

# The Survivors of Sexual Violence in Kenya Network

Subjects: Psychology

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Police interviews gather detailed information from witnesses about the perpetrator that is crucial for solving crimes. Research has established that interviewing witnesses immediately after the crime maintains memory accuracy over time. However, in some contexts, such as in conflict settings and low-income countries, witness interviews occur after long delays, which decreases survivors' access to vital services and justice. We investigated whether an immediate interview via a mobile phone application (SV\_CaseStudy Mobile Application, hereafter MobApp) developed by the Survivors of Sexual Violence in Kenya Network preserves people's memory accuracy over time.

Keywords: gender-based violence ; sexual violence ; Kenya ; memory ; behavioural crime linkage ; access to justice

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## 1. Introduction

Statements and testimony given by witnesses, which include that of victim survivors and bystanders (e.g., the victim's family, community members), are vitally important in criminal investigations <sup>[1]</sup>. The information they provide often includes a description of the perpetrator's physical appearance and behaviours, which can aid in perpetrator identification and provide leads in securing and interpreting forensic evidence <sup>[2]</sup>. However, due to demands on police time and other resource constraints, there are often lengthy delays between the crime and when the police can gather statements from witnesses <sup>[3][4]</sup>. The length of the delay can affect a witness' ability to recollect, or recall, information about the crime. Research has found that recall is optimal immediately after a witnessed event; but, as the delay between the event and the first recall attempt increases, the number of correct details recalled decreases <sup>[5][6]</sup>. However, research has found that the sooner a witness is interviewed, the fewer details that they will forget about the crime over time <sup>[3]</sup>. This matters because a witness will provide statements several times over the course of justice proceedings, such as recalling the crime to first responders (e.g., human rights defenders, community health volunteers, police, medical personnel), criminal investigators, and jurors in court. Thus, a relatively early interview can preserve the witness' memory for longer, leading to more accurate memory evidence over time.

Interviewing witnesses soon after a crime, however, is challenging even in the best of circumstances (e.g., when a police station, well-trained interviewers, and a secure environment are available) <sup>[7]</sup>. Interviewing in sexual violence cases is especially difficult in conflict settings and contexts where insufficient resources are available for investigations and survivors are stigmatised, such as Kenya <sup>[8]</sup>. To overcome these obstacles, communities in Kenya are documenting sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) incidents using a mobile application. This work is being organised by the Wangu Kanja Foundation (WKF), a Kenyan non-profit organisation that focuses on promoting prevention, protection, and response in ending sexual violence in the country. The vision of the foundation is towards a society that is safe and free from all forms of violence. The WKF convenes the Survivors of Sexual Violence in Kenya Network (hereafter the Network) that brings together survivors of sexual violence, which includes women, men, and children, to amplify their voices towards restoring their dignity and assisting survivors in accessing vital services and justice in a timely manner (e.g., police, medical, safe shelters, and other agencies that promote the safety of the victim).

The WKF has pioneered a mobile phone application (SV\_CaseStudy Mobile Application, herein MobApp) to interview survivors, that allows survivors the opportunity to report and document anonymously should they wish to. Moreover, whilst anyone can utilise MobApp on their own or someone else's mobile device, currently MobApp is primarily being used by the Network, which spans across all 47 counties of Kenya. Members of the Network are sexual violence survivors who are also human rights defenders and community health volunteers, trained in a trauma sensitive manner to respond to incidents of SGBV within their community. The Network is using MobApp to interview survivors, following provision of informed consent, to obtain an early account of violations and track cases across the referral pathway (e.g., health, security, and justice mechanisms). MobApp records are currently held by the WKF; however, a survivor can access them at any point and share them with any involved parties. The

## 2. Memory Preservation over Time

Regardless of whether MobApp included prompts for the survivor to report information about the perpetrator's behaviour, the recall accuracy rate did not decrease over time. Recall accuracy was high immediately after the crime and one week later for those who used MobApp to give an immediate initial account. This finding is in line with previous research findings that an early initial recall attempt preserves memory accuracy across time <sup>[3][9]</sup>. Previous research has found that participants are frequently accurate when they can freely recall details <sup>[10]</sup>. It was found that an initial recall attempt using the community driven MobApp or the modified MobApp+ preserved recall accuracy rates across time, which means in practice that the community can use MobApp to gather accurate and essential details that can further investigations and prosecutions.

While the rate at which participants were accurate did not decrease over time for those who used the mobile application, the total number of details recalled did decrease over time. Specifically, participants in the MobApp condition and the behaviourally enhanced MobApp+ condition recalled more details in total (both correct and incorrect) in their initial recall attempt compared to one week later. These results do not replicate what is typically found in research on the benefit of an early initial recall attempt <sup>[3][11]</sup>. Previous research has found that participants who gave an early initial recall account maintain a similar number of total details recalled at initial test and final test <sup>[3][11]</sup>. The current research may not have replicated these findings for several reasons. First, over the one-week delay period, participants may have become increasingly stringent about the memories they reported, which in turn served to decrease the amount of information they reported, and this helped them maintain accuracy over time <sup>[10]</sup>. Put differently, witnesses may apply a strict reporting criterion, which preserves accuracy, but this comes at the expense of the completeness of the account <sup>[12]</sup>.

It was found that MobApp and MobApp+ led to a higher rate of recall accuracy one week later in comparison to the control group, which did not have an initial recall attempt. The control group represents the situation in most countries, wherein survivors of violence often delay their reporting to the police. The work shows an initial recall attempt using a mobile application immediately after the crime can preserve accuracy, which is vital if survivors elect to report to the police after a delay. Participants in the MobApp+ condition did have the highest accuracy rates on average, albeit this difference was not statistically significant. Thus, it can be tentatively concluded that MobApp+ may potentially lead to the highest rate of accuracy over other known approaches when used by community actors documenting incidents of violence.

## 3. Behaviorally Relevant Details

The use of the mobile applications also led to increased recall accuracy for behaviourally relevant details compared to the control condition, although the difference was not statistically significant. Given these results, we would encourage community organisations to prompt survivors for behaviourally relevant details. First, doing so does not decrease accuracy. Second, behaviourally relevant details can be used to link crimes together, helping to provide evidence and aid investigations to bring serial offenders to apprehension, thus preventing further offences <sup>[13][14][15][16]</sup>. Additionally, behaviourally relevant details can also be important for other types of analyses, such as indicating geographical and temporal crime patterns to inform situational crime prevention strategies. In contexts such as Kenya, where there are limited resources, this information may be strategically important for developing preventative measures, such as increased police or community surveillance at certain times or in certain locations <sup>[17]</sup>.

## 4. Conclusions

It was found that MobApp can preserve recall accuracy over a one-week period. This community-developed tool is also effective in the documentation of information about the perpetrator's behaviour, which can be vital in linking serial crimes. The results are promising for low-resource contexts like Kenya, where communities are seeking to document crimes to illustrate and understand the nature of the violations that are occurring. This research indicates that MobApp preserves memory accuracy over time, which is vital considering that crimes are infrequently reported, and that among those that are reported, there is often a long delay between the crime and adjudication.

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