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Confronting Police Sexual Violence, Envisioning Collective Healing: Methodological Contributions of a Survivor-Centered, Community-Based Study

Priscilla Bustamante 

Department of Applied Psychology, Bouvé College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University, New York, NY 10021, USA; p.bustamante@northeastern.edu

Abstract

This article details the methodological contributions of a five-year, mixed-method, community-based participatory action research study on police sexual violence (PSV) in New York City—the first of its kind conducted outside of prisons and jails in the city with the nation’s largest police force. In partnership with a coalition of 200 community-based organizations, this study draws from two virtual town halls, a citywide survey of 3778 New Yorkers, and 37 in-depth interviews with survivors of PSV to generate three key theoretical contributions. First, the data produce a critically expanded redefinition of PSV as a vast continuum of sexually aggressive officer behaviors, including legally sanctioned acts within everyday policing, that broaden our understanding of sexual violence, police violence, and state power at large. Second, centering survivor-led analyses reveals the cumulative psychosocial and material impacts of PSV across individual lives and entire communities, theorized as a form of state betrayal that functions as collective terror(ism). Third, survivors reimagine justice not as punitive retribution, but as collective healing requiring embodied, relational, and structural transformation. These contributions demonstrate that community-based, survivor-centered research is not only a more ethical approach to studying state harm, but also a more epistemically accurate way to understand the complexities of invisibilized forms of state and interpersonal violence.

Keywords: participatory action research; state violence; policing; sexual violence; justice; healing



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1. Introduction

Police sexual violence (PSV)—including physical, verbal, and visual misconduct of a sexual nature perpetrated by officers—constitutes the second most commonly reported police complaint after excessive force ([The Cato Institute 2010](#)). Reviewing news reports and court records, a study spanning ten years found that police across the U.S. are *caught* for some form of sexual misconduct once every five days ([Purvis and Blanco 2020](#); [Tromadore 2016](#)). Another study surveying and interviewing police officers directly has found that more than 36% of officers engage in some form of sexual misconduct, with flirting on duty and sexually motivated traffic stops reported as common ([Maher 2003](#)). On-duty officers have also been found to commit sexual assaults at more than double the rate of the general population ([Mac and Smith 2018](#)).

State-sanctioned sexual violence perpetrated by carceral actors—including border patrol agents, immigration officials, and correctional officers—has now been well documented

both at our borders and in our prisons (Falcón 2016; Kubiak et al. 2017). As a result, federal law prohibits these carceral agents from engaging in sexual activity with those in federal custody under any circumstances; however, no federal law explicitly prohibits officers working outside of prisons and detention centers from engaging in sexual activity while on-duty; this legal loophole has thus allowed police officers to argue that any sexual contact they engage in is consensual (Bodde and Lorshbough 2018; Tromadore 2016).¹ At local levels, police departments also rarely address the issue of police sexual violence (Ritchie and Jones-Brown 2017). In a recent study of 78,000 officers with disciplinary records from 2012 to 2023, in which the most common and harmful form of misconduct was police sexual violence, less than 1% of offending officers were fired or resigned as a result of on-duty abuse (Dario et al. 2024).

With no official data on PSV systematically collected at the federal or local levels (Ritchie and Jones-Brown 2017), police sexual violence has historically remained hidden and under-researched. Previous research has largely been confined to content analyses of high-profile sexual assault cases, most of which come from media reports, with less evidence obtained from police force investigations. Not only are these methodologies incomplete, as they do not reflect more banal and everyday forms of police sexual violence (Maher 2003), but they can also be collectively misleading; examining the most high-profile or appalling cases and/or relying on officers' testimonies can reinforce the "bad apple" notion of those who enact sexual violence, and further obscure incidents of PSV that are not captured by media coverage.

In addition, part of the problem with collecting data on PSV and measuring its rates across the country is the lack of clarity around what constitutes it (Tromadore 2016). What constitutes sexual violence in general is legally contested, with certain common forms of sexual harassment, for example, not legally recognized (Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017). This study utilizes the term *police sexual violence* to encompass the many differing acts that, in some previous literature, have been labeled as police sexual misconduct. Aligned with feminist perspectives on sexual violence, PSV is understood as one category of gender-based violence that includes a vast continuum of sexually aggressive behaviors that become state-sanctioned when enacted by law enforcement (Kelly 1987; Stinson et al. 2015). Police sexual violence has been more comprehensively defined in previous literature as any behavior by an officer that misuses authority to commit sexual acts, exploit sexual favors, instigate sexual contact, or reciprocate perceived sexually motivated cues (Tromadore 2016; Maher 2003); however, given the ambiguity around the wide range of behavior that may constitute such acts—from subtle and everyday forms of sexual harassment to egregious instances of sexual assault and rape—PSV is typically understood in limited and often undefined terms (Tromadore 2016).

Moreover, definitions of PSV that draw from broad understandings of sexual violence still prove limiting because they do not fully account for the contextual complexities of police work, and the discretionary power with which officers are legally granted to target certain populations (Ritchie 2017). The majority of previous research on police sexual violence, for example, does not take into account experiences of routine frisks which can be experienced as sexual violations (Butler 2017). Additionally, police sexual violence, like other types of police violence, has the potential to compound in the lives of those in heavily policed communities (Bustamante et al. 2018, 2019). One study of 318 women in drug court in St. Louis, Missouri found that one-fourth of participants—most of whom were low-income Black women who had been arrested multiple times—reported repeated acts of police sexual violence, such as trading sex in exchange for not being arrested or charged with a crime; and of these women, nearly one-third reported being raped by an officer (Cottler et al. 2014). The geographic scope of policing has also stretched wider in

recent decades with the expansion of the carceral state, as people have become increasingly subject to a range of police encounters in their neighborhoods, homes, schools, hospitals, welfare offices, and immigration facilities (Annamma 2018; INCITE! 2016). Situating sexual violence within the context of everyday policing elucidates the need for a more comprehensive definition of police sexual violence. Examining the range of acts that comprise PSV—including criminally recognized forms (e.g., rape), non-criminal everyday forms (e.g., street sexual harassment), and policing-specific forms (e.g., strip searches)—can further illuminate how its full continuum may be operating in a range of settings and how communities may be experiencing an accumulation of it.

Moreover, with few notable exceptions (Cottler et al. 2014; Ritchie 2017), previous research largely does not examine firsthand experiences of police sexual violence, which would further shed light on how these incidents occur, and the impacts they have on those targeted. Studies document a multitude of embodied, psychosocial, and material harms of both a vast range of sexual violence in general, including everyday forms of sexual harassment (Brownstone et al. 2018; Bryant-Davis et al. 2009; Davis 1994; Donde et al. 2018), as well as a vast range of police violence, including everyday police encounters (Brunson and Miller 2006; Bustamante et al. 2018, 2019; English et al. 2017; Fabricant 2010; Jashnani et al. 2017; Torre et al. 2012). Thus, while research has not specifically examined the long-term consequences of PSV, it is reasonable to conclude that survivors are likely experiencing a vast array of interconnected effects. Centering firsthand experiences also presents a critical opportunity to understand not only the full harm of PSV, but also the survival, resistance, and healing that is possible amid various forms of state and interpersonal harm. As such, much of what is left to learn about PSV can only be explained by speaking to survivors themselves—the majority of whom do not formally report incidents or have their cases make the news (Bowleg et al. 2022; Cottler et al. 2014; Maher 2003; Ritchie 2017).

In response, this study offers the first in-depth examination of survivors' experiences of the wide spectrum of acts that comprise PSV, enacted by police officers in New York City. The NYPD is the nation's largest police force and one of the most internationally powerful police forces, with a stand-alone military and a budget of over 12 billion dollars (Ganeva and Gottesdiener 2012; Mayor's Office of Management and Budget 2024). There is also a long history of police sexual violence documented in New York City as far back as the late-nineteenth century (M. S. Johnson 2003). More recently, high-ranking NYPD officials—including the former chief of the NYPD and the former mayor of New York City, who was previously an NYPD officer—faced numerous allegations of sexual violence during their time on the force (Fitzsimmons 2024; Meko et al. 2024). New York City is also home to the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB), the largest independent oversight agency of police officers in the country, tasked with investigating civilian complaints; yet, out of the thousands of complaints that get filed against NYPD officers each year, the CCRB generally rules a lack of sufficient evidence, finding the vast majority of claims to be unsubstantiated (New York City Mayor's Office of Operations 2025). The CCRB also remains connected to police departments, with the police commissioner retaining final authority over what penalty, if any, officers will receive (New York City Mayor's Office of Operations 2025). Amid this cityscape, there is a long simultaneous history of deeply organized community activism against police violence in New York City (Burrowes 2018; M. S. Johnson 2003; Su 2025). The sheer size and scope of the NYPD's power, along with the many different neighborhoods and populations regularly surveilled in the city, provide extremely fertile ground to examine diverse experiences of and resistance to police sexual violence.

2. Article Overview

This article traces the methodological choices, challenges, and strengths of conducting a five-year, community-based study to examine the hidden phenomenon of police sexual violence in New York City. The methodological outcomes of this study illuminate what police sexual violence is, what it does to those most impacted, and what its true prevention requires. The following section begins by detailing the methodological processes of this three-part study, guided by ethical frameworks of critical and decolonial participatory action research. The subsequent sections then highlight three key, resulting theoretical contributions: (i) a critically expanded redefinition of PSV that includes a vast continuum of officer acts within everyday policing that broaden understandings of sexual violence, police violence, and state violence at large; (ii) the cumulative impacts and collective terror of PSV as a significant form of state betrayal within and across communities; and (iii) survivors' shared reimagining of justice as collective healing facilitated by embodied, relational, and structural transformation to address the root causes of various forms of racialized and gendered harm. The final section then offers a methodological reflection on the strengths of community-based research, more specifically for critical, public dissemination.

This study theoretically situates police sexual violence within the intersecting structures and ideologies of white supremacy and hegemonic masculinity—organized around the notion of normative male sexual aggression enacted on racialized bodies—that have historically and contemporarily (i) shaped the formation of the carceral state and the function of policing, as a masculine and militarized institution within it, and (ii) informed the threat and enactment of state-sanctioned sexual violence, as a psychological tool of carceral control (Cacho 2012; Cooper 2009; Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015; Falcón 2016; Haley 2016; Harris 2011; McGinley 2015; Sielke 2002). The carceral state has intensified military tactics that have historically included rape as a weapon of war amid perceived threats to state power through various domestic wars—from the War on Poverty, War on Crime, and War on Drugs, to most recently, the War on Terror (Alcoff 2018; Enloe 2013; Falcón 2016; Hinton 2016; McGinley 2015; Purvis and Blanco 2020). Sexual violence has been used to exert state domination and punishment, intensified within the very structures designed to legally control and punish (Enloe 2013; Falcón 2016). Today's incidents of police sexual violence, though largely underreported, undocumented, and institutionally concealed, stem from this history.

3. The Methodological Rigor and Ethics of Engaging in Community-Based Research

This five-year study of police sexual violence extends from a three-part, mixed method, participatory action research project that includes: (i) two virtual town hall meetings on police gender-based and sexual violence with sixty participants in total; (ii) a structured survey administered to 3778 New Yorkers that in part captures a broad range of acts that constitute PSV; and (iii) thirty-seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews that delve more deeply into survivors' lived experiences. I began this project as a member of the Public Science Project (PSP), a collective of City University of New York professors and students who conduct grassroots social science research in partnership with community organizations and public institutions. Beginning in the summer of 2020, the Public Science Project was invited to partner with Communities United for Police Reform (CPR), an unprecedented campaign running coalitions of over 200 local, statewide, and national organizations to end abusive policing practices in New York and build a lasting movement for public safety. As a member of PSP who partnered with CPR on a previous research project, I joined a deeply collaborative working group comprising fifteen representatives of community-based organizations that included grassroots organizers, activists, social

service providers, educators, lawyers, and survivors of various forms of police violence. This working group included organizations such as the Audre Lorde Project, FIERCE, Girls for Gender Equity, the New York City Anti-Violence Project, Make the Road, and the New York Civil Liberties Union.

CPR expressed longstanding interest in specifically examining police sexual violence within their larger campaign, as PSV remained a more invisibilized form of police violence that community members continued to report experiencing. As someone who experienced sexual harassment from NYPD officers myself on multiple occasions, I presented the working group with a written proposal of preliminary research plans. This proposal went beyond a traditional research plan, including a personal reflection on my various positionalities, including my interests in and motivations for wanting to undertake this collaborative work on a sensitive topic. This decision aimed to answer [Harding's \(1993\)](#) call to embrace strong objectivity; in contrast to an empirical objectivity that can never be fully obtained within deeply human and biased conditions, achieving strong objectivity requires cultivating a continuous practice of researcher self-reflexivity rooted in sociopolitical and historical attentiveness to the ongoing conditions and perspectives shaping the research at hand ([Palaganas et al. 2017](#)). Embracing strong objectivity in this way also served as an important mode of building trust and transparency with community members who did not yet know me—an essential component of effectively engaging in community-based research ([Tran et al. 2025](#)). This participatory partnership shaped the entire study on police sexual violence that followed, from project design to dissemination.

Over the next 14 months, our collaborative working group met to identify research questions and collectively produce town hall and survey protocols for CPR's larger campaign. This larger campaign sought to capture experiences of various forms of police violence and community visions for safety most broadly. Within this collaborative work, we each drew upon our different strengths. My role included leading workshops on research design in general and leading the team's efforts to capture experiences of police sexual violence more specifically. To do so, I organized more specific discussions on capturing and measuring components of PSV. I also provided initial templates for the town hall and survey items on PSV that were included in the overarching study, as well as the preliminary interview protocol to be administered to survivors of PSV—all of which were reviewed by the whole working group for further refinement in this process. Other members of the group simultaneously led discussions of how the various community groups they represented (e.g., Black girls, undocumented women, LGBTQIA+ youth, houseless people, etc.) more specifically experience police violence, including PSV, and the best logistical methods for recruiting a diverse sample to participate in our study.

This methodological process included democratically making decisions by working through group dynamics and tensions as they arose, making space and taking extra time for ongoing dialogue when competing viewpoints were presented, and remaining transparent with how the study was evolving and what changes were made to reflect group consensus. This process also included navigating differing organizational priorities, as well as limited (time, energy, and financial) capacities that reflected ongoing structural constraints ([Torre and Ayala 2009](#)). For example, there was a collective desire to administer the survey in twenty different heavily policed neighborhoods in New York City to capture a wide range of police experiences from all the diverse populations that comprised the coalition; however, given our evolving study's timeline—with this collaborative work taking longer than initially anticipated—along with spatial restrictions and staff shortages at some community organizations, our group ultimately agreed on seven organizational sites from which to administer the survey. Tempered by shared overarching goals, this decision arose from our consensus that these seven sites ensured that data was collected from a diverse range

of neighborhoods in New York City (with all five boroughs represented) and from a diverse range of community members (e.g., representing various sexual, racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds).

Our working group then began data collection, with each of the three interconnected methodologies building on the last. First, CPR member organizations helped recruit participants for two virtual town halls, with sixty New Yorkers ultimately comprising this purposive and snowball sample. I worked alongside representatives from five community organizations to hold these town hall meetings, which functioned as structured focus groups, lasting two to 2.5 h each. We established a separate Zoom breakout room staffed by a trained mental health counselor affiliated with one of the community organizations throughout both sessions—a design decision that emerged from community knowledge about how to hold space for trauma disclosure and minimize retraumatizing participants.

All members of our collaborative working group, alongside additional representatives from CPR member organizations, then administered a citywide survey over a three-month period between November 2021 and January 2022 to 3778 New Yorkers across all five boroughs. One survey section was designed to comprehensively capture the full spectrum of PSV—including criminally recognized forms of sexual violence (e.g., sexual assault), non-criminal everyday forms (e.g., catcalling), and policing-specific forms (e.g., sexualized frisks)—utilizing multiple items with differential wording and open-ended additions to allow space for the ambivalence that participants may have felt about how to make sense of and label their experiences (Fahs 2016). For example, rather than only asking participants if NYPD officers had sexually harassed them, survey items also included asking if officers had ever hit on them, commented on how their body looked, accused them of being a sex worker, made insulting comments about their sexuality, and/or requested sexual favors from them in exchange for being offered something, such as a dropped arrest or charge. This survey was also translated into Spanish and Chinese to increase accessibility for non-English speakers.

Survey collection began with in-person sampling in seven heavily policed neighborhoods across New York City, each anchored by a different organizational site. To start, each organizational site advertised the survey to its community members in an effort to identify a diverse group of randomly chosen initial participants (i.e., seeds) who then helped identify and recruit other participants (Wejnert and Heckathorn 2011). Individuals were eligible to participate in the survey at each in-person site if they identified as residents of that particular zip code and were at least 16 years of age. Participants received \$20 upon their survey completion, as well as three tickets (worth \$10 each) to give away to other potential participants, for a chance to make \$50 total when those they recruited completed the survey after them. I helped administer these surveys in-person at all seven sites, where 2753 participants anonymously completed them on tablet computers. Meeting participants directly in their neighborhoods through respondent-driven sampling ensured that the survey captured data from harder-to-reach populations, such as houseless people and sex workers (Wejnert and Heckathorn 2011). This methodological approach also created neighborhood spaces to educate and facilitate dialogue among participants, share citywide and local resources, and nurture caring community relationships. Once in-person survey collection was completed, we then administered the survey fully online utilizing panel sampling through Qualtrics in an effort to more broadly reach New Yorkers across the city.

The final part of this methodology included 37 in-depth interviews with survivors recruited almost entirely from the citywide survey.² Individuals over 18 years of age were eligible to participate if they lived in New York City and had experienced any form of police sexual violence, or a related form of police gender-based violence by NYPD outside of prisons and jails. I conducted all interviews by phone or in person at organizational

sites over the same three-month period. While informed consent was obtained orally at the start of our conversation, the full scope of ethical considerations extended far beyond Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines (Tuck and Guishard 2013). IRB protocols are designed to protect research participants, but their guidelines can also conflict with an ethical approach to harm reduction within survivor-centered inquiry. For one, I administered the semi-structured interview protocol flexibly to honor the emotional labor of disclosure, the logistical availability of participants, and the varying experiences and impacts of PSV reported. Taking into account potential participants' knowledge, labor and time, these interviews were initially advertised as lasting 30 min for a compensation of \$20 to not overwhelm them with a longer time commitment on a grave subject; however, many interviewees had more to share than would fit in a 30 min interview. Therefore, I conducted each interview with flexibility to go longer if the interviewee had more to share, with additional compensation of \$10, or \$30 total, for interviews that lasted 50 min or longer.³ Ultimately, 17 interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min, with the majority of these lasting approximately one hour.

Interviews were affectively and relationally guided by my interpretations of participants' verbal and non-verbal cues, as I attended to affective tone and energetic shifts (Ullman 2014). This embodied social listening aimed to disrupt the historically hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant (Krueger-Henney 2016), and emphasize interviewees' power to choose both what and how to share—methodological considerations that have been found particularly vital for sexual assault survivors and trauma survivors in general (Campbell et al. 2009, 2010). In contrast to traditional positivist modes of inquiry, cultivating an ethical approach to survivor-centered inquiry also required making space to offer validating responses and affirming gestures, engage in mutual discussion and points of connection, and provide participants with a compilation of free and low-cost therapeutic and counseling resources. This methodological approach at times resulted in participants offering a greater depth of information over the course of our interview. Where time allowed, I also invited participants to reflect on the interview experience itself (Ullman 2010)—a preliminary form of member-checking that consistently revealed feelings of relief, gratitude, being heard, and contributing to a movement larger than their individual hardship.

Overall, the ongoing partnership with such a diverse coalition of CPR organizational members was methodologically generative in ways that traditional academic research could likely not replicate, increasing this study's validity in several key ways (Sandwick et al. 2018; Torre et al. 2012). In addition to shaping more robust and comprehensive research protocols, the collaborative work with CPR provided trusted pathways to recruit a large, diverse sample of survivors that previous academic research has not been able to capture. My sustained partnership with CPR also seemed to facilitate a level of enhanced trust among participants, especially important given both the sensitivity of the topics discussed and the understandable distrust of academic researchers that historically exists in marginalized communities (Tuck and Guishard 2013). This trust allowed for more open and honest communication, thus likely allowing for less distorted, less unidimensional, more accurate accounts of the experiences and consequences of PSV, as well as the institution of policing in which it occurs (Harding 1993).

This study's sample includes New Yorkers who have been identified as particularly vulnerable to PSV, such as LGBTQIA+ women of color, as well as those who are low-income, previously incarcerated, disabled, (im)migrants, and/or perceived to be involved in the drug or sex trades (Cottler et al. 2014; Ritchie 2017; Sankofa 2016). Overall, 81% ($n = 30$) of interviewees identified as Black, Latinx, or other people of color, 57% ($n = 21$) identified as cisgender women, 43% ($n = 16$) identified as LGBTQIA+, and nearly half

(46%; $n = 17$) reported being homeless or houseless at some point in their lives. Of the 3149 survey participants who filled out demographic information, 80% ($n = 2532$) identified as Black, Latinx, or other people of color, 55% ($n = 1741$) identified as cisgender women, 25% ($n = 682$) identified as LGBTQIA+, and 26% ($n = 750$) reported being homeless or houseless at some point in their lives. A diverse sample, as such, aids in illuminating a more comprehensive understanding of how PSV is experienced across multiple identities and in a variety of contexts.

Additionally, utilizing three diverse methodologies from which to collect data on PSV strengthened the analytic rigor of this process. This study employed thematic analysis (Maguire and Delahunt 2017), utilizing a contextualist approach informed by critical theory and standpoint epistemologies (Mjøsset 2009). Town halls were first preliminarily analyzed as focus groups to inform the development of the subsequent survey and interview protocols. Town hall data helped further identify conceptual categories that existing literature had missed, with this methodological approach recognizing the need to start from survivors' experiences and perceptions to create definitions of police sexual violence "born of experiential knowledge" (Vera-Gray 2016, p. 14). After all mixed methods data were collected, I utilized a concurrent embedded strategy within a transformative approach to analyze survey and interview data (Creswell 2014); that is, findings largely drew from qualitative analyses as the predominant method applied to detail the more in-depth aspects of this complex phenomenon, with quantitative analyses providing supporting evidence. Survey data descriptively illuminated the general landscape of PSV in New York City, including the prevalence of different types, while interview data allowed a much deeper exploration of the lived experiences and forms of meaning-making associated with them.

Lastly, this study continuously drew from the relational ethics embedded within critical and decolonial participatory action research that center non-hierarchical relationships, collective commitment to justice, and shared accountability (Tuck and Guishard 2013) to disrupt racist, white supremacist, settler logics of inquiry (Krueger-Henney 2016) and locate interventions that best meet the needs of survivors of PSV and their communities. Within critical and decolonial participatory action research, participatory processes do not equate with the mere inclusion of more people; critical participation refers to an epistemological and methodological stance that challenges the academy's monopoly on expertise, and recognizes the irreplaceable knowledge gained from lived experience (Fine 2013; Haraway 1988; Tuck and Guishard 2013). This project was thus born from the recognition that partnering with community members who have experienced police violence, organize against it, and work with survivors is necessary to respond to the complexities of this issue. It has been a purposeful choice throughout this collaborative methodological process to center the voices of those most marginalized and affected by police sexual violence (Harding 1993)—a task that remains critical to fully understanding and preventing it.

4. Key Theoretical Contributions of Survivor-Centered Inquiry

4.1. *Understanding Police Sexual Violence: A Vast Spectrum of Sexual Harm Within Everyday Policing*

Police sexual violence complicates traditional notions of both police violence and sexual violence. Data reveal that police sexual violence should be understood as a significant part of a larger continuum of both extreme and everyday forms of police violence, enacted in ways that signal institutional failures far beyond "a few bad apples." Of the 3778 survey participants across New York City, nearly one in five (19%; $n = 459$) reported experiencing some (verbal and/or physical) form of police sexual violence.⁴ This study's sample of participants revealed that police sexual violence includes a vast continuum of sexual harassment and sexual assault at the hands of officers that previous studies have not com-

prehensively captured. Police sexual harassment includes unwanted sexualized attention, sexually motivated stops, and sexualized forms of surveillance; sexuality-based harassment such as officers making insulting comments about participants' sexual identities; false accusations of engaging in sex-related crimes such as prostitution or the solicitation of prostitution; and forms of sexual coercion and extortion, such as officers using threats and intimidation facilitated by police power, that can then lead to sexual assault. Police sexual assault includes unwanted touching that feels sexually violating, including during frisks; strip searches and cavity searches; and a range of physically violating sexual acts including rape by means of force (see Table 1).

Table 1. A Typology of Police Sexual Violence (PSV).

Form of PSV	Subtype	Description
Police Sexual Harassment	Unwanted sexualized attention	Sexually motivated stops, sexualized forms of surveillance, unwanted flirting, and/or comments or questions of a sexual nature
	Sexuality-based harassment	Comments or questions about one's sexuality or sexual practices
	False accusations of sex-related crimes	False accusations of engaging in sex-related crimes, such as prostitution or solicitation of prostitution
	Sexual coercion	Using threats, intimidation or manipulation, facilitated by police power, to engage in sexual behavior
	Sexual extortion	Asking for sexual favors by using police power to offer something (e.g., dropping a charge) or threaten harm (e.g., making an arrest)
Police Sexual Assault	Unwanted sexualized touching	Unwanted sexualized touching of body parts, including during frisks
	Strip searches	Undressing and/or demanding clothes be removed
	Cavity searches	Visual or manual internal inspection of private bodily cavities
		Penetration occurring through physical force, threats of injury, and/or incapacitation
	Rape	

Some interviewees experienced multiple forms of police sexual violence. Sherray, a 50-year-old bisexual Black woman, experienced sexual coercion for several months, leading to rape at the hands of the same police officer, sharing:

I was being pressured, because he [officer] would pop up to my house unexpectedly. Um, and this is a heavy man. Um, there was plenty of phone calls and threats. . . I wanted to tell somebody, but I was afraid. He told me, 'I could get all your information. I'll make it hard for you.' It was really bad. . . But, it was a time when I went to tell him that we can no longer continue with this behavior. . . And then he forced himself on me.

Overall, forty percent of interviewees ($n = 15$) and 13% ($n = 270$) of survey participants reported forms of sexual assault by officers.

Importantly, interviewees' experiences also illuminate that this continuum of PSV includes sexually intimidating and abusive officer behavior that is facilitated by not only the power of the badge, but also common and lawful policing practices (Butler 2017; Jashnani et al. 2017, 2021; Maher 2003). Sexual violence is at times perpetrated in the name of police "doing their job," with officers legally acting in ways that would more clearly be deemed sexually violating if enacted by non-officers. Describing an incident of being stopped and frisked before being called a homophobic slur, Julio, a 34-year-old bisexual Latinx man, recounted:

I'm not a suspect, but yet you have your hands all over my crotch and, you know, my buttock. . . I'm explaining to him I'm very uncomfortable. And then instead of being professional, that's when it comes out, "It's not my fault, you're a fag. . ." To, uh, call me those names, you know, and to actually degrade me by like searching me. God knows I

don't have nothing in these tight pants. . . They went inside my pants in the back, and, felt my balls and everything.

Julio's experience of both sexualized touching and sexuality-based harassment highlighted an accumulation of more than one type of PSV in a single incident. Like Julio, many other participants reported PSV happening within everyday policing contexts such as (i) routine stops and frisks, including unwarranted strip and cavity searches; (ii) unnecessary arrests that included either arrests for false charges that were later dropped, or discretionary arrests for low-level, non-criminal violations; and (iii) police patrols of public and private areas, including home raids and police encounters in domestic spaces.

Moreover, examining experiences of police sexual violence sheds light on issues with the conceptual idea of consent itself when determining whether officers are causing sexual harm. The legal limits of consent, amid imbalanced power dynamics in general, have long been raised (Alcoff 2018; Haley 2016; Wang 2018); consent does not equate to desire or will (Alcoff 2018), and can too easily become blurred by coercive behavior (Park 2016). State-sanctioned sexual violence raises even more concerns around an incapacity to establish consent given the depth of power and force that officers can legally wield with impunity (Kraska and Kappeler 1995).⁵ Most people will "consent" to police action simply as a means to avoid further violence, especially when police are legally carrying loaded weapons (Ross 2018). Soeurette, a 29-year-old heterosexual East Asian woman, experienced unwanted touching that felt sexually violating during a frisk by a male officer in the subway. She explained, "When they say they want to pat you down, like you have to comply. . . I think a lot of people will just because they're scared."

Data also reveal that this continuum of sexual harm is situated within a police culture of institutional disregard for cases of sexual violence and gender-based violence at large. Of the 128 survey respondents who reported a non-officer-related sexual assault case to the police, 64% ($n = 82$) reported troubling police interactions including the NYPD blaming them for the assault, ignoring their case, and/or arresting them instead. LG, a 39-year-old heterosexual Black woman, experienced two separate incidents of sexual assault where she called police for help and was met with disbelief and blame. She shared:

They [officers] were kind of like so cold and nonchalant. Like, just like another rape victim. . . like it was your fault that you brought this guy home. . . I did have another incident [of sexual assault]. . . They pretty much didn't believe me about that incident either, even though my face was swollen and scratched up. . . They say something like, um, "oh, well you know, it was an attempted rape, you know, so we can't really do anything about it."

While previous research findings highlight inadequate and harmful police responses to sexual violence in general, (Carbone-Lopez et al. 2016; Farrell et al. 2019; Greeson et al. 2016; Payne and Thompson 2008), interviewees' experiences shed light on psychosocial mechanisms within police forces that not only underlie the perpetration of a diverse spectrum of sexual violence, but also become intensified within the masculine and militarized institutional culture of policing (Cooper 2009; Harris 2011; McGinley 2015; Ross 2018). Julia, a 26-year-old heterosexual Black woman, described multiple incidents of being sexually harassed by officers who were in a pair or group, illuminating psychosocial processes of racialized misogyny, hegemonic masculine bonding, and cumulative dehumanization (Bustamante et al. 2018, 2019; Manne 2018; Sanday 2007). For example, she recounted one incident happening when she was just 15 or 16 years old, explaining:

I was going into the train station, um and there was a police officer that was, you know, looking at me. . . And then I remember his partner, the guy he was with, who was also an officer, said to him like, "oh, take a picture. It'll last longer." And I turned around

and I looked and it was just really uncomfortable 'cause they both were staring at me. . . And it's by the same officers that you would see all the time. You know I live in the neighborhood. Um and then you're flirting with me. Your partner's not helping or like telling you to stop.

This institutional culture also transcends the identities of individual officers, with several participants describing forms of PSV happening either directly at the hands of or indirectly in the presence of policewomen. Jonathan, a 22-year-old multiracial (Latinx and white) man, described being sexually harassed and physically violated by a policewoman in his neighborhood. He explained, “there was this woman, this policewoman and, I was just walking minding my own business and then she she came at me. . . All she said, she wanted me. . . like this, ‘I want you’ [said seductively]. . . She charged at me. Pushed me against the wall.” As Jonathan’s experience highlights, pervasive gendered and heteronormative ideologies on police forces can be internalized, embodied, and enacted by officers of any gender (brown 2019; McGinley 2015).

Furthermore, intersecting forces of anti-Blackness and cisheteronormativity within racial capitalism shape both who is targeted and how PSV is enacted (Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015; Haley 2016; Pain and Cahill 2022). With sexual violence largely impacting women, and police violence disproportionately affecting Black and Brown communities, Black, Indigenous, and other women of color—particularly those who identify as LGBTQIA+—stand at the nexus of those most vulnerable to police sexual violence (Ritchie 2017; Sankofa 2016; Tromadore 2016). Mary, who identified as a queer woman of color, remarked, “Being a survivor is actually very, very difficult. . . it kind of like, opened my eyes a little bit, to realizing that women of color aren’t necessarily taken care of in the system.” Those who do not subscribe to heteronormative lifestyle choices—such as sex workers, single mothers, and those who are openly non-binary—are further susceptible to processes of dehumanization and resulting police sexual violence (Cacho 2012; Park 2016). Overall, those with marginalized racial, gender, and sexual identities—as is true of the vast majority of this study’s sample—are more likely to experience sexual violence in general, be targeted and criminalized by police, and be dismissed and perceived as less credible when speaking out after being harmed (Henry 2009; Jiwani 2011; Pain and Cahill 2022). Previous research suggests that police officers, often aware of these disparities and pervasive hierarchical perceptions of (trust)worthiness, target those at the intersection of multiply marginalized identities (Henry 2009; Jiwani 2011; Ritchie 2018b; Tromadore 2016). Overall, data from this study provide further evidence of the need to address the existing vulnerabilities to police sexual violence that previous research has called attention to (Ritchie 2017; Sankofa 2016; Tromadore 2016). Additionally, interviewees’ analyses of why they were targeted—connecting their vulnerabilities to factors such as race, gender, and sexuality, as well as socioeconomic, housing, and immigration status—reflected embodied knowledge and critical consciousness of this structural history.

Taken together, participants’ experiences reveal that police sexual violence encompasses a multitude of direct and indirect ways that officers can cause harm in people’s sexual and intimate lives. Encompassing a widespread sample of diverse experiences in varying contexts, data call for a critically expanded redefinition of police sexual violence as a continuum of state-sanctioned violence that includes a range of sexually aggressive behaviors, varying in severity and frequency. These officer behaviors share common structural and ideological roots (Kelly 1987) with other pervasive forms of sexual violence and are all situated within a wider spectrum of historical and contemporary police harm (Harris 2011).

4.2. The State Betrayal of Police Sexual Violence: Cumulative Impacts and Collective Terror

Unlike previously utilized methodologies focusing on individual instances of PSV, this study centers firsthand lived experiences to reveal an accumulation of police sexual

violence both within individual lives and across entire communities. This study offers new theorization of the shared human impact of police sexual violence as an accumulation of long-term psychological, embodied, behavioral, social, spatial and material consequences. With police as the final authority one might depend on to report all kinds of violence to, interviewees illuminated incidents of PSV as a shared experience of profound betrayal that can be more comprehensively conceptualized as a form of state betrayal, particularly in heavily policed communities. Expanding the concept of institutional betrayal (Smith and Freyd 2013, 2014) to examine structural violence and state harm, data reveal a state betrayal that reflects cumulative layers of harm across time and space; participants discussed the initial trauma of PSV, its lasting interconnected effects, the lack of a perceived pathway to justice, and deep collective fear of police within an institution facilitating and concealing this harm.

Interview participants largely described police sexual violence as an even deeper violation than sexual violence enacted on an interpersonal level alone, due to high levels of perceived dependence on, as well as fear of, the institutional power of police. Jojo, a 46-year-old heterosexual Native and Latinx woman, was subjected to several hours of police sexual harassment during a false arrest for marijuana possession that was dismissed after her release. She explained:

It was a very uncomfortable situation. . . just really horrible ughh. It was horrendous. . . It's a lot worse because you expect a level of professionalism. And, when that happens to you, you feel like oh my god, you don't even know how to react because if you react a certain way and the cop doesn't like it, you the one that's gonna feel the wrath. You're raised, "oh if something bad happens, go run to a cop; he'll, he'll help you," you know, so it's more traumatic.

Like Jojo, the majority of interviewees who experienced PSV described the incidents as traumatic, compounding preexisting layers of societal and structural traumas, particularly for multiply marginalized survivors in heavily policed communities (Bryant-Davis et al. 2009; Menakem 2017; Pain 2021). Nearly all interviewees who experienced police sexual violence (87%; $n = 27$) shared numerous psychological costs, including anxiety, panic, and hypervigilance.

The depth of these psychological consequences was intensified among those who experienced more severe acts and/or an accumulation of police sexual violence. Damien, a 32-year-old heterosexual Black man, discussed the first time he was stopped by officers at 17 years old. He was suddenly frisked and cavity searched while walking home in his neighborhood, which he classified as rape and described as "literally the most traumatizing incident that happened to me in my life." Damien further explained that he was stopped an estimated 25 times after this incident, with officers frisking and searching him in sexually violating ways again about 15 of those times. Like Damien, nearly half (45%; $n = 14$) of those who experienced PSV described the incident as their first encounter with police—a traumatic foundation that served as an ongoing tool of carceral control. Another 45% ($n = 14$) of interview participants then went on to experience a subsequent act of PSV.⁶ Damien discussed these experiences and their grave consequences, saying:

Two cops they, you know, racially profile me, "come here. You look like a suspect. . ." One of them even stuck like, a finger to see if I was, hiding things up there. But I'm just a 17-year-old kid. . . It made me very scared to the point that there would be, sometimes, sometimes cops would have to be like, "Are you okay? You alright? Like, you shaking" . . . I've never felt the same, ever since that day. . . Now I feel like I have to look over my shoulder. . . Like, I can't be around people for too long. . . That's why I'm actually alone a lot. . . When I got home, it's like I literally felt like the worst person in the world. I felt

ashamed. I felt like it was my fault... It terrorizes me every night and day... I've been had the um, the suicidal thoughts and everything in my time.

Other interviewees discussed similar psychosocial and embodied consequences, including enduring shame and self-blame that manifested as depression, social anxiety, self-isolation, strained relationships, and distrust of others—effects that are consistent with research on the consequences of sexual assault (Brownstone et al. 2018; Bryant-Davis et al. 2009). These consequences were then intertwined with behavioral and spatial effects, as the vast majority of interviewees discussed going out of their way to avoid any kind of police interaction. As Damien added, “I don’t go outside... I’m afraid to go places.” Interviewees also spoke about changing their clothes or speech, limiting their expressions of gender and sexuality, and changing their routes when walking to avoid being targeted by police. Interview participants explained that the ongoing presence of police created an atmosphere where the unpredictability of officer encounters and how those encounters would unfold served as its own source of terror.

Furthermore, the avoidance of officers extended to interviewees feeling like they could not call the police for help when needed, resulting in the perception of no protection from future danger and enhanced feelings of vulnerability in their communities. As Jessica, a 36-year-old heterosexual Latinx woman, remarked, “It feels like your world is crumbling... You go to police because you want to feel safe, because you want to report the bad guys to the police, but what happens when the police are the bad guys?” Interviewees at large conveyed internal distress from the tension between feeling like they are supposed to be able to depend on police, and knowing that they cannot.

Consequences of this abuse of police power were exacerbated by a lack of police accountability. The vast majority of participants chose not to report their experiences of PSV due to their collective fear and perception of institutional and legal modes of officer protection—a shared perception that previous research substantiates (Butler 2017; Dario et al. 2024; Jeltsen and Liebelsen 2017; Lopez 2025; McGinley 2015; Walker and Irlbeck 2002). Katie, a 41-year-old queer white woman, discussed why she chose not to report two different experiences of being frisked in a sexualized manner by multiple male officers, explaining:

They wouldn't do anything... They do so much worse things to other people and nobody cares... I'm sure that it happens like all the time, and I don't think that, that there's any way that this, the organization that's responsible for producing people like that would ever be able to offer support, or even like, be somebody that you'd be comfortable approaching to say this happened... I don't trust you.

Investigative research on police forces does in fact reveal pervasive institutional practices that facilitate and conceal instances of PSV, including the blue wall of silence, transferring offending officers to new departments, union-mandated eradication of police misconduct records, and the institutional rewarding of violence (Harway and Steel 2015; Joseph 2016; Phillips and McCoy 2007; Purvis and Blanco 2020; Rabe-Hemp and Braithwaite 2012).

The six interview participants who did choose to report an instance of PSV back to police forces were ignored, harassed, and/or retaliated against by officers after reporting. Sherray, a 50-year-old bisexual Black woman, filed a complaint for being sexually coerced and then raped by an officer. She recounted:

Every time they [officers] seen me, whether it be driving, walking, once I put in the case and called Internal Affairs, I was always harassed. I was, I kept being arrested. They would put anything in from loitering to trespassing... They was threatening me, acting like it was other people making prank phone calls, stuff like that... They would pull us

over, you know, and try to say things about the case. “Oh you still got that case open, huh?” . . . I decided to drop the case ‘cause I was afraid.

Overall, the consequences of attempting to speak out, for the few who did, compounded the cumulative consequences that amassed from the incidents of PSV themselves, revealing additional legal, educational, financial, and employment costs.

Moreover, when police sexual violence was examined at the community level, linked to witnessing incidents of PSV and fearing future ones, the consequences amassed even further. Nearly one-fifth of survey participants (17%; $n = 339$) reported directly witnessing PSV in their communities. Data also revealed that over a third (36%; $n = 722$) of survey respondents living in heavily policed neighborhoods worried about being sexually assaulted by officers, and 40% worried about friends or family being sexually assaulted—fears felt most days or every day by more than one-quarter (27%) of those surveyed. In this way, the threat of PSV served as a source of terror for even those who had not directly experienced it. Chris, a 30-year-old asexual white man from a heavily policed neighborhood, shared, “He’s looking up my butt with a flashlight. And then he’s telling me spread and bend over more, bend over more. And this is out in the street, in public! Yeah other people are looking.” The humiliation and powerlessness felt during these interactions, particularly when they are enacted in front of others, contributed to enhanced fear not only in those targeted but also in those witnessing this abuse.

The state betrayal from PSV results in a psychological landscape that erodes a collective sense of safety and fuels a deeper internalization of the carceral logics (e.g., distrust and fear) that not only form the basis of continuous control and punishment but also reinforce the very rationale for societal reliance on policing (Pain and Cahill 2022; Saleh-Hanna 2017). Survivors’ experiences elucidate how PSV functions as both an intimate and structural form of betrayal—a distinct betrayal by a state that permits sexual violence by officers while uplifting a singular public narrative of police providing safety. Overall, data reveal that this state betrayal, including the initial trauma and enduring consequences of PSV, is experienced as a force of terror(ism), strengthened by the ongoing presence of police and a history of police impunity.

4.3. Abolitionist Pathways Forward: Reimagining Justice as Collective Healing

Rather than defining justice as punitive retribution within a legal landscape of both historical impunity for sexual violence (Alcoff 2018; Freedman 2013; Richie 2012) and plentiful protection of police (Butler 2017; Cacho 2012; Ticktin 2008; Tromadore 2016), interviewees underscored that hegemonic notions of justice itself must be challenged and reimagined (Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017; Márquez 2014; Richie 2012; Ritchie 2017). As Latoya, a 35-year-old pansexual Black woman, shared:

I don’t think adding more laws to a system that’s already flawed is going to be any help. . . the real justice would definitely have to come with the dismantling and, and rethinking and reimagining what would actually be helpful to a society.

Interview participants largely called for reimagining justice as collective healing, with an understanding that the creation of healing-centered communities fundamentally promotes public safety and reduces widespread violence and harm (Ginwright 2018; Micklem 2021; Mingus 2019). Their experiences reveal how healing and justice are deeply interwoven, each enhancing the other, with collective healing as foundational to actualize a felt sense of justice (Haines 2019; Raffo 2017).

Interviewees’ tactics for surviving and even thriving in moments shed light on potential embodied, relational, and material pathways forward amid various forms of ongoing state and interpersonal harm. Rather than sharing clear or definitive narratives about being or feeling fully healed, survivors often embodied invisibilized processes that create

varied, non-linear pathways toward healing. Interviewees described immediate modes of resistance, such as speaking back to offending officers and speaking out about their experiences to counter the widespread silencing and shaming around sexual violence (Alcoff 2018; Fileborn 2018). These agentic assertions of power can also be understood as foundational aspects of healing (Ginwright 2015) while acknowledging that healing the wounds of trauma often requires more than resistance alone (Soundararajan 2022). Taken together, survivors' shared insights underscore the need for collective healing at micro (i.e., bodily), meso (i.e., community) and macro (i.e., societal) levels.

At the micro level, part of healing fundamentally includes creating safety (Herman 2023). Interviewees underscored that creating safety is both an embodied and relational process that cannot be fully felt for oneself if not also created with and for others (Haines 2019; hooks 1999). Police sexual violence often results from dehumanizing and relegating people to (just) bodies (Bustamante et al. 2019; Vaes et al. 2011) while disconnecting those targeted from their own bodies. In response, interviewees highlighted that part of healing from PSV included engaging in practices that helped them be in their bodies to grow their somatic awareness and embodied intelligence in ways that foster connection and acceptance (Germer 2024; Gómez 2023; R. Johnson 2023; Kram 2024; van der Kolk 2014). Some embodied artistic practices such as journaling, painting, and cooking also served as significant everyday portals to pleasure and to recovering a sense of joy in the body (brown 2019; Soundararajan 2022). Interviewees also revealed how relational processes of healing include the shift from a more disembodied self to a more deeply embodied, affective self, attuned to the bodies of others (R. Johnson 2023).

Survivors' movement toward healing also included the cognitive reframing of their experiences and overall shifts in meaning-making. For example, most interviewees shared an understanding that police violence encompasses more than individual officers and located police accountability starkly within the institution of policing. As one interviewee, Mike, a 22-year-old heterosexual Black man, discerned, "I'm not really against the police. I'm against how they operate." While the perception of a corrupt institutional culture contributed to collective fear, it also countered modes of shame and self-blame, and allowed some interviewees to retain a larger collective hope for humanity. Extending this humanity to offending officers themselves, without justifying abusive behaviors and despite being dehumanized themselves, is also a way that interviewees moved toward healing by becoming more human; developing heightened consciousness of others' humanity as a means to expand one's own critical consciousness (Bustamante et al. 2019) then allowed for what Kelley (2002) refers to as "poetic knowledge" (p. 12)—the healing ability to envision a better future, tied to imaginative hope rooted in desire, belief in shared human potential, and greater spiritual awareness of our inherent interconnectivity (Ginwright 2018; Hemphill 2024; Wilbur et al. 2024). As another interviewee, Pamela, a 58-year-old bisexual Black woman, added, "I'm struggling myself... But I always got hope. I want to open somewhere I could take, you know, foster kids and just give 'em love... Like I always tell my daughter, *everybody* got something good in 'em."

At the meso level, interviewees then discussed everyday ways that they were not only supported by others, but also actively building community. They talked about mentoring youth, sharing needed resources, organizing neighborhood events, and creating communal spaces; altruism itself functioned as an effective mode of healing (Stidham et al. 2012; Quist-Møller 2024). Their experiences illuminated that trauma can make you at once increasingly distrustful and more empathetic and connective, with enhanced potential to form solidarities around shared struggle (Levine 2024; Pain 2019; A. Taylor 2023). Pushing back against dehumanizing hierarchies of humanity and moving from relationships of dominance, subordination, scarcity, and distrust to deepened relationships of vulnerability,

connection, mutuality, and reciprocity with others was a significant part of how survivors of PSV described actualizing justice (brown 2019; Haines 2019; Herman 2023; R. Johnson 2023; A. Taylor 2023). As Jennifer, a 24-year-old bisexual East Asian woman, explained:

It is important to keep each other safe. . . Even though my circumstances were horrible, I made it through and I know I can help somebody else do it too. Sometimes it takes something ugly to make something beautiful. And, you know, I think people should hold on to that. Yeah like, life sucks, we all know that. . . But we make the best of what we have. And if we have a community that supports one another, we have everything.

Moving from the meso to the macro, interviewees highlighted that a true conception of justice as healing cannot exist without focusing on repair in the form of necessary therapeutic and material supports for survivors of PSV, such as free group therapy sessions, as well as immediate harm reduction and long-term prevention to stop incidents from happening in the first place. As Kayleigh, a 33-year-old heterosexual Latinx woman, remarked, justice is “making sure that [PSV] never happens again in the future to anybody else.” Conceptualizing justice collectively, survivors highlighted the need to develop more effective avenues for institutional accountability such as transparent and confidential police oversight (Ritchie 2018a), completely disconnected from police departments. Given the historical legacy of officer impunity (New York Civil Liberties Union 2021), they also cautioned against reliance on police forces to hold themselves accountable, and called for the more immediate establishment of external unconnected sites to report incidents of police sexual violence. As Mary Jane, a 26-year-old bisexual Latinx woman, remarked, “Can we trust that these. . . these reports will go somewhere. . . Imagine going to the cops about the cops [laugh].”

Tracing the way the state betrayal from PSV extends beyond the criminal legal system to other systemic betrayals that intersect with policing, interviewees—along with 85% of the 2753 survey participants living in heavily policed communities—comprehensively called for divesting from the carceral responses funded by a bloated NYPD budget of 12 billion dollars (Mayor’s Office of Management and Budget 2024) to instead invest in community-based safety interventions that proactively improve communities and care for city residents. Interviewees discussed the need to ensure that everyone in their communities attains a baseline bodily safety that includes immediate forms of material support such as clothing, healthy food, and shelter (Tempone-Wiltshire 2024). They also called for community advocates trained in de-escalation and mediation. Crucially, they called for community-based organizations and social workers to maintain a level of disconnect from police departments to be able to effectively act in the interest of community members. This consideration is particularly warranted given the expansion of carceral logics into social service organizations, especially those with programs directly connected to the state (Kim 2020).

Their visions of justice as healing then expanded to highlight a vast range of needed structural supports, from housing as a human right and a deep investment in education to expanded employment options, equitable healthcare, free community-based mental health services, and improved city infrastructure. In doing so, they also illuminated the essential role of reducing structural and systemic inequities that further legitimize the perceived need for policing. Participants at large called for a critical shift away from criminalization to instead focus on addressing the root causes of violence and harm in their communities. For example, Tracy, a 54-year-old heterosexual white woman who experienced seven different incidents of intimate partner violence where police escalated the situation, called instead for trained counselors and community leaders who can step in to tackle the interconnected factors contributing to gender-based and sexual violence. She explained:

Don't send ten cops to the door when somebody calls them in a domestic violence situation... It's not the cops' job... to really find the root of the problem. Do they need rehabilitation for drugs? Do, you know, is it an economical thing? Okay, the guy's got out of jail for something petty—you know, stupid—so he's having problems getting a background-friendly job... Maybe community leaders can be there rather than the cops to figure out what's really going on... I think a lot of it is mental health.

Perhaps most importantly, interview participants called attention to the ways in which the micro, meso, and macro are collectively intertwined; justice as healing involves simultaneous change on all these levels. Previous research has unsurprisingly found that survivors need community support after experiencing sexual violence (Herman 2023); however, interviewees further shed light on the depth of community support that is needed. They discussed how the development of safe communities requires systemic and structural change that begins with ideological and embodied shifts—the everyday activism of collectively undoing the ways in which systems of harm live in our bodies and behaviors (Dixon 2018; Havlin 2015).⁷ Interviewees repeatedly underscored that effective forms of public safety must not be defined by ideologies of control, domination, and dehumanization in service of protecting access to resources (Haines 2019), as the function of policing has historically served (Platt et al. 1982; Seigel 2018). Rather, approaches to creating the safety needed for collective healing must instead include embodying values of shared accountability and collective care (Micklem 2021; Mingus 2019). As Rob, a 41-year-old gay multiracial (Black & white) man, explained, “The person that’s doing that repeatedly to somebody is getting the help that they need, not the punishment that they, we think they deserve... *That* is healing, seeing the change in society.” Overall, interviewees collectively highlighted the need to (i) cultivate multiple and varied (somatic, psychological, and spiritual) approaches toward healing, and (ii) fully support these individualized processes of healing within new systems of care to carve tangible pathways toward deep societal transformation.

5. Methodological Reflections: The Strength of Critical Community-Based Dissemination

Ultimately, the ongoing research partnership with CPR increased this study’s impact validity (Massey and Barreras 2013), with the shared goal of generating educational resources, just policy, and organizing capacity (Sandwick et al. 2018) from these key findings in ways that traverse the spaces that academic research too often evades. In partnership with the coalition, I began work on a collaborative policy report on PSV in early 2025 that included meeting with CPR coalition members to share updates on the project and get feedback on findings and framings from which to disseminate data. In these meetings, we ran demographic data in real time, discussed impactful stories and themes, and considered the limitations of this study, including whose experiences were not represented. This process ensured that the research findings were ultimately conceptualized and analyzed in ways that matched community understandings of police sexual violence.

These meetings also provided an opportunity for community members to discuss specific policy recommendations, linked to the policy work already underway within their organizations (e.g., the Sex Worker Protection Bill), previous organizing successes that have resulted in improved policies (e.g., the How Many Stops Act), and new legislation that is still needed. Part of the coalition’s related feedback included highlighting institutional policies that have had minimal effect on improving police transparency or accountability, such as existing police trainings, with only 1% of all investigated NYPD misconduct cases overall resulting in serious disciplinary action (New York Civil Liberties Union 2021). Community representatives also discussed the implementation of recent policing practices that further

facilitate instances of PSV in New York City, such as quality-of-life initiatives that further criminalize communities for low-level offenses (Bustamante et al. 2019), and the rebranding and expansion of NYPD's Vice Squad, which has been staffed with officers who have a history of civilian complaints against them (Ganeva 2022; Garsd 2022). Addressing stop-and-frisk policies and their recent resurgence within a Trump administration (Aguirre and McCormack 2024) was noted as particularly important to reduce the routinized, legalized occurrence of unwanted sexualized touching.

Included in this discussion was also a recognition that carceral feminist approaches to handling sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence in general still pose a problem for creating sound and just policy (Kim 2020). For example, some organizations aiming to help survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence continuously support mandatory arrest policies that not only are ineffective in reducing this violence overall but also disproportionately criminalize queer, gender non-conforming, and transgender people (Ritchie 2017).⁸ Perhaps most importantly, this discussion on policy resulted in a shared acknowledgment that emergent community-centered practices that do not rely on improvements in policing are most needed—a critical finding that is supported in interview data as well.

Advancing methodological humility, discussions with community organization members also raised additional questions: How can we make the data more publicly accessible while still protecting participants' anonymity? How can we educate the public and provide survivors with needed resources without instilling more fear of police? And how can we further explore how different demographic groups and different heavily policed neighborhoods are more specifically impacted? Coalition members rightfully called for future intersectional data that more deeply explore demographic differences and their contexts. For example, no interview participants spoke about being explicitly targeted for their religion, yet community members shared stories of Muslim women experiencing sexualized frisks and having their hijabs ripped off by police officers. This sexualized and gender-based violence was also noted as on the rise within current protests for Palestinian liberation. Other organizational representatives shared that their transgender community members have experienced police sexual violence in the context of sex work, a demographic vulnerability that previous research has also called attention to (Vitale 2017). These research gaps reflect both the limitations of this study's reach and the strength of our collaborative partnership; one study cannot capture what a sustained, accountable, community-embedded research practice might build over time, particularly when studying an issue of ongoing state harm.

With the shared intent to create a public-facing report, we also spent significant time considering the legal parameters around the content of this policy report. The complexities around what behaviors are legally permissible in the context of policing, as well as what legally constitutes sexual assault, were particularly difficult to gain clarity on and required additional meetings with lawyers connected to the coalition. What remains a major concern are the ways in which everyday policing practices leave room for officers to dangerously exploit these blurred lines of legality (Butler 2017; Maher 2003). Highlighting the political stakes of knowledge production, collaborative decisions around what to include in this report also required continued consideration of holding visibility and risk simultaneously. Meeting with legal representatives within the coalition ensured that participants' anonymity was protected and that we (the coalition and individual researchers) were legally protected from any lawsuits such as accusations of defamation, particularly since we included information from one interviewee who names a high-profile former NYPD officer.

Finally, we had conversations with media communication and advocacy representatives to strategize how and when to release the report to maximize its impact. These

conversations provided an opportunity to receive additional feedback on the most effective stories and data points to present to media outlets for broader dissemination to a wider variety of audiences outside of the academy. We also discussed timing the report's release to not get overshadowed by other major news such as the city's mayoral election, and the ways in which we could build upon current headlines to amplify the report's messaging. Through the coalition's network of communities, we simultaneously sought to identify other directly impacted people who might want to provide additional personal testimony and speak directly to reporters.

Nine months after we began this work to disseminate findings, we released the finalized version of this 50-page policy report, which was distributed to various local and national media outlets, along with community organizations and advocacy groups. (The full report can be found here: <https://deserve2bsafe.commons.gc.cuny.edu/police-sexual-violence-report/>). In addition to several online newspaper articles written about the study, the report was shared as social media content where thousands of users engaged with its main data points. Shared goals around disseminating this work continued to bring clarity to the ways in which data can be used by different groups, including policymaking for lawyers, educational advocacy for organizers, and direct survivor support for service providers.

6. Conclusions

This five-year study offers the first in-depth, survivor-centered examination of police sexual violence outside of prisons and jails in the city with the nation's largest police force. It was designed and implemented in a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, national protests following the murder of George Floyd, intensifying political backlash against progressive organizing, and ongoing threats to higher education's capacity for producing critical public science. Amid these conditions, engaging in community-based, survivor-centered participatory action research was not solely a more ethical approach to studying police sexual violence but a more epistemically accurate way to understand this invisibilized form of state violence, the systems of power in which it is generated, and the forms of resistance needed to dismantle it. The ongoing partnership with Communities United for Police Reform (CPR) was essential for reaching multiply marginalized populations that academic researchers typically have not accessed—populations that are most impacted by police sexual violence, including LGBTQIA+ women of color, unhoused individuals, and those with histories of criminalization. Community knowledge significantly shaped research design and data collection in ways that ensured access to a large, diverse sample of participants, refined conceptualizations and preliminary analyses of PSV, and translated findings into forms of participatory dissemination for educational advocacy. Research validity, in this context, was enriched by ongoing community relationships and the trust built through sustained coalition organizing around shared commitments.

The data elucidate how police sexual violence constitutes a vast range of sexually aggressive behaviors—including criminally recognized forms of sexual violence facilitated by the power of the badge (e.g., rape), non-criminal everyday forms (e.g., street harassment), and policing-specific legal forms (e.g., strip searches)—accumulating both within individual lives and across entire communities. By critically expanding the definition of PSV to encompass a continuum of sexually abusive behaviors, this research documents the scope of a state-sanctioned phenomenon that has been systematically hidden; it reframes PSV as not an abnormal occurrence, but a pervasive feature of routine, and often lawful, policing practices that data reveal affects nearly 20% of those surveyed across New York City. Moreover, elevating a diverse range of lived experiences further illuminates the cumulative embodied, psychological, behavioral, social, spatial and material consequences of police sexual violence. In heavily policed communities in particular, the enactment and mere

threat of PSV instill collective fear in 40% of community members, within unpredictable conditions of ongoing police presence and historical officer impunity. Police sexual violence is thus more expansively theorized as a significant form of state betrayal that further informs how we understand state violence at large. Extending from the historical use of state-sanctioned sexual violence as a tool of psychological warfare and carceral control (Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015; Haley 2016; Harris 2011), PSV today functions as a form of terror(ism) that further entrenches harmful carceral logics, eroding our collective safety.

Understanding the cumulative logic of PSV and the collective harm it creates challenges conventional and individualized approaches to attending to psychological harm. Situating psychological harm within both the structural oppression from which that harm stems and the collective wisdom cultivated within these conditions carves critical pathways forward (Sandwick et al. 2018; Tuck 2009). Police sexual violence reveals the need to collectively address the root causes of sexual violence without the fabricated sense of safety that policing, prisons, and the criminal legal system at large provide (Saleh-Hanna 2017; Seigel 2018). In a society in which sexual violence is all too common, we remain collectively traumatized and grasp onto false historical notions of “security” within the deeply human need to feel safe, in ways that keep us all collectively stuck in larger cycles of abuse with the state (Saleh-Hanna 2017; Seigel 2018). This abusive relationship effectively dampens our collective imagination to conjure up and invest in alternatives to policing (Stoudt et al. Forthcoming). Yet, the issue of police sexual violence in particular highlights the ways in which our enduring reliance on policing strengthens a culture of sexual and gender-based violence, re-entrenching state-sponsored harm and undermining all our safety (Harris 2011; Richie 2012), within a carceral state that has failed to deter or reduce rates of sexual violence overall (INCITE! 2016; C. Taylor 2018; Whalley and Hackett 2017). In response, participants revealed the need to shed our collective internalization of the widespread carceral logics—including fear, distrust, disconnection, isolation, surveillance, judgment, blame, control and punishment—that fuel many societally prevalent forms of policing. Holding the complexity of interconnected processes of individual healing and societal transformation, their visions for justice simultaneously recognize needed structural, ideological, psychosocial, and embodied shifts to facilitate collective healing and destabilize the perceived need for policing and punishment in the first place.

Survivors of police sexual violence in New York City, speaking with extraordinary clarity and courage, have documented a form of state harm that is pervasive, systematically denied, and shielded from accountability. They have also articulated, with equal clarity and force, what it would mean to create genuine public safety; they describe building safety not through expanded policing but through the messy, difficult, and beautiful work of building communities rooted in shared accountability and collective care. The very methodological processes engaged throughout this community-based study similarly reflect some of the challenges and joys of community building within politically contentious and unjust conditions. The methodological tensions encountered—including navigating discrepancies between IRB requirements and survivor-centered care, simultaneously holding the human complexities of participants’ harm and healing, and considering questions of visibility and risk in public dissemination—remain generative sites of collective reflection. At the same time, the methodological strengths of this study—from diversity of partner organizations, participants, and forms of data collection, to democratic decision-making and community-led dissemination—offer a model for conducting critical public scholarship rooted in sustained community collaboration. As Cornel West (2022) reminds us, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public” (p. 161). This survivor-centered, community-based research study is one attempt to make that love visible. It is one attempt to reimagine justice

by attending to not only the harm that has been done but also the collective healing that is possible.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Graduate Center, City University of New York (#2021-0637) on 21 September 2021.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ While current New York State legislation has more recently established incapacity to consent for those under arrest, in detention, or in custody, this legislation does not protect those who are not formally under arrest or detained.
- ² One survey participant was recruited from the previous town hall on police sexual violence, while a second participant was referred by another interviewee.
- ³ While existing funding did not permit additional forms of compensation, free specialized therapeutic offerings are one important form of compensation that we would have liked to offer, and that can be implemented for future studies of PSV.
- ⁴ Survey data presented are not meant to represent definitive estimates of the total number of people in New York City experiencing police sexual violence; rather, data offer further information to begin to broadly map out the complex landscape of PSV, the varied ways in which it is enacted and experienced, and the demographic vulnerabilities that it reflects.
- ⁵ While this incapacity to consent has more recently been established for those formally in police custody in New York, a legal premise of “consent” is still accepted within the everyday policing of those not officially under arrest or detained ([New York State Assembly 2018](#)).
- ⁶ Some interviewees experienced an accumulation of PSV over the course of many years, while the experience of four individuals highlighted an accumulation of more than one type of PSV in a single incident (e.g., an experience of sexualized touching and sexuality-based harassment during an instance of stop and frisk).
- ⁷ Despite interviewees going to extreme lengths at times to avoid being triggered by police, some still chose to show up in spaces where police were present to protest PSV and other forms of police harm, in both formal and informal everyday ways.
- ⁸ Some coalition members also raised additional concerns around mandatory arrest policies disproportionately impacting non-English-speaking individuals, who may both be arrested if no translator is present and police cannot understand what has occurred.

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