



Culturally competent trauma-informed practices benefit survivors and investigations

Jacob S. Crawford*, C. Markle* and A. Rooks*

This article is directly related to the first global Trauma Informed Policing and Law Enforcement Conference held in Melbourne, Australia in February 2024.

ABSTRACT

This study presents findings from an examination of trauma-informed investigative practices within the Sexual Assault Unit (SAU) of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD). Through a comprehensive analysis of sexual assault cases and key informant interviews, the study explores the impact of cultural competency on investigative processes and the provision of support services to survivors. The findings underscore the critical importance of cultural sensitivity in shaping both the investigation and the delivery of victim-centred care. While the SAU demonstrates a commitment to trauma-informed practices, there remains a need for expanded methodologies to fully understand and develop culturally sensitive approaches. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of considering culturally relevant intergenerational trauma in addressing the needs of survivors. Moving forward, research to enhance trauma-informed practices must prioritize the integration of cultural competency across all facets of the investigative process to promote healing, empowerment, and justice for survivors of sexual assault.

Key Words Law enforcement; victim centred; sexual assault; cultural awareness; police; Charlotte; North Carolina.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the implementation of trauma-informed practices within law enforcement agencies has garnered significant attention, particularly in the realm of sexual assault investigations. Recognizing the profound impact of trauma on victims and survivors, law enforcement agencies, including the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD), have increasingly adopted approaches aimed at providing sensitive and supportive responses to individuals who have experienced sexual violence (Campbell, 1998).

While the benefits of trauma-informed practices are well documented, there remains a critical gap in the literature regarding the integration of cultural competency into these approaches, particularly within the context of law enforcement systems. Diaz (2024), for example, discusses how trauma-informed care principles are integrated into forensic mental health and law enforcement practices and mentions the benefit to the criminal justice system of integrating culturally competent trainings to enhance engagement. The

article is not focused on trauma-informed practice, cultural competency, and law enforcement, and this is a gap in the literature that deserves further investigation. The ability to understand and respond to the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of victims and survivors is paramount in ensuring that trauma-informed practices are truly effective and inclusive (Dolezal & Gibson, 2022; Markey, 2017).

This article represents an initial effort to address this gap by examining the benefits of culturally competent trauma-informed practices for both victims/survivors and the broader investigative process within the CMPD's Sexual Assault Unit (SAU). Given the preliminary nature of this study, the scale of research was limited, primarily comprising qualitative evidence gathered from key informant interviews and case reviews. However, this pilot study underscores the potential impact of cultural competency on victim/survivor support, investigative procedures, and the overall delivery of services within law enforcement agencies.

This study also works to highlight the need for further and more expansive research. As such, this article serves as

Correspondence to: Detective Jacob Crawford, 601 E Trade St, Charlotte, NC 28211, USA, Telephone: 704-307-8890. **E-mail:** jacob.crawford@cmpd.org

To cite: Crawford J. S., Markle C., & Rooks A. (2025). Culturally competent trauma-informed practices benefit survivors and investigations. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 10(1), 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.402>

© Author(s) 2025. Open Access. This work is distributed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license. For commercial re-use, please contact sales@sgpublishing.ca.

SG PUBLISHING Published by **SG Publishing Inc.** **CSKA** Official publication of the **Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.**

a first step and pilot for future efforts aimed at exploring and refining the integration of cultural competency within trauma-informed approaches within law enforcement agencies. By emphasizing the significance of cultural competency in trauma-informed practices, this research aims to inform and guide ongoing endeavors to enhance the responsiveness and effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in addressing sexual violence within diverse communities.

ABOUT THE JURISDICTION OF FOCUS

Charlotte, the 15th most populous city in the United States, boasts a vibrant and diverse community, with approximately 1.145 million individuals residing in the Charlotte Metropolitan area. The CMPD, responsible for policing 438 square miles of this dynamic urban landscape, faces a myriad of challenges in serving its diverse population. With 1,038,817,911 calls for service annually, the CMPD operates within a complex social and economic context, where issues of poverty, racial disparities, and community safety intersect. Indeed, with more than one in seven Charlotte residents living below the poverty line and one in five children in the area experiencing poverty, the CMPD's role in ensuring public safety and supporting vulnerable communities is paramount (Charlotte Regional Business Alliance, 2022).

Within the CMPD, the SAU plays a crucial role in investigating cases of sexual violence and providing support to victims/survivors within the community. Part of the Special Victims Division, the SAU specializes in cases involving victims-survivors aged 16 and older, focusing on felony sex crimes. In 2023 alone, the SAU investigated roughly 550 cases of sexual assault, resulting in 33 rape arrests – a 120% increase from 2022. In 2024, the SAU investigated 422 cases with a roughly 45% clearance rate (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, 2023, 2024).

SAU is tasked with addressing one of the most underreported and challenging crimes; the unit operates within the broader framework of trauma-informed practices. However, despite the prevalence of trauma-informed approaches, there remains a critical gap in the literature regarding the integration of cultural competency into these practices, particularly within the context of law enforcement systems (Harrison, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma-informed practices have gained recognition as essential approaches for addressing the complex needs of individuals who have experienced trauma. Extensive research has demonstrated a direct correlation between trauma exposure and a range of adverse social and health outcomes (Magruder et al., 2017). Despite the prevalence of trauma, sexual assault remains one of the least reported violent crimes to law enforcement agencies (Rennison, 2002). Moreover, sexual assault is widely acknowledged as a challenging crime to investigate, substantiate, and prosecute (Seelinger et al., 2011). Many survivors of sexual assault report difficulties with the reporting and legal processes, often describing them as retraumatizing (Campbell, 1998).

Trauma-informed practices move beyond the skepticism, the discovery of inconsistencies, and reliance on physical

evidence that are inherent in suspect-based crime investigations. This approach allows victims to voice their experiences uninterrupted, recognizing that trauma memories can be fragmented. Perpetrators often deliberately target vulnerable victims (Markey, 2017; Smith & Freyd, 2014).

In response to these challenges, trauma-informed practices have emerged as a paradigm shift in victim/survivor support and investigative procedures. Unlike traditional suspect-based approaches, trauma-informed practices prioritize the needs and experiences of the victim/survivor. This approach involves creating a safe and supportive environment for individuals to share their experiences without interruption, acknowledging the fragmented nature of trauma memory, and recognizing the deliberate targeting of vulnerable victims by perpetrators (Markey, 2017; Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Cultural competency is an integral component of trauma-informed practices, emphasizing the importance of understanding and respecting the cultural backgrounds and experiences of survivors/victims. Trauma-informed services strive to be culturally competent and to understand each victim-survivor in the context of their life experience and cultural background, although there is often confusion about the definition (Ardino, 2014). Cultural differences can significantly impact the perception and interpretation of trauma events, as well as beliefs about control over the event (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2021). Despite efforts to promote cultural competency within trauma-informed services, gaps persist, highlighting the need for further examples and exploration in the literature (Downing et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the literature highlights the need for greater consideration of culturally specific organizations in supporting survivor healing from intimate partner and sexual assault trauma (Campbell, 2005; Serrata et al., 2020). While there has been a significant increase in the delivery of trauma-informed care, discussions around broader cultural, political, and societal factors that contextualize client trauma remain limited (Esaki et al., 2022). Additionally, there is growing recognition of the role of shame and intergenerational trauma in shaping care and service provision, although further exploration is warranted (Dolezal & Gibson, 2022; Isobel et al., 2021). While there has been a significant increase in the delivery of evidence-supported, trauma-informed care, there is a notable lack of consideration for broader cultural, political, and societal factors that contextualize client trauma (Esaki et al., 2022).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an interdisciplinary research design that sought to overcome the challenges of conducting research within a law enforcement department while integrating findings from literature and experiences both within and outside of law enforcement. The rationale for this approach stems from the increasing priority placed on culturally sensitive, trauma-informed approaches due to the diverse service population of CMPD and those providing trauma-informed investigation and support.

In the design and implementation of this study, we adhered to the ethical guidelines established by CMPD and standard academic ethics procedures. Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with departmental requirements,

ensuring compliance with all relevant regulations. Informed consent was secured from all participants involved in the study, including key informants and case subjects, prior to their engagement. These measures were taken to uphold the integrity of the research and safeguard the rights and confidentiality of all individuals involved.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model used for analysis is a hybrid of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) trauma-informed practice guidelines and the Seven Commitments of the Sanctuary Model, along with the integration of the SAU's own culturally responsive practices. While this model was considered in the study design, its primary function is to serve as an analytical framework, guiding the interpretation of findings and assessing how culturally competent, trauma-informed approaches influence both survivors' experiences and investigative outcomes.

The SAMHSA trauma-informed practice guidelines emphasize key elements such as establishing a safe environment, promoting collaboration and mutuality, and addressing cultural, gender, and historical considerations (Wallace, 2020). The Seven Commitments of the Sanctuary Model focus on principles such as nonviolence, emotional intelligence, social learning, democracy, open communication, social responsibility, and growth and change. However, these models do not explicitly emphasize cultural competency, which is critical in law enforcement interactions. Therefore, this hybrid model integrates culturally responsive principles to ensure that trauma-informed practices account for the diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, and systemic inequities that may shape a survivor's interaction with law enforcement.

In looking at the application in analysis of our hybrid conceptual model, it was used to assess how trauma-informed and culturally competent principles manifest in law enforcement interactions, ensuring that findings are analyzed within a framework that acknowledges both psychological trauma and cultural dynamics. The model was instrumental in evaluating whether officers' responses were sensitive to survivors' unique cultural identities, whether implicit biases were addressed, and whether engagement strategies were adapted to diverse community needs.

The model integrates these principles into the following key components:

- **Safe:** Establishing a safe and culturally responsive environment built on trust, transparency, and awareness of historical and systemic trauma.
- **Rapport:** Developing rapport through a culturally competent lens that recognizes victim trauma, historical injustices, and the intersectionality of identity while maintaining an offender-focused investigative approach.
- **Collaborate:** Engaging in a collaborative response that respects varied cultural perceptions of trauma and justice, ensuring that investigative practices do not reinforce mistrust or re-traumatization.
- **Support:** Offering culturally responsive support and referrals, integrating survivors' empowerment, voice, and choice while ensuring accessibility across linguistic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

This hybrid conceptual model was chosen because it provides a balanced, culturally responsive framework for analyzing trauma-informed law enforcement practices. By integrating cultural competency, the model ensures that both policy considerations and practical applications reflect the realities of marginalized communities and that investigations align with best practices in equitable and survivor-centred approaches.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study examines culturally competent, trauma-informed investigative practices within the SAU of the CMPD using a qualitative research approach. The following research questions guided the study:

1. In examining both the investigator and the systems-based advocate, what are the benefits of understanding the victim through the lens of culture?
2. Are there trauma-informed practices that transcend culture, found to be effective, and transferable to those with less cultural competency training and experience?

To explore these questions, this study employed a two-pronged qualitative methodology involving (1) key informant interviews and (2) case reviews. The first research question was addressed by examining how cultural identity and perception influence investigative practices, both in interviews and in case files. The second research question was approached by identifying culturally specific practices and assessing whether any aspects could be extrapolated for broader applicability. However, given the sample size limitations, determining universally transferable practices may require further exploration in a follow-on study with a larger, more diverse dataset.

Key informants for this study included investigators and systems-based advocates with direct experience in sexual assault cases requiring both cultural competency and trauma-informed approaches. Participants were selected based on their expertise and prior engagement in cases where cultural identity influenced victim interactions, investigative procedures, or case outcomes. This purposeful sampling ensured insights from those actively applying these practices in the field, though it is acknowledged that a larger and more diverse participant pool would be necessary for broader generalizability.

Initially, interviews were designed as semi-structured, with a primary prompt asking participants to reflect on past cases involving cultural considerations and trauma. However, early interviews revealed that an open-ended approach was more effective in eliciting detailed and nuanced responses. As a result, the interview process shifted to an open-ended format, allowing participants to describe their experiences, challenges, and strategies in their own terms.

To supplement the qualitative data obtained from interviews, a comprehensive review of 10 sexual assault cases was conducted. Case selection criteria focused on instances where cultural competency was a critical factor alongside trauma-informed practices. These cases were selected based on the presence of language barriers, nationality, ethnicity, or cultural perceptions of law enforcement and sexual assault, ensuring that the study examined how both cultural

awareness and trauma-informed approaches intersect in investigative contexts.

For each case, all available case records, investigative reports, victim interviews, advocate interactions, and outcomes were analyzed. Some cases included recorded interviews, while others relied solely on written documentation. The review process followed a structured coding framework derived from the hybrid conceptual model, assessing whether and how principles of safety, rapport-building, collaboration, and support were applied in the investigative process.

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze qualitative data, guided by the hybrid conceptual model (as detailed in the previous section). Interview transcripts and case reviews were coded to identify patterns, recurring themes, and insights related to culturally competent trauma-informed practices. Particular attention was given to how investigators adapted their approaches based on cultural considerations and whether any strategies appeared to be effective across different cultural contexts.

Triangulation was conducted through comparative analysis between interview data and case reviews, ensuring that emerging themes were supported by multiple sources of evidence. While this study utilized a basic triangulation approach, it is acknowledged that a more robust methodological approach – incorporating additional sources, perspectives, and validation techniques – would strengthen findings in a future expanded study.

This study provides valuable insights into the intersection of cultural competency and trauma-informed investigative practices, but its scope is limited due to sample size constraints and the qualitative nature of the analysis. Future research should:

- expand the participant pool to include a broader range of investigators, advocates, and survivors to enhance generalizability.
- explore longitudinal case tracking to assess long-term outcomes of culturally competent trauma-informed practices.
- develop a more comprehensive triangulation framework, incorporating multiple data sources and validation techniques.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a growing body of research on culturally responsive approaches in law enforcement investigations, providing a foundation for future inquiry into universal best practices that balance trauma-informed care with cultural sensitivity.

FINDINGS

Introduction

Analysis of sexual assault cases within the SAU of the CMPD revealed three key themes related to culturally competent, trauma-informed investigative practices:

1. **Rapport-building:** Establishing trust and meaningful engagement with survivors to facilitate cooperation and communication.
2. **Collaboration:** Engaging external stakeholders and survivors in decision-making to ensure a holistic, victim-centred approach.

3. **Support:** Providing individualized, culturally competent assistance tailored to the unique needs of survivors.

These themes illustrate the complexity and necessity of balancing investigative priorities with survivor well-being, highlighting best practices and areas for improvement in culturally responsive trauma-informed policing.

Rapport: Establishing Trust through Cultural and Trauma Sensitivity

Building trust and rapport with survivors emerged as a foundational component of trauma-informed investigations. Establishing a meaningful connection with victims was critical to facilitating communication, ensuring survivor engagement, and creating a sense of safety throughout the investigative process.

Investigators and advocates consistently emphasized that each survivor's background and trauma history shaped their ability to engage with law enforcement. One investigator highlighted the challenges of making that connection, stating,

Sex assault investigations, and especially victim interviews, you have to connect with the victim. There are challenges for making that connection, whether it be because of the individual's background, recent trauma, or even past trauma that has come up. There are always challenges to work through to connect.

To overcome barriers to trust, SAU personnel took intentional steps to create comfortable and culturally responsive environments for survivors. Advocates met victims where they felt safest, whether in a hospital room or at a location of their choosing, and offered practical support such as transportation assistance and navigating the legal system.

Investigators also demonstrated flexibility in their approach, recognizing that communication preferences differed based on cultural background and access to technology. As one advocate explained,

No one communicates the same way, and the background and experiences of the individual influences how they communicate. Even when thinking about the digital platform they use – some use text, some use WhatsApp, or Telegram, etc. I am fluid and flexible to not only be able to communicate with the victim how they want to communicate but also to attempt to understand why the victim is communicating the way they are communicating. Do they have a US phone? Are they concerned that someone in their household will see our messages? I am always cognizant of this and ensure to endeavor safe and clear communication.

By prioritizing survivor agency and cultural understanding, SAU personnel fostered a sense of trust that was critical to both victim recovery and investigative outcomes.

Collaboration: Strengthening Investigations through Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

Collaboration between the SAU and external partners played a vital role in delivering comprehensive, culturally competent support to survivors. Findings demonstrated that effective collaboration extended beyond investigative efforts, ensuring

survivors received holistic assistance tailored to their unique needs.

One investigator emphasized the importance of moving beyond desk-based investigations, advocating for direct engagement with survivors and their communities:

There are investigations that can be done from the desk and others that must be done in the field. Before I came to the unit, we were much more of a desk investigation unit. This was not working. We needed to know who these people are, what their five senses told them and are telling them. Therefore, our unit evolved and went where they are.

Beyond investigative efforts, collaboration also enhanced survivor empowerment. Instead of directing survivors toward pre-determined investigative pathways, SAU personnel worked closely with victims to co-develop solutions. As one investigator described,

It would be easy for us as investigators to dictate a direction of the investigation, but we know that this is not best practice. We must work with our survivors and empower our survivors. Empowerment looks different for every survivor, and if we understand who they are and where they come from, we can tailor that empowerment.

SAU personnel also leveraged community partners to fill gaps in cultural competency and victim support. Investigators and advocates acknowledged that law enforcement alone could not meet every need and emphasized the value of strategic partnerships:

We know there is only so much that we can do. We are not perfect. But if we know our weaknesses and we have a community partner who is strong in this area, then we must lean on one another. It is all about helping our victims.

By actively engaging survivors and external stakeholders, SAU personnel strengthened investigative processes while ensuring survivor-centred outcomes.

Support: Providing Culturally Competent and Individualized Assistance

Findings highlighted the importance of tailoring support services to individual survivors and recognizing that each survivor's needs, perceptions of safety, and legal understanding were shaped by their cultural background.

One investigator recalled a particularly complex case involving an East African survivor navigating both language barriers and community opposition to leaving her abuser:

To understand what safety means to the victim is key. I remember a case where we had a victim who was an immigrant from East Africa. Her first language was her local dialect, her second was French, and her third was English. The community was not supportive of the victim separating from her abuser and was constantly trying to undermine her efforts. Ensuring her safety outside of her support system was vital, as was ensuring her

understanding of the law once she was provided legal protection.

In addition to cultural awareness, SAU personnel demonstrated commitment to immediate safety and long-term survivor well-being. Investigators prioritized enforcing Secure Custody Orders (SCOs), sometimes delaying investigative steps to first ensure a survivor's physical safety. As one investigator explained,

Investigations never follow the same path. Sometimes, for example, you want to go and canvass for additional evidence, but the safety of the victim comes first.

However, despite strong trauma-informed practices, some investigators noted a gap in formalized cultural competency training, with knowledge being largely learned through experience rather than structured education:

I think we need more training and explicit conversations about cultural competency. We discuss trauma all the time, but we don't discuss cultural nuance – we just do it.

This underscores the need for structured training and policy development to ensure consistent, culturally competent responses across all cases.

Findings from this study illustrate how trauma-informed and culturally competent practices shape survivor experiences and investigative effectiveness. While SAU personnel demonstrated strong trauma-informed approaches, the study highlights opportunities for more structured training in cultural competency and deeper integration of survivor-driven investigative practices.

These insights set the stage for a broader discussion on policy recommendations, training improvements, and systemic shifts necessary to enhance culturally competent, trauma-informed policing. The next section will explore these implications in depth, considering how law enforcement agencies can build upon existing strengths while addressing identified gaps.

DISCUSSION

Enhancing Documentation of Support Services

While the case file analysis provided valuable insights, it also revealed gaps in documentation, particularly regarding the role of victim advocates in providing support services. Findings suggest that some survivor interactions, accommodations, and culturally specific interventions may not have been systematically recorded, making it difficult to assess the full scope and impact of support efforts.

To address this, the development of standardized protocols for documenting victim advocacy services is necessary. Implementing structured data collection tools – such as checklists, digital case notes, or standardized reporting forms – can ensure that all support interactions, cultural considerations, and survivor accommodations are consistently recorded. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of survivor needs, facilitate cross-case comparisons, and improve accountability in service provision.

Moreover, strengthening documentation practices would support long-term policy and training improvements by enabling law enforcement agencies to track patterns in survivor needs, effectiveness of referrals, and gaps in service delivery.

Advancing Cultural Competency in Trauma-Informed Investigations

Findings highlight commendable efforts by the SAU to integrate cultural sensitivity into trauma-informed investigations, yet they also underscore the need for a deeper and more structured approach to cultural competency. Currently, cultural competency efforts tend to be informal and learned through experience rather than through formalized training.

One key limitation of current practices is the over-reliance on language proficiency as a proxy for cultural identity. Categorizing individuals solely based on language access may overlook critical factors such as country of origin, immigration status, religious background, or historical experiences with law enforcement and justice systems. A more intersectional approach is needed – one that recognizes the diversity within cultural groups and avoids broad generalizations.

To enhance cultural competency in trauma-informed policing, the following recommendations should be considered:

- **Structured Training and Continuing Education:** Develop mandatory cultural competency training for investigators and advocates, incorporating case studies, role-playing scenarios, and expert-led discussions on navigating cultural nuances in trauma responses.
- **Cultural Liaison and Advisory Roles:** Establish liaison partnerships with community organizations and cultural advocacy groups to provide consultation and real-time guidance on best practices for engaging survivors from diverse backgrounds.
- **Intersectional Case Assessment Frameworks:** Develop investigative frameworks that explicitly prompt officers to assess cultural factors beyond language, including familial support systems, community pressures, and cultural stigma surrounding sexual violence.

By institutionalizing cultural competency within SAU practices, agencies can ensure consistency, improve survivor engagement, and create more equitable investigative processes.

Quantifying Cultural Competency Needs: Data and Systemic Gaps

A significant gap identified in the analysis is the lack of standardized mechanisms for measuring the prevalence and impact of cultural competency needs within sexual assault investigations. Currently, law enforcement agencies lack systematic methods for tracking how often cultural competency factors play a role in cases, making it difficult to identify trends, allocate resources, and tailor policy interventions.

Although individual cases demonstrate clear instances where cultural sensitivity is critical, there is no structured data collection process to quantify

- how often cultural barriers affect victim engagement with investigators.
- which cultural competency interventions are most effective in supporting survivors.
- what patterns exist across different cultural communities in seeking justice and support.

Therefore, looking into the following areas could be an avenue of consideration after additional research is completed. Avenues to consider include, but are not limited to,

- **Cultural Competency Data Fields:** Modify investigative reporting systems to include data fields on cultural barriers, survivor communication preferences, and key cultural considerations that impacted the case.
- **Thematic Case Coding for Cultural Factors:** Develop a thematic coding system for investigators to flag cultural and linguistic issues in case records, creating a database for trend analysis.
- **Annual Cultural Competency Audits:** Conduct periodic reviews of case files to analyze whether cultural competency needs were identified, addressed, and effectively resolved.

By systematically tracking and analyzing this data, agencies can move beyond anecdotal observations to evidence-based policy and training improvements that better reflect the realities of survivor experiences.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While this study provides meaningful insights into culturally competent, trauma-informed policing, it is important to acknowledge its limitations:

- **Sample Size and Scope:** The analysis was conducted on a limited number of cases within one law enforcement unit, meaning findings may not be generalizable across all investigative agencies or jurisdictions.
- **Qualitative Nature of Findings:** Due to the qualitative approach, conclusions rely on thematic interpretations rather than statistical validation. Future studies incorporating quantitative methods could provide more precise measurements of cultural competency trends in investigations.
- **Limited Examination of Survivor Perspectives:** This study primarily focuses on investigators and advocates; future research should incorporate survivor interviews to gain direct insights into their experiences with culturally competent trauma-informed policing.

To expand on this study, future research should explore:

- Comparative studies of cultural competency practices across multiple law enforcement units to identify best practices and inconsistencies.
- Longitudinal studies tracking how cultural competency interventions impact survivor engagement and case outcomes over time.
- Policy analysis on legal and systemic barriers survivors face when seeking culturally competent law enforcement support.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a critical foundation for understanding how trauma-informed policing intersects with cultural competency. These findings underscore the importance of refining investigative approaches, strengthening training and data tracking, and ensuring that law enforcement agencies remain responsive to the diverse needs of survivors.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of cultural competency in the investigation and support of survivors of sexual assault. Findings highlight how cultural identity influences survivor engagement, access to services, and investigative processes, reinforcing the need for intentional, structured efforts to integrate culturally responsive approaches into trauma-informed policing.

It became evident that while SAU personnel demonstrated strong commitments to victim-centred practices, cultural competency efforts remain largely informal and inconsistently documented. This gap emphasizes the necessity for structured training, standardized documentation, and more robust data collection to better assess and address the cultural dimensions of trauma-informed investigations. The lack of formalized systems for tracking cultural competency needs and interventions further underscores the importance of developing measurable frameworks to ensure equitable, effective, and survivor-centred law enforcement responses.

Moreover, this study raises important questions about the scalability and sustainability of current trauma-informed investigative practices. While investigators and advocates demonstrated adaptability in working with survivors from diverse backgrounds, findings suggest that more systemic, institutionally embedded approaches are needed. Future research should explore long-term impacts of cultural competency interventions, assess the effectiveness of training programs, and examine how survivor experiences can inform future policy and procedural reforms.

By embracing a holistic, victim-centred approach, law enforcement agencies can ensure not only justice but also healing and empowerment for survivors. This requires ongoing dialogue, investment in training and education, and meaningful engagement with survivor communities and advocacy groups to foster a more inclusive, responsive, and effective system of trauma-informed care.

The intersection of cultural competency and trauma-informed investigations remains an evolving and complex field, but one thing is clear: progress must be continuous, intentional, and survivor-centred. By prioritizing these efforts, we can create a justice system that is more equitable, trauma-responsive, and attuned to the needs of all survivors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, Charlotte, NC, USA

REFERENCES

Ardino, V. (2014). Trauma-informed care: Is cultural competence a viable solution for efficient policy strategies? *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 11(1), 45–51.

- Campbell, R. (1998). The community response to rape: Victims' experiences with the legal, medical, and mental health systems. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(3), 355–379. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1022155003633>
- Campbell, R. (2005). What really happened? A validation study of rape survivors' help-seeking experiences with the legal and medical systems. *Violence and Victims*, 20, 55–68.
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department. (2023). *End-of-year report*. City of Charlotte. Retrieved from https://www.charlottenc.gov/files/sharedassets/police/v/1/newsroom/article_documents/cmpd-eoy-website-reduced.pdf
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department. (2024). *2024 Annual report*. City of Charlotte. Retrieved from https://www.charlottenc.gov/files/assets/police/v/1/2024_cmpd_annual_reportfinal.pdf
- Charlotte Regional Business Alliance. (2022). *Equity and inclusion in the Charlotte Region: Economic disparities and gaps widen*. Retrieved from <https://charlotteregion.com/blog/2022/03/03/research-data/equity-and-inclusion-in-the-charlotte-region-economic-disparities-and-gaps-widen/>
- Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. (2021). *What is culturally-sensitive trauma-informed care?* Retrieved from <https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/culturally-sensitive-trauma-informed-care#Beliefs>
- Diaz, B. (2024). A legacy of feminism and advocacy: An interview with Dr. Lenore Walker. *Trauma Counseling and Resilience*, 1(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.33470/29977088.1017>
- Dolezal, L., & Gibson, M. (2022). Beyond a trauma-informed approach and towards shame-sensitive practice. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9, 214. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01227-z>
- Downing, M.J., Benoit, E., Coe, L., Brown, D., & Steen, J.T. (2023). Examining cultural competency and sexual abuse training needs among service providers working with Black and Latino sexual minority men. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 49(1), 79–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2022.2157524>
- Esaki, N., Reddy, M., & Bishop, C. T. (2022). Next steps: Applying a trauma-informed model to create an anti-racist organizational culture. *Behavioral Science (Basel, Switzerland)*, 12(2), 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12020041>
- Harrison, S. (2023). *Mecklenburg added nearly 20,000 residents over the last year, Census says*. WFAE 90.7. Retrieved from <https://www.wfae.org/charlotte-area/2023-03-30/mecklenburg-added-nearly-20-000-residents-over-the-last-year-census-says>
- Isobel, S., McCloughen, A., Goodyear, M., & Foster, K. (2021). Inter-generational trauma and its relationship to mental health care: A qualitative inquiry. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 57, 631–643. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-020-00698-1>
- Magruder, K. M., McLaughlin, K. A., & Borbon, D. L. E. (2017). Trauma is a public health issue. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 8(1), 1375338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2017.1375338>
- Markey, J. (2017). Improving your sexual assault victim interview for law enforcement. Workshop presenting to the multi-disciplinary team in, mobile, Alabama.
- Rennison, C. A. (2002). *Rape and sexual assault: Reporting to police and medical attention, 1992–2000*. NCJ Number 194530. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Seelinger, K. T., Silverberg, H., & Mejia, R. (2011). The investigation and prosecution of sexual violence. Sexual Violence and Accountability Working Paper Series. Berkeley: Human Rights Center, University of California.

- Serrata, J. V., Rodriguez, R., Castro, J. E., & Hernandez-Martinez, M. (2020). Well-being of Latino survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault receiving trauma-informed and culturally-specific services. *Journal of Family Violence, 35*, 169–180. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-019-00049-z>
- Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2014). Institutional betrayal. *American Psychologist, 69*(6), 575–587. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037564>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). *Census.gov*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-cities-and-towns.html>
- Wallace, C. (2020). *An overview of trauma-informed approaches (TIA)*. CASCADE, Cardiff University. Retrieved from https://cascadewales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/11/Information-sheet-on-TIA_CASCADE-2.pdf