received training that is specific to sex crimes investigations and that many investigators believe additional, sex crime-specific training would be valuable.

RESULTS: JUVENILE INVESTIGATORS

Most juvenile investigators (66 %) explained that, prior to becoming a member of the sex crimes unit, they completed a "40 hour basic investigations course." Investigators reported that the course covered the basic criminal investigation process and is required for all investigators in each specialized unit in the police department (e.g., homicide, robbery, sexual assault). The basic investigations course is not specific to any investigative unit; it provides investigators with general information regarding elements of investigative procedures. For juvenile investigators, the basic investigations course is supplemented by a training program which couples new investigators with experienced officers. Fifty percent of juvenile investigators mentioned this type of training during their interviews. This peer-training fosters mentoring and allows new investigators to learn procedures with the assistance of an experienced investigator.

About three-quarters of juvenile sex crimes investigators indicated that they had received specialized training about child abuse and sex offenses from trainers within HPD and outside organizations. The majority of investigators who indicated they received specialized training said that the training was delivered at large conferences and that the courses were not hands on. Slightly more than half of the juvenile investigators (53%) indicated that additional training regarding child victims would be beneficial and would improve their ability to investigate juvenile sex crimes.

RESULTS: ADULT INVESTIGATORS

Adult sex crimes investigators (75%) also reported completing the 40 hour basic investigations course. The majority of investigators in the unit (83%) said they had not received specialized training that focused on the investigation of sex crimes prior to their assignment to the adult sex crimes

unit. Most investigators in the adult unit (75%) said that the best kind of training they could receive was “on-the-job,” hands-on training, by working with an experienced sex crimes investigator. These investigators indicated that they did not receive any training specifically addressing sexual assaults but had gone through extensive investigator training. Approximately one-third of the adult unit investigators (35%) indicated that more training would help improve relations with victims and their ability to investigate sexual assaults. In contrast, about half of the investigators in the juvenile unit believed additional training would be beneficial.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PROVIDE SPECIALIZED, SEX CRIME INVESTIGATIONS TRAINING

An important percentage of investigators in both units believe additional training would improve their work. While only about a third of investigators in the adult unit believed additional training would be helpful, about half of investigators in the juvenile unit believed this to be true. In addition, the lack of consistent, specialized training suggests this is an area of need.

→ *Houston Police Department Response*

HPD made the decision to use project funds to offer new, specialized training opportunities for investigators in the adult and juvenile sex crime units.

CAREFULLY SELECT TRAINING PROVIDERS AND CURRICULUM

Not all training is of equal quality, so speakers, trainers, and their curriculum should be assessed before deciding on a specialized training program. Some have recommended that “rape crisis centers” should deliver specialized sexual assault training to law enforcement officers (Epstein & Langenbahn, 1994; Lord & Rassel, 2000), focusing on education to improve responses to victims of sexual assault (Epstein & Langenbahn, 1994; Lonsway et al, 2001; Lord & Rassel, 2000). One noted expert has recommended the use of “interactive exercises, including simulated sexual assault interviews” (Lonsway et al., 2001, p. 697), including segments on “crisis intervention, victim response, and interview techniques, as well as legal and procedural issues pertaining to arrest, charging, unbounding, evidence collection, and prosecution” (Lonsway et al., 2001, p. 697).

Studies that have evaluated specialized sexual assault response training for patrol officers have found positive results (Lonsway et al., 2001; Lonsway, 2010). These studies suggest that effective training entails interactive processes, such as role playing and examining older cases that were initially believed to be fabricated but were found to be true. Using this interactive process, participants are forced to examine perceived problems that would hinder prosecution, and may improve investigation practices by “expand[ing] their thinking about investigative steps” (Lonsway,

2010, p. 1363). Consistent with these findings and suggestions supporting interactive training, studies on law enforcement training more broadly also support the use of hands-on exercises. Many studies support a shift from traditional law enforcement training which has stressed the “memorization of laws, rules, and procedures” (Bradford & Pynes, 1999, p. 286) toward victim management and problem solving skills (Birzer, 2003; Bradford & Pynes, 1999; Chappell, 2006; Kelling, Wasserman, & Williams, 1988; Oliver, 1998; Olivia & Compton, 2010; Oettmeier & Wycoff, 1994; Werth, 2011). Below is a list of training resources that may provide useful information to be used when planning for sexual assault investigator training.

TRAINING RESOURCES TO CONSIDER

- Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas at Austin. The UT researchers working on the SAK project compiled a catalog of training resources and distributed this catalog to the working group in early December 2012. HPD personnel who make training decisions should consult the catalog and members of the UT research team when planning training sessions.
 - Link to IDVSA: <http://www.utexas.edu/ssw/cswr/institutes/idvsa/>

- Dr. Rebecca Campbell from Michigan State University. Dr. Campbell is the researcher partner on the Detroit SAK project and she recently delivered training on the neurobiology of trauma as part of the project in Detroit. She will soon begin delivering this training across the state in Michigan. Dr. Campbell presented information about the neurobiology of trauma as part of the National Institute of Justice’s *Research for the Real World* series in December 2012. HPD personnel are coordinating a training session to be delivered by Dr. Campbell in Houston in March 2013.
 - Link to NIJ and the recording: <http://www.nij.gov/nij/events/research-real-world.htm>

- International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Training Key, *Investigating Sexual Assaults Part II: Investigative Procedures*. This resource includes information regarding victim rights, follow-up interviews with victims, victim needs, how to respond to “drug-facilitated sexual assault,” and methods that can improve “contacting and interviewing” suspects.
 - Link to the report: <http://www.theiacp.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=JK0TYfpVhki%3D&tabid=87>

- End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI). EVAWI provides free online training to police officers regarding the entire sexual assault investigation process. The training focuses on improving criminal justice actors' responses to sexual assault by providing information through online training units which is then used to assess hypothetical situations. EVAWI also provides examinations and "case studies" to evaluate participants' knowledge of sexual assaults. Summaries of the training available can be found at the EVAWI training modules website provided below.
 - Link to EVAWI website: <http://olti.evawintl.org/default.aspx>
 - Link to EVAWI training modules: <http://olti.evawintl.org/Courses.aspx>

- Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The LAPD designed and delivers a course for sex crimes investigators. A sample schedule for this course is included in Appendix A. Professors Cassia Spohn and Katherine Tellis completed a study of sexual assault investigations and prosecutions in Los Angeles and they provided this information. It may be worthwhile to contact a representative from the LAPD to learn more details about this course.

- The Southern Police Institute (SPI) at the University of Louisville. SPI offers a 40-hour course for new and advanced sex crimes investigators.
 - Link to SPI course: <http://louisville.edu/spi/courses/ce-courses/sci>

➔ **Houston Police Department Response**

The training being provided is varied and investigators have participated in webinars, attended national conferences, and have attended presentations by sexual assault experts in the Houston area.

EVALUATE TRAINING THAT IS PROVIDED

An evaluation study should be conducted to understand the outcomes of additional training delivered to HPD sex crimes investigators. This evaluation can measure multiple outcomes that include knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and case results (i.e., complainant cooperation) with multiple data sources, including investigators, their supervisors, victims, and case files. Pre- and post-training measurements will allow for an understanding of changes over time. While it may not be possible to conclude that the training *caused* any observed changes, it can still be valuable to document the extent to which changes occur.

➔ **Houston Police Department Response**

Investigators completed a brief survey after one training session. The survey allowed for management to measure areas where the investigator indicated a positive or successful area of the training. In addition to identifying the success of the training, surveys also highlighted areas in the training where investigators felt a need for improvement. This allowed investigators to have a positive influence on the type of training they received, providing them with a voice during the process.

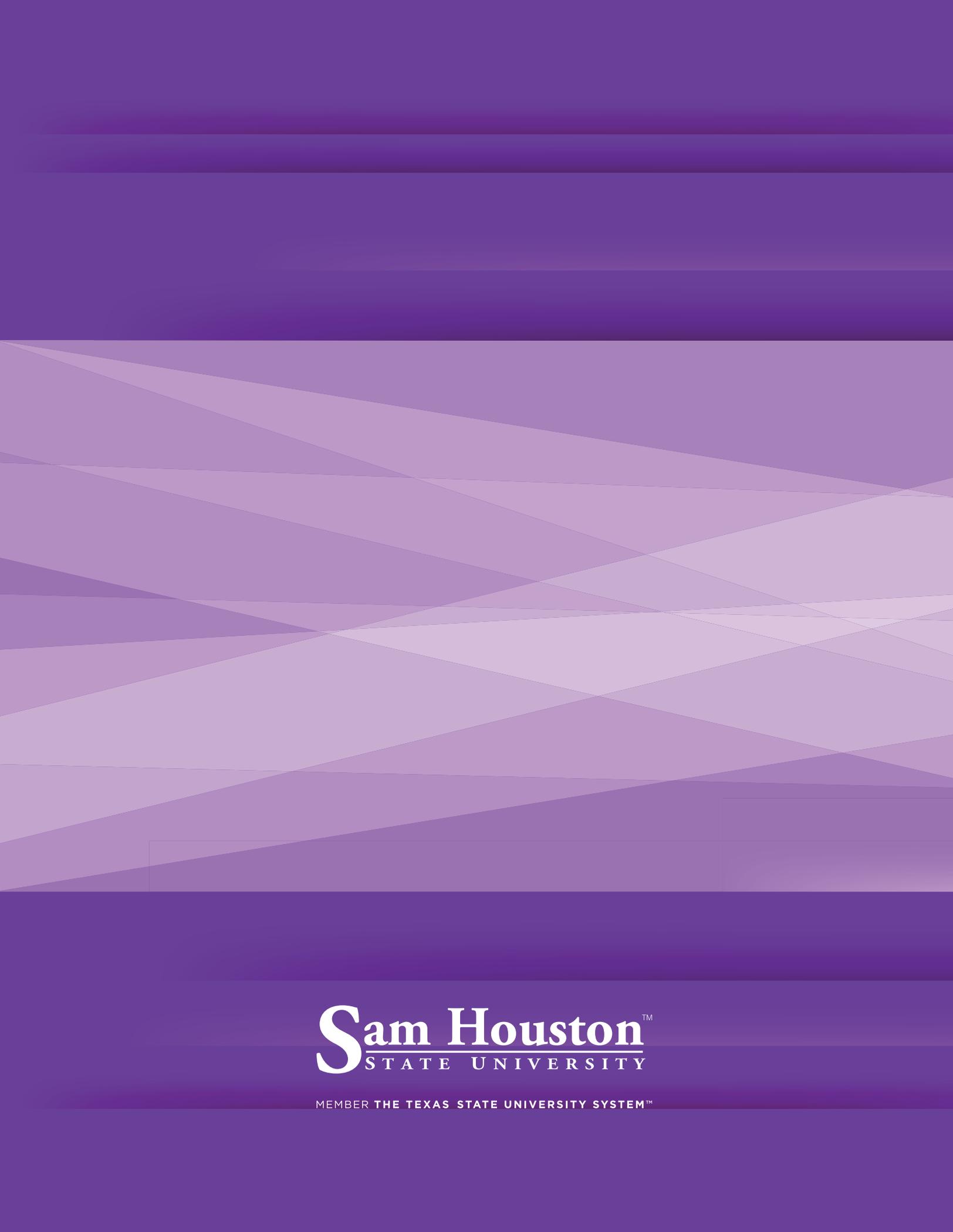
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APPENDIX

Los Angeles Police Department training schedule used for the week of June 13 – 17, 2011.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
<p>7:00-8:00 INTRO & OVERVIEW <i>Dr. Luann Pannell, PTE Det. Denis Kilcoyne, RHD</i></p> <hr/> <p>8:00 – 10:00 MEDICAL & FORENSIC EXAM <i>RTC Staff</i></p> <hr/> <p>10:00-11:30 FILING AND CASE LAW OF SEXUAL ASSAULTS <i>DDA Jane Blissert</i></p>	<p>7:00 – 11:00 COMPUTER CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN <i>Matt McFadden Clovis PD Lt. Andrea Grossman ICAC Unit</i></p>	<p>7:00-8:30 CASE MANAGEMENT <i>RHD Cadre</i></p> <hr/> <p>9:30-11:00 INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUES <i>RHD Cadre Michelle Robinson Sharlene Johnson Deanna Stark Karen Crawford</i></p>	<p>7:00-11:00 EVIDENCE <i>SID Cadre Sue Brockbank Guy Hollowman Jennifer Butterworth Sue Rinehart Patty Pape</i></p>	<p>7:00-11:00 OFFENDER DYNAMICS AND INTERROGATION TECHNIQUES <i>Jaime Baltazar Sean Van Leeuwen LASD Scott Frus, LAPD</i></p>
<p>11:30 – 12:30 Lunch</p>	<p>11:00 – 12:00 Lunch</p>	<p>11:00 – 12:00 Lunch</p>	<p>11:00 – 12:00 Lunch</p>	<p>11:00 – 12:00 Lunch</p>
<p>12:30-4:00 FILING AND CASE LAW OF SEXUAL ASSAULTS (CONT.) <i>DDA Jane Blissert</i></p>	<p>12:00-4:00 VICTIM DYNAMICS <i>Marisa Messier Advocate, UC Davis Police Dept. Gail Abarbanel, RTC</i></p>	<p>12:00-4:00 INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUES <i>RHD Cadre</i></p>	<p>12:00-2:00 EVIDENCE <i>SID Staff</i></p> <hr/> <p>2:00-4:00 CRIME SCENE ACTIVITY <i>SID Staff with RHD Cadre for Learning Activity</i></p>	<p>12:00-2:00 INTERROGATION PRACTICAL (CONT.)</p> <hr/> <p>2:00-3:30 INVESTIGATOR WELLNESS <i>Dr. Sara Butte, LASD Dr. Denise Jablonski-Kaye Dr. Azadeh Famili, LAPD</i></p> <hr/> <p>3:30-4:00 CLOSING COMMENTS & CERTIFICATES</p>



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