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Article

Safety Before the Statement: Why the First Response to Sexual Assault Victims Matters

By: Ashley Gray

Ask a room full of law enforcement officers which cases they would rather not work, and sexual assault will usually make the list. The reasons are understandable. These cases can be emotionally difficult, evidentiary questions are often complicated, and victims may not behave or remember events in the way an officer expects.

But that is exactly why the first response matters.

In law enforcement and in the classroom, I have heard some version of the same statement many times: "I could never work those cases." My answer is usually simple: If not you, then who?

For a person reporting sexual assault, contacting law enforcement may mean telling a stranger about one of the most intimate, frightening, and disempowering experiences of their life. Before an officer begins sorting out elements of the offense, timelines, corroboration, or prosecution, something more basic is actually happening. The victim is deciding whether it's safe enough to tell the person sitting across from them what happened.

Table of Contents

1 **ARTCILE:** Safety Before the Statement: Why the First Response to Sexual Assault Victims Matters

7 **ACJS National CJ Month Award Winners**

9 **ARTICLE:** Beyond the Research Paper: Designing Authentic Assessments for Criminal Justice Education

14 **ACJS Journal Articles:** *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, Justice Quarterly, and Justice Evaluation Journal New Articles*

16 **ARTICLE:** Beyond Arrests: Five Strategies New Orleans Needs to Sustain Its Historic Crime Reduction

23 **ARTICLE:** Online Professionalism and the Criminal Justice Education Pipeline

26 **Regional Information**

29 **ARTICLE:** Labeling, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Euphemisms

That sense of safety is not a courtesy added after the real police work. It is part of the police work. A calm, respectful, victim-centered response can reduce avoidable harm, improve the quality of information officers receive, and make it more likely that a victim remains engaged long enough for a thorough investigation to occur.

The Reporting Gap

Sexual violence remains common, while reporting to law enforcement remains comparatively rare. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that 45.1% of US women experienced contact sexual violence during their lifetime, including 21.0% who reported completed or attempted rape. Among men, 16.9% reported lifetime contact sexual violence (Leemis et al., 2025).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated 560,890 rape or sexual assault victimizations in 2024 among persons age 12 or older. Only 23.6% were reported to police. By comparison, 73.4% of robberies and 69.1% of aggravated assaults were reported during the same year (Tapp & Coen, 2025).
Those numbers should make us ask more than, "Why do victims not report?" We also have to ask what victims believe will happen if they do report and what happens after they finally make that call, walk into an agency, or tell an officer what occurred.

The first law enforcement contact cannot undo the assault. It can, however, shape whether the next hour feels like the beginning of help or another experience of losing control.

Safety Comes Before Detail

Police officers are trained to obtain information quickly. We clarify timelines, identify inconsistencies, preserve evidence, locate suspects, and make decisions with incomplete facts. Those skills are necessary. They can also become counterproductive when they are applied too aggressively to a person whose body and mind may still be responding to trauma.

A sexual assault victim may be physically safe by the time police arrive and still not feel safe. They may be sitting in a hospital, patrol car, interview room, residence, or parking lot while remaining hyperalert, embarrassed, fearful, numb, or overwhelmed. A rushed or overly controlling interaction can make it harder to process questions, organize memories, or continue talking.

The Office for Victims of Crime (2020) identifies safety, support, information, access, continuity, voice, and justice as core needs in a victim-centered law enforcement response. Those needs are not separate from investigation. They help create the conditions in which an effective investigation can occur.

For the first responder, this can be remarkably practical. Introduce yourself and explain your role. Tell the victim what is going to happen next. Ask whether the location feels private and safe. Offer reasonable choices when choices exist. Explain why a sensitive question is necessary before asking it. Determine whether medical attention, an advocate, or a brief pause is needed. Avoid making the victim repeat the account unnecessarily.

Sexual assault is an experience in which control has been taken away. When law enforcement can safely return some control—where to sit, whether to pause, who may be present, what the next step will be—we are not being less investigative. We are making it easier for a person to participate in the investigation.

Trauma Does Not Have a Standard Appearance

One of the easiest mistakes to make is believing there is a normal way a victim should behave after sexual assault. There is not.

Some victims cry. Some are angry. Some appear flat or detached. Some laugh nervously. Some want to talk immediately, while others struggle to say very much at all. Some remember sensory fragments before they remember sequence. Some continue communicating with the offender. Some delay reporting. Some minimize what happened even while describing conduct that meets the elements of a serious offense.

None of those behaviors, standing alone, tells us whether an assault occurred.

The National Institute of Justice (2013) has emphasized that trauma can affect memory and recall. Information may emerge slowly or in fragments, and rushing a victim or treating an imperfectly organized account as inherently unreliable can reduce both the quality of the information obtained and the victim's willingness to cooperate.

That does not mean inconsistencies should be ignored. Good investigators notice inconsistencies. They corroborate statements, examine physical and digital evidence, interview witnesses, compare timelines, and test alternative explanations. Trauma-informed practice does not ask officers to suspend critical thinking. It asks us not to make a credibility decision too early based on behavior that may be entirely consistent with trauma.

Inconsistency is something to investigate. It is not, by itself, proof of deception.

How We Ask Matters

Officers frequently ask "why" questions because we need to understand behavior. The problem is that a question can be logically relevant to the officer and still sound accusatory to the person hearing it.

Consider the difference between "Why did you go home with him?" and "Tell me what you remember about how you ended up at his home." The factual issue is the same. The message is not.

"Why didn't you leave?" can become, "What was happening that made it difficult or impossible for you to leave?" "Why did you keep texting him afterward?" can become, "Tell me about your contact with him after the assault."

The US Department of Justice (2022) warns that stereotypes and bias can compromise sexual assault investigations, including when victims are interrogated rather than interviewed or when assumptions about victim behavior influence credibility decisions.

Words matter, but tone and behavior matter just as much. An officer can use technically perfect questions and still communicate disbelief through interruptions, visible impatience, eye-rolling, or an immediate focus on the victim's alcohol use, clothing, prior sexual history, or relationship with the offender.

Victims notice those cues. They quickly learn whether we are listening to understand or listening to challenge them.

Victim-Centered Does Not Mean Uncritical

Some law enforcement professionals hear the term *victim-centered* and worry that it means automatically accepting every allegation as proven. It does not.

Victim-centered describes how we treat the person in front of us. *Objectivity* describes how we evaluate the evidence. We can do both.

Treating a victim with dignity does not determine the outcome of a case. Saying, "I'm sorry this happened to you," is not a legal conclusion. Explaining the process does not compromise neutrality. Allowing a person time to answer does not prevent corroboration. Offering an advocate does not interfere with evidence collection.

Research also suggests that perceptions of procedural fairness matter. In a study examining women's anticipated reporting of sexual assault, procedurally unfair police treatment reduced participants' likelihood of reporting future victimization, while more positive prior perceptions of police were associated with greater willingness to report (Stanek et al., 2023).

That should matter to agencies concerned with both legitimacy and case outcomes. We cannot investigate crimes we never learn about, and we cannot build strong cases when victims disengage because the first interaction made them feel blamed, dismissed, or disbelieved.

What the First Responder Can Do

The first responding officer does not always need a complete investigative interview. In many cases, the immediate priorities are safety, urgent medical needs, preservation of time-sensitive evidence, identification of the suspect, required notifications, and accurate documentation of the initial disclosure.

Then, listen.

Use open-ended prompts before narrowing to necessary details. Allow pauses. Do not fill every silence simply because it is uncomfortable. Tell the victim it is acceptable to say, "I don't know" or "I don't remember." Avoid promising an outcome that cannot be controlled. Before leaving, explain what happens next and who will follow up.

These are not complicated techniques, but they require discipline. They also cannot be reserved only for detectives or specialized units. The patrol officer, dispatcher, supervisor, hospital officer, campus officer, and investigator all contribute to a victim's understanding of what "the system" is.

If Not You, Then Who?

When someone says, "I could never work sexual assault cases," I understand what they mean. These cases are hard. They require patience when we are accustomed to speed, restraint when we want immediate answers, and empathy without giving up investigative objectivity.

But victims do not get to choose whether the worst thing that happened to them is comfortable for us to hear.

When a person finally tells law enforcement what happened, they do not need the responding officer to be their therapist. They do not need promises. They do not need us to decide the entire case during the first conversation.

They need us to be competent, calm, respectful, and safe.

The criminal justice process will eventually ask difficult questions. It should. Evidence must be tested. Accounts must be corroborated. The rights of the accused matter. Prosecutors must decide whether the evidence can prove a case.

None of those responsibilities requires us to make the first interaction harder than it already is.

For many sexual assault victims, the first officer they

meet becomes the face of the entire justice system. The way that officer responds can influence whether the victim keeps talking, returns a detective's call, follows through with a forensic examination, participates in later interviews, or ever contacts law enforcement again.

Safety is not separate from the investigation. Sometimes, it is where the investigation begins.

Author note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Department of Veterans Affairs or the VA Law Enforcement Training Center.

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MIDWESTERN CRIMINAL JUSTICE ASSOCIATION

Call for Editor of the *Journal of Crime and Justice*

The Midwestern Criminal Justice Association (MCJA) invites applications for the position of Editor of the *Journal of Crime and Justice* (JC&J) – the official publication of the Association. Published five (5) times per year, JC&J is a peer-reviewed publication that features original research addressing current and emerging issues of criminal justice and criminology. The journal welcomes diverse approaches and seeks research that make a clear contribution to the field and has relevance for the broader criminology and criminal justice community, including implications for policy and practice.

The Editor shall be responsible for the preparation, publication, and distribution of JC&J. The Editor will serve a term of four (4) years, with the possibility of renewal for up to three (3) consecutive terms. It is anticipated that an applicant will be selected by March 31, 2027. The incoming Editor will then work with the current Editor (Jennifer Peck, University of Central Florida) to develop a transition plan, with the transition beginning in August 2027. During the transition, the incoming Editor will serve as Co-Editor with the current Editor and begin training the Managing Editor. The current Editor will retain responsibility for all manuscripts received during their editorship and will make final editorial decisions on those manuscripts through the completion of the editorial process (expected through the end of 2027). The incoming Editor will officially assume the position on September 30, 2027.

Applicants eligible for this position will have the following qualifications:

1. An earned PhD in criminal justice or a closely related field;
2. A demonstrated record of scholarly activity and contributions to the field of criminal justice/criminology;
3. A sustained record of scholarly publication in peer-reviewed outlets;
4. Support from the applicant's host institution(s) confirming institutional resources and services that will be provided to support the editorship, including the provision of a Managing Editor;
5. A Regular Member in good standing of the Association who will maintain Regular Member status throughout their term as Editor.

Applications must include:

1. A cover letter of application outlining the applicant's interest in the position and summarizing their relevant qualifications and experience.
2. A separate, detailed statement addressing the applicant's qualifications for the position, including:
    a. Academic credentials and scholarly experience;
    b. Demonstrated record of scholarly activity and contributions to the field of criminal justice/criminology;
    c. Sustained record of peer-reviewed publications;
    d. Prior journal editorial experience;
    e. Prior experience with MCJA; and
    f. Vision, goals, and priorities for the journal during editorship
3. A letter of support from the host institution(s) that will describe supportive services that the institution(s) will commit to the editorship and provision of a Managing Editor;
4. Curriculum Vitae

The Executive Board may request additional materials from applicants as needed during the selection process.

Applications (combined into one PDF file) must be emailed to mcja@mcja.org with the subject line "Application for JC&J Editor" by 11:59 PM (CST) on **February 20, 2027.**

Questions may be directed to the MCJA Executive Board at mcja@mcja.org.

Compensation:

- $5,000 honorarium (disbursed at the MCJA Conference annually following the first year of Editorship)
- $2,000 travel expense reimbursement (required annual approval from Executive Board)

ACJS National CJ Month Award Winners

In 2009, the United States Congress established March as National Criminal Justice Month (NCJM). The purpose of NCJM is to promote awareness of the causes and consequences of crime, as well as strategies for preventing and responding to crime. Each year, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) invites colleges and universities to submit their National Criminal Justice Month programming in March for consideration for NCJM awards. Awards recognize outstanding Education, Community Engagement, and Program of the Year initiatives, although awards are not necessarily presented in every category each year.
At this year's 2026 ACJS meeting held in Philadelphia, two universities were recognized for their outstanding National Criminal Justice Month programming (fy 2025) and their efforts to engage their communities in conversations about criminal justice. Congratulations to St. Joseph's University and the University of Louisville.

Program of the Year Award – St. Joseph's University

During National Criminal Justice Month 2025, St. Joseph's University, New York's Criminal Justice Department engaged more than 200 students across its Brooklyn and Long Island campuses through 12 events focused on criminal justice education, professional development, community engagement, and experiential learning. In partnership with the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York, the Suffolk County Sheriff's Intelligence Bureau, Suffolk County Jail, legal professionals, alumni, and other criminal justice agencies, students gained firsthand exposure to federal court proceedings, human trafficking intelligence and prevention, correctional operations, legal careers, and a range of criminal justice professions. The month's programming also included workshops, guest speakers, career and internship activities, and events highlighting women's contributions to the field. Collectively, these experiences extended criminal justice education beyond the traditional classroom, providing students with opportunities to engage directly with practitioners, develop professional networks, explore career pathways, and deepen their understanding of the criminal justice system.





Community Engagement Award – University of Louisville

During National Criminal Justice Month 2025, the University of Louisville's Criminal Justice Department engaged more than 70 students through seven events organized around the theme "Cops, Courts, and Community." Developed with support from the university's Alpha Phi Sigma chapter, the programming connected students directly with criminal justice practitioners and community resources while emphasizing practical ways students could contribute to the safety and well-being of their communities. Students engaged with the University of Louisville Police Department and Secret Service, toured a forensic investigations laboratory, learned about legal careers and drug courts, and participated in hands-on training through the university's Building Resilience in Campus Community office on opioid overdose response, Narcan use, and harm-reduction strategies. The programming extended beyond traditional classroom instruction by giving students opportunities to interact with practitioners, develop practical skills, better understand criminal justice responses within their communities, and consider their own roles and responsibilities as future criminal justice professionals. A "Criminal Justice Passport" encouraged sustained participation across the month while also documenting student engagement with the seven events.

Beyond the Research Paper: Designing Authentic Assessments for Criminal Justice Education

By: Amanda Willows & Brandi Davis Westmoreland

Who Do We Want Our Students to Be?

Knowing something and being able to do it are not the same thing. A student can describe de-escalation strategies perfectly on paper and still freeze, or fumble, the first time they actually have to use them. That gap matters a lot in criminal justice education, where graduates will be the ones making consequential calls, talking to people who are scared or angry, and exercising judgment when there's no time to look up the "right" answer.

Holsinger and Arbuthnot Clancey (2019) put it simply: Who do we actually want our criminal justice students to be by the time they graduate? Answering that means figuring out what students should know, what they should be able to do, and what they should value. And it raises the assessment question that follows naturally: What would we actually need to see a student do to believe they are becoming that person?

That question has gotten more urgent with generative AI in the picture. AI can write a polished, plausible answer to almost any academic prompt you hand it. But producing an answer has never been the same thing as demonstrating learning; AI just made that gap easier to paper over. So the job for faculty is to design assessments that still show us what a student can actually do with what they know.

Authentic assessment is one way to do that: put students in a realistic professional role, make them make decisions, and see what happens.

The CJCB 305 Assessment: From Knowing to Doing

Here's what that looks like in practice. CJCB 305: Communication is built around oral and written communication for criminal justice professionals: talking to the public, the media, court officials, and law enforcement. Students work on public speaking, professional writing, and de-escalation, and the course pushes them to actually use those skills in realistic situations, not just write about them.

The culminating assessment puts students in the role of a police chief responding to a tense incident involving officer conduct and community concern. They have to handle the same incident twice, for two different audiences. First, a three- to five-minute recorded press conference for the public and media: they need to explain what the department is doing, while showing professionalism, reading their nonverbal cues, and de-escalating rather than inflaming the situation. Then, a one-page internal memo to department personnel, covering the same incident but with a completely different job to do: informing staff, setting expectations for officer conduct, managing an internal audience rather than a public one.

Using the same incident for both is the whole point. The public and department staff need different information, and the student, now acting as chief, has to figure out what to say, how to say it, and what their role actually requires in each setting. That's where the "knowing vs. doing" gap tends to show up. Plenty of students can define de-escalation and professionalism perfectly well in a discussion post. Fewer can keep their own reaction

out of a public statement, shift their tone convincingly between audiences, or decide on the spot what's appropriate to share and what isn't. The strongest responses show more than accuracy. You can see the student's restraint and awareness of the audience, along with the judgment behind the choices they make.

A traditional research paper is still useful. It shows whether a student can find sources, synthesize an argument, and write clearly: all real skills. But it answers a different question than "can this person actually communicate like a professional under pressure?" This assessment is built to answer that second question by making students take responsibility for how they communicate and the choices they make while doing it.

Holsinger and Arbuthnot Clancey (2019) frame this as asking what students can "exhibit, accomplish, or perform," not just explain. That's the real shift: *from what does the student know about professional communication to what would convince us they can actually do it.* The CJCB 305 assessment brings several kinds of evidence together. Students have to apply what they know while thinking on their feet. They communicate in writing and aloud, make ethical choices about what they say, and adjust their approach for two very different audiences. Colvin and Hartley (2026) found something similar when they replaced a written reflection with a live, dialogic role-play assessment in a criminal justice capstone course: a student "handing over" their job to an incoming officer or caseworker. They found that the real-time, in-role format surfaced students' critical reflection and judgment in ways the written version had not. Changing what students were asked to do changed what instructors were able to see.

Authenticity comes from what the assessment asks students to do, not from making an assignment superficially resemble the workplace. In this case, the situation makes students' thinking and judgment visible. A great paper about professional communication still does not prove that someone can communicate professionally.

What Changes in the Age of AI?

Generative AI makes it a lot harder to ignore the difference between an answer and evidence of learning. AI can already draft a press statement, suggest a de-escalation approach, or explain communication principles, and do it well (Xia et al., 2024). A student could hand both parts of this assessment to an AI tool and get back something polished and professional sounding. But polish doesn't tell you what the student can actually do.

That does not mean the answer is banning AI outright. AI tools are already part of the professional landscape students are entering, so learning to use them responsibly may genuinely be part of their professional training. What matters more is whether the assessment shows us what the students can do.

In CJCB 305, much of the evidence comes from seeing the student perform the role. Can the student deliver the message convincingly? Shift their communication for a different audience? Make choices about what information belongs in a public statement and what belongs in an internal memo? AI can generate a draft, but it cannot stand at the podium or take responsibility for what is said.

Designing for Demonstration

You do not need to build an elaborate simulation for every assignment to get at this. Start with a much smaller question: what would someone actually *do* with this knowledge?

That question opens up a few more. What would a professional in this situation actually be asked to

do? Who are they talking to? What decisions are on the line, and where does judgment come in? What evidence would let you see those abilities?

Sometimes the fix is small. Instead of asking students to describe how an officer should talk to a victim or a colleague, have them write or deliver that communication. Instead of analyzing an ethical dilemma from the outside, have them make the call and defend it. Let a scenario shift midway through, so they have to reconsider a decision they already made. Or, like CJCB 305, make them handle the same situation for two different audiences. Small changes like these force students to apply what they know instead of just handing it back to you.

They also open the door to something research papers rarely allow: real feedback and a second try. Nobody walks into a professional role already knowing how to navigate every hard conversation. When students can attempt a professional task, receive feedback, and try it again, the assessment becomes part of the learning rather than simply a judgment at the end of it. The classroom gives students a place to get it wrong, learn why, and try again before the stakes are real.

The Bottom Line

We cannot recreate every situation our students will eventually face, and we should not try. But we can give them a low-stakes place to practice the hard calls—talking to different audiences, sitting with ambiguity, making a judgment call and living with it—before those calls actually count.

Holsinger and Arbuthnot Clancey asked who we want our students to be by graduation. At a moment when producing a convincing answer has never been easier, the better question might be simpler still: What do we need to see them do along the way to believe they are becoming that person? If we want graduates who can do the work, our assessments have to let them practice doing it first.

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Thai Adults' Knowledge and Awareness of Legal Rights and Access to Assistance Under the Thailand Justice Fund: Implications for the Implementation of a Rights-Based Approach
Wanaporn Techagaisiyavanit & Sutham Cheurprakobkit
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Beyond Arrests: Five Strategies New Orleans Needs to Sustain Its Historic Crime Reduction

By: Christopher A. Williams

Introduction

New Orleans is experiencing a public safety transformation that would have seemed difficult to imagine only a few years ago. After confronting an alarming increase in violence during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, the city has recorded substantial reductions in homicide, nonfatal shootings, armed robbery, and carjacking. The New Orleans Police Department reported in July 2026 that these four categories of violent crime combined had declined approximately 70% compared with the first six months of 2022.

The numbers are encouraging. However, criminal justice professionals should ask a more difficult question: **How does New Orleans make these reductions permanent?**

The answer cannot simply be more arrests.

Arrest is an essential component of law enforcement, particularly when dealing with individuals responsible for serious and repetitive violence. But sustainable crime reduction requires a broader strategy. Police departments must identify the people, places, behaviors, and environmental conditions associated with violence and intervene before the next crime occurs.

New Orleans should, therefore, build its next phase of crime reduction around five interconnected strategies: **intelligence-led and place-based policing; concentrating resources on repeat violent offenders; strengthening police community partnerships; investing in prevention and youth intervention; and creating a permanent research partnership between criminal justice agencies and universities.**

Strategy One: Intelligence-Led and Place-Based Policing

Traditional policing frequently emphasizes responding to calls after crimes occur. Modern policing must increasingly anticipate where serious violence is most likely to occur and strategically deploy resources before that violence happens.

Crime is not distributed evenly across a city. A relatively small number of locations can account for a disproportionate amount of criminal activity. Likewise, violent incidents often cluster around particular individuals, groups, disputes, businesses, abandoned properties, poorly illuminated areas, or recurring environmental conditions.

This makes data one of law enforcement's most important resources.

New Orleans should continue strengthening the use of crime mapping, real-time intelligence, license plate readers where legally and appropriately deployed, surveillance evidence, ballistic intelligence, investigative databases, and analytical technology. Technology should not replace officers. It should help officers make better decisions.

The city's current administration has already incorporated this philosophy into its public safety approach. New Orleans' Data Informed Community Engagement initiative uses risk-terrain modeling to identify vulnerable locations and

connect public safety with environmental improvements. Such an approach recognizes something criminal justice researchers have long understood: the physical environment can influence opportunities for crime.

A dark street, abandoned structure, overgrown property, repeatedly unsecured business, or poorly maintained public space can become more than a quality-of-life concern. Under the right conditions, it can become a crime opportunity.

Therefore, public safety should involve more than sending additional patrol cars into high-crime areas. City departments responsible for lighting, code enforcement, blight, transportation, recreation, sanitation, and economic development should become active participants in crime prevention.

Strategy Two: Concentrate Resources on Repeat Violent Offenders

One of the greatest mistakes a criminal justice system can make is treating every offender as though he or she presents the same risk to the community.

They do not.

A person arrested for a minor, nonviolent offense should not necessarily receive the same enforcement attention as an individual repeatedly associated with shootings, armed robberies, illegal firearms, violent groups, or retaliatory violence.

The objective should be **precision rather than saturation.**

Focused enforcement allows police, prosecutors, courts, probation and parole agencies, and federal partners to concentrate their limited resources on the individuals presenting the greatest threat to public safety. New Orleans has previously incorporated focused enforcement and intelligence-based deployment into its violence-reduction strategies.

This approach also has an important benefit for police-community relations. A department does not have to choose between aggressive crime reduction and constitutional, community-oriented policing. By concentrating resources on the relatively small number of individuals driving serious violence, law enforcement can avoid unnecessary enforcement contacts with residents who pose little public safety risk.

The criminal justice system must also improve information sharing. When an individual arrested for a serious violent offense has pending cases, prior violent convictions, probation or parole obligations, outstanding warrants, or documented involvement in recurring violence, decision-makers throughout the system should have timely access to accurate information.

Accountability must be swift, lawful, and proportional.

Strategy Three: Turn Community Trust into a Crime-Fighting Resource

Law enforcement agencies often discuss community trust as though it were primarily a public relations objective. It is much more than that.

Trust is an investigative resource.

Police officers rarely witness homicides, shootings, armed robberies, and carjackings as they occur. Investigators frequently depend on residents, witnesses, business owners, victims, surveillance systems, and community relationships to reconstruct what happened.

When residents trust the criminal justice system, they

are more likely to report suspicious behavior, provide information, turn over video evidence, identify offenders, and participate in prosecutions.

When they distrust the system, information disappears.

Community policing, therefore, should not be limited to occasional meetings or public events. Every police district should maintain a measurable community engagement strategy. Officers should know neighborhood leaders, clergy, school officials, business owners, apartment managers, nonprofit organizations, and residents before a major crime occurs.

Police departments should also communicate successes to communities. When residents provide information that helps solve a serious crime, law enforcement should, without compromising investigations, demonstrate that community cooperation produces results. At the same time, residents have responsibilities. Citizens must report crimes. Parents must know what their children are doing. Gun owners must secure firearms. Property owners should maintain adequate lighting and surveillance when possible. Businesses should preserve video evidence. Neighborhood organizations should communicate recurring problems to district commanders. Witnesses with information about violent offenses should use available reporting systems, including anonymous channels when appropriate. Public safety is strongest when citizens view themselves not merely as consumers of police services but as partners in crime prevention.

Strategy Four: Treat Youth Violence as a Prevention Challenge

If New Orleans wants to reduce crime for one year, it can concentrate primarily on enforcement.

If New Orleans wants to reduce crime for a generation, it must invest in young people.

Juvenile crime is among the most complicated issues facing American cities because it sits at the intersection of criminal justice, education, family stability, poverty, mental health, peer influence, neighborhood conditions, and opportunity.

The solution cannot be simply choosing between punishment and rehabilitation.

Young people who commit serious violent offenses must be held accountable. Public safety requires it. However, accountability and rehabilitation are not mutually exclusive.

New Orleans should expand early intervention systems capable of identifying young people experiencing chronic absenteeism, repeated school suspensions, juvenile justice involvement, exposure to violence, homelessness, family instability, or association with violent peer groups.

Intervention should include mentoring, tutoring, behavioral health services, conflict resolution programs, summer employment, recreation, vocational training, college exposure, and structured after-school activities.

Universities can become particularly important partners.

Southern University at New Orleans and other local institutions possess faculty expertise, students seeking internships, researchers capable of program evaluation, and facilities that can host educational and community programs. Criminal justice education should extend beyond the classroom and become part of the city's violence-prevention infrastructure.

A teenager who sees a realistic path toward

college, employment, entrepreneurship, public service, or a skilled trade has something meaningful to protect.

Strategy Five: Create a Permanent Criminal Justice Research Partnership

New Orleans generates enormous amounts of criminal justice data, but collecting information is not the same as learning from it.

The city should establish a permanent **New Orleans Criminal Justice Research Collaborative** involving NOPD, the District Attorney's Office, Sheriff's Office, courts, probation and parole, juvenile justice agencies, universities, community organizations, and independent researchers.

The collaborative should continuously evaluate one central question:

What is working, what is not working, and why?

Every major crime-reduction initiative should contain measurable performance indicators. If a youth intervention program receives public funding, researchers should examine whether participants subsequently experience lower arrest or victimization rates. If police concentrate resources in a particular area, analysts should determine whether crime declined or simply moved elsewhere. If technology is purchased, officials should determine whether it improves clearance rates or response times sufficiently to justify its cost.

Research should also examine disparities.

Crime reduction strategies must be evaluated not only by the number of arrests they generate but by whether they reduce victimization fairly, constitutionally, and efficiently.

Universities are uniquely positioned to provide this independent analysis. Faculty researchers and graduate students can conduct program evaluations, analyze crime trends, survey residents, study recidivism, and compare New Orleans strategies with evidence from other American cities.

Such partnerships would also create valuable experiential learning opportunities for criminal justice students and the future police officers, attorneys, researchers, probation officers, federal agents, administrators, and policymakers who will eventually inherit responsibility for the system.

The Evidence Gives New Orleans an Opportunity

New Orleans now has something many cities desperately want: momentum.

As of August 2, 2026, the Metropolitan Crime Commission reported **51 homicide victims**, 31% fewer than at the same point in 2025 and 71% fewer than in 2022. The city had recorded **92 nonfatal shooting incidents**, representing a 67% reduction since 2022.

Carjackings stood at 38–79% below the comparable 2022 figure, while armed robberies stood at 110, approximately 68% below the 2022 level.

These are extraordinary reductions.

But the data also provide a warning. Carjackings were essentially unchanged compared with the same period of 2025, and armed robberies were only slightly lower. Crime does not decline uniformly, and yesterday's successful strategy may not automatically solve tomorrow's problem.

That is why public officials should resist declaring victory.

Measuring Success Differently

Police departments have traditionally measured productivity through arrests, citations, calls for service, response times, and reported crime. Those measures remain useful, but modern criminal justice systems should ask broader questions.

Are fewer people being shot?

Are fewer residents becoming victims?

Are homicide cases being solved?

Are repeat violent offenders being identified earlier?

Do residents feel safer?

Are young people who participate in intervention programs less likely to enter the criminal justice system?

Are neighborhoods previously associated with violence experiencing sustainable improvement?

Those are ultimately more meaningful measures of public safety.

New Orleans' experience should remind policymakers of a basic principle: **The objective of policing is not to produce arrests. The objective is to produce public safety.**

An arrest can be one means of accomplishing that objective, but it is not the objective itself.

Conclusion

New Orleans has achieved a remarkable decline in serious violence. The New Orleans Police Department reported that homicides, nonfatal shootings, carjackings, and armed robberies combined fell approximately 70% when the first six months of 2026 were compared with the same period in 2022.

That progress should be recognized. It should also be studied. The next chapter in New Orleans' crime reduction should move beyond asking how many people police arrested and begin asking how effectively the entire community prevented victimization.

That requires intelligence-led policing. It requires focusing resources on the people and places responsible for disproportionate violence. It requires genuine community partnerships. It requires investing in young people before they enter the criminal justice system. And it requires universities and criminal justice agencies to rigorously evaluate what works.

As a former law enforcement executive and now a criminal justice educator, I believe policing is strongest when experience and research inform one another. The practitioner understands what happens on the street. The scholar asks why it happens and whether our response works. New Orleans needs both perspectives.

The decline in violent crime proves that change is possible.

The challenge now is not simply to celebrate lower crime.

The challenge is to understand it, sustain it, and build upon it.

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Dr. Christopher A. Williams is a distinguished law-enforcement professional, military veteran, educator, author, and community leader whose career reflects more than three decades of public service. He has 33 years of law-enforcement experience, including serving twice as Chief of Police, where he provided executive leadership, organizational oversight, and a commitment to community-centered public safety. In addition to his law enforcement career, Dr. Williams devoted 33 years of service to the United States Army, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to leadership, discipline, and service to others.

Dr. Williams is also a dedicated scholar and educator committed to preparing the next generation of criminal justice professionals and leaders. He holds an Ed.D. in Higher Education Leadership from Nova Southeastern University and has extensive experience teaching criminal justice at the university level. He is especially proud to have graduated as a member of the inaugural Master of Arts in Criminal Justice class at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) in 1998, an institution where he now serves as an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice. Dr. Williams is also the author of the award-winning book, Breaking the Chains to Corrections, which examines corrections, reentry, recidivism, and approaches to creating meaningful opportunities for individuals returning to their communities.

Beyond the classroom and law enforcement, Dr. Williams has remained actively engaged in civic and community service. In 2024, he was elected to the Orleans Parish Democratic Executive Committee (OPDEC) and currently serves as its Sergeant-at-Arms. Throughout his professional and personal journey, his leadership philosophy has been grounded in faith, education, service, integrity, and the belief that leadership carries a responsibility to improve the lives of others. Whether serving his country, leading a police department, educating students, writing about criminal justice reform, or contributing to his community, Dr. Williams continues to embrace a life centered on service, scholarship, leadership, and leaving a legacy for future generations.

Dr. Williams believes titles or positions do not measure leadership; leadership is measured by the lives we touch and the positive difference we leave behind.

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ACJS encourages all eligible graduate and undergraduate students to take advantage of this opportunity offered by the **American Correctional Association** to gain recognition for their scholarly work and engage actively with academic and practitioner communities.

Online Professionalism and the Criminal Justice Education Pipeline

By: Regan R. Reid

Abstract

Online professionalism has become a key marker of graduate employability, though few scholars have asked what it means specifically for students entering criminal justice careers. Lapses in how students conduct themselves online are often treated as classroom management issues. Still, for future justice practitioners, the stakes run higher: these are the professionals who will one day exercise discretion over people's liberty, work that depends on public trust to carry any credibility. Drawing on instructors' observations of student conduct since the pandemic, the argument here is straightforward. Professionalism must be taught, not assumed, and the responsibility for that teaching sits with the institution, not the student alone. Two interventions follow from that: netiquette rubrics built into every syllabus, and orientation modules that model professional conduct before students are ever graded on it. Institutional policy needs to back both. The question beneath it all is simple: What standard of professional conduct is higher education actually prepared to hold its future justice practitioners to?

Keywords: online professionalism, criminal justice education, netiquette, higher education policy, student conduct

Online Professionalism and the Criminal Justice Education Pipeline

Professionalism most commonly refers to how someone conducts themselves in a professional role: attitudes, behaviors, and qualities such as competence, integrity, and respect, among other markers of appropriateness and emotional intelligence (Abenido, n.d.. Much remains to be understood, though, about how criminal justice students' lack of online professionalism may impede their future effectiveness as professionals or contribute to decisions that are inimical to social justice, national security, and societal progress. Drawing on instructors' post-pandemic reports on students' online professionalism, O'Dea and Zhou (2023 recommended that managing student behavior requires policymaking. The authors argued that institutions must first define acceptable behavior in formal online settings before making judgments about which behaviors count as "inappropriate." Their argument frames much of what follows here. Their article does not address the justice professions specifically. Still, one long-term risk deserves more attention than institutions currently give it: a sustained erosion of online professionalism among justice studies students could, over the years, harden into a broader erosion of public respect for the professions themselves. The people who eventually become justice-involved bear that cost most directly because their liberty and punishment often ride on the judgment and credibility of the practitioners deciding their cases.

Online professionalism is increasingly a vital attribute of graduate employability (Castrillon, 2021; O'Dea & Zhou, 2023, yet many of today's students entered higher education after years of pandemic-induced isolation, with little exposure to the ordinary courtesies that once defined face-to-face professional life. Educators cannot take for granted that students already know how to behave professionally online; that understanding has to be taught and modeled deliberately. The task for institutions, then, is to build a professional culture into online learning itself, one that accounts for the

fact that many students were socialized in digital spaces governed by very different norms.

When there is no clear standard of practice, students struggle to develop professionally in any meaningful sense, and lecturers are left with little basis for holding them accountable, so some resort to acting arbitrarily to have something to point to. The result, too often, is a student who graduates credentialed but hollow: able to practice, but not equipped to make a difference. An online classroom that only delivers content misses half the job; it also needs to be a space where students rehearse the professional behaviors their field expects. For justice studies students specifically, that starts with the basics: respectful communication, accountability, and a sense of public trust.

Anecdotally, some lecturers describe student behavior as apathetic at best and disrespectful at worst, with little sign of improvement from one cohort to the next. The complaints tend to cluster around a familiar set of habits: students who log in late without a word of acknowledgment, who show up under usernames that have no business in a classroom, who write emails the way they would text a friend. Others rarely participate, multitask through lectures, or arrive unprepared altogether. Then there are more serious lapses: plagiarism, an overreliance on (and misuse of) AI tools, flagrant cheating, and, in some cases, lying to instructors outright. Taken together, these patterns suggest that students' professional etiquette, netiquette, and decorum have not kept pace with what their future fields will demand.

This stark reality compels educators to confront a hard truth: Standards of professional and academic conduct have shifted—in some cases, utterly inverted. Part of the explanation may be that education is worth less to students than it used to be, treated less as a competitive opportunity than as a means to a paycheck or a promotion. However, there is a more generous reading, too: A generation shaped by informal online subcultures may be desensitized, having absorbed performative engagement as a substitute for the discipline that academic and professional spaces once required. That is the version worth building policy around because it points to something fixable, a pedagogical gap, rather than a permanent shift in values.

Competence and capacity may be at stake here, and for justice studies students, the question is not an abstract one. These are people who will one day assess risk and make time-pressured judgment calls that shape someone's liberty or custody. Habits of inattention, evasiveness, or performative engagement do not just vanish at graduation if nobody addresses them in the classroom first; they travel with the student into the field, where the cost of the same inattention is no longer a lower grade but someone's liberty. That gap between how a student appears and how they actually perform is not a minor pedagogical concern. It is becoming a pipeline problem for the justice sector as a whole, and institutions need to weigh students' acquisition of knowledge against their development of the behaviors, judgment, and ethical standards that the job actually demands.

Beyond workplace etiquette, professionalism includes the judgment that lets students exercise discretion responsibly and protect the justice system's integrity. None of that is something a student arrives at the institutions with. It is built through conditioning and repetition, yet many students have never been told, in any explicit way, what constitutes professional versus unprofessional online behavior. Closing that gap takes deliberate pedagogical design: netiquette taught as one piece of professionalism (not a stand-in for the broader judgment professionalism requires), with real curricular space for students to practice it over time. A syllabus-embedded rubric in a modest way to

start, covering topics such as attendance acknowledgment, camera and username conventions, and participation expectations. Pair that with a first-week orientation module, built jointly by administrators and facilitators, that shows students what professional conduct looks like before they are ever graded on it. None of this works, though, without institutional backing. University policy, at both the course and institutional levels, must specify the disciplinary strategies that maintain orderly, safe online learning.

These are not just administrative safeguards. They are a referendum on the kind of professionals higher education is willing to send into the world because every standard left unenforced quietly becomes the new one. Years into recovery from the disruptions of the pandemic, higher education and the criminal justice system both have room to be rebuilt with more intention than before. The real question is what we are teaching the next generation to expect, and whether we are ready for what happens if we never get around to setting a standard at all.

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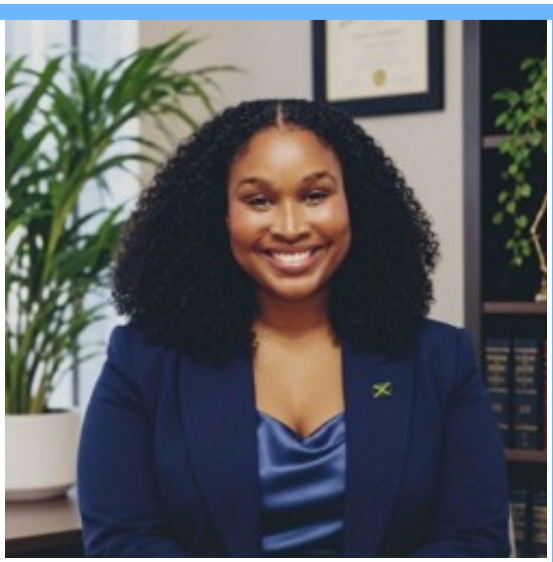
Dr. Regan R. Reid is an emerging Jamaican criminologist, researcher, and educator specialising in juvenile justice, delinquency prevention, and evidence-informed criminal justice policy and reform. She is a full-time faculty member in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of the Commonwealth Caribbean. She holds a Ph.D. in Juvenile Justice from Prairie View A&M University, where she was a faculty-nominated candidate for the Most Outstanding Dissertation Graduate Student Award (2023-2024).



Beyond academia, Dr. Reid is a published author and contributes to research and policy development through her consultancy and work with the Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CAPRI). Her research on evidence-based delinquency prevention among girls in Jamaica earned first place in CAPRI's Pitch for Peace competition, recognising her work on an important and often overlooked dimension of youth justice.

Dr. Reid's research interests include adverse childhood experiences, juvenile delinquency prevention, firearms and gun violence, mental health, substance abuse, and the ethical implications of artificial intelligence in criminal and youth justice.

At the core of her work is a commitment to translating research into meaningful action. She seeks to advance evidence-informed policies and practices that prevent delinquency, strengthen justice systems, and expand opportunities for marginalized young people.

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Labeling, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Euphemisms

By: Jerry Ratcliffe

The February 2026 issue of the criminology discipline's flagship journal, *Criminology,* introduced us to a new euphemism intended to spare the reputational anxieties and discomfort of those apprehensive about negative characterization: PWSF. I'm not sure how many incarcerated drug dealers are regular readers of *Criminology*, but rest assured, the abbreviation PWSF ensures that "people who sell fentanyl" can read all about their admirable harm reduction practices without the associated stigma or criminal connotations.

In "'It's Such a Terrible Drug': Narratives of Fentanyl Dealers Amid the Opioid Overdose Crisis," Schwehr and Bucerius (2026) embraced the journal's person-first language, but they took a rather confrontational stance by occasionally peppering their article about PWSFs with the term dealer. Fortunately, the trauma was offset by the dealers—sorry, I guess I should say "currently indisposed brand ambassadors"—in question learning that they "demonstrated a heightened sense of responsibility for mitigating harm, whether through harm reduction efforts or accepting moral and legal accountability." Legal accountability is probably easier to accept when interviewed in prison. They can while away the time reading about how they "maintain a positive self-image" and use narratives "as tools for managing societal stigma and internal guilt."

In 2024, about 48,000 people died of opioid overdoses in the United States ("Fentanyl Continues to be the Leading Cause" 2025). This number does not include the substantial number of participants and innocent bystanders killed or seriously injured in turf battles related to drug dealing... sorry, I should say RPRA (recreational pharmaceutical retail activity).

By comparison, filtering the *Washington Post* police shootings database found 29 unarmed victims of fatal police shootings in the US in the same year, stemming from more than 80 million police interactions with the community (16+) (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2024). While every police-involved death is a tragedy, there are orders of magnitude difference with the tens of thousands of opioid deaths.

Is the field of criminology equally magnanimous in protecting the feelings of the many police officers who study criminology? Officers and their families can read scholarly language about "brutal police behavior against communities of color, and a lack of professional accountability in the wake of police violence" (Beardall, 2022). Alternatively, "police" (not apparently people who do law enforcement, or people who work in public safety) can learn—probably to their surprise—that they "criminalize minoritized communities" through "harassing, arresting, brutalizing, shooting, and killing Black individuals" (Henson & Blount-Hill, 2025). If even that restrained wordsmithing is too triggering, they can pop over to the lauded *Annual Review of Criminology* to read how their work trying to prevent crime has "its origins in colonialism, slavery, and class warfare," is "invasive," permeated by racism, "aggressive, punitive," "deals in and dispenses violence," "contribute to gentrification," reinforces "fear-based policing," engages in "segregation policing," enacts "slow violence," or that police "harms constitute cultural trauma and shape health, well-being, academic performance, government,

participation, community membership, and physical space" (Kramer & Remster, 2022). One can only wonder how this paragraph would have read if the authors had not been so sensitive in pulling their punches, as in Schwehr and Bucerius.

The lesson seems clear. In contemporary criminology, the gravest victim of the opioid crisis may not be the overdose victim, the grieving relatives, or the community ravaged by addiction and associated violence and crime, but the self-esteem of the person embracing their "plucky grassroots entrepreneurialism." Selling a substance associated with tens of thousands of deaths annually is unfortunate, certainly, but describing the seller too directly risks stigma, and there are standards to maintain. Accordingly, drug dealers become "people who sell fentanyl," their narratives are treated with interpretive generosity, their accounts are presumed sincere, and their efforts to avoid killing customers are presented as evidence of moral responsibility.

Police officers, by contrast, can apparently absorb unlimited amounts of stigmatizing language without adverse consequences. Their occupation may be characterized as colonialist, violent, racist, trauma-inducing, oppressive, harmful, corrosive to democracy, brutalizing, and destructive of communities, all without triggering the slightest concern about labeling, stereotyping, or reputational harm. The emerging rule seems elegantly simple: the more directly an individual contributes to crime, victimization, and death, the more carefully their dignity must be protected; the more directly an individual attempts to prevent crime, victimization, and death, the more freely they may be described in person-last language as a source of harm. Criminology spent decades warning society about the dangers of labeling. It now appears that the real problem was never the labels themselves, but rather who was being labeled.

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Jerry Ratcliffe is a professor of practice and faculty director of the Master of Applied Criminology and Police Leadership in the Department of Criminology at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a former police officer, a scientific advisor to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and host of the popular Reducing Crime podcast. After an ice-climbing accident ended an 11-year career with London's Metropolitan Police, he earned a PhD from the University of Nottingham. He then coordinated Australia's National Strategic Intelligence course before moving to academia in the US in 2003.

In Australia, he ran graduate programs in criminal intelligence and worked as a senior research analyst with the Australian Institute of Criminology, where he conducted one of the first evaluations of an intelligence-led policing operation. Since moving to Philadelphia, Ratcliffe has twice been awarded the Professional Service Award for outstanding contributions to criminal intelligence by the International Association of Law Enforcement Intelligence Analysts (IALEIA). In 2010 he received the Distinguished Service Award from the Association of Law Enforcement Intelligence Units (LEIU), and in 2014 the Ronald V. Clarke ECCA award for contributions to crime analysis.

Ratcliffe has published over 120 research articles and related publications, and ten books, including: Intelligence-Led Policing; Reducing Crime: A Companion for Police Leaders; and in 2023 Evidence-Based Policing: The Basics. His studies have examined shootings in Philadelphia, drug market investigations in New Jersey, gang intelligence in Central America, and FBI anti-gang operations in Los Angeles. He has led numerous experiments, including the Philadelphia Predictive Policing Experiment and the Philadelphia Foot Patrol Experiment, the latter winning a research award from the International Association of Chiefs of Police. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Academy of Experimental Criminology, was awarded the Joan McCord Award from the Academy of Experimental Criminology in 2019 and received the Sir Robert Peel medal from Cambridge University in 2023.

Ratcliffe has been an advisor to the Philadelphia Police Commissioner and the criminal investigative division of the FBI. He is a charter member of the FBI Law Enforcement Education and Training Council and has been an instructor for the ATF Intelligence Academy. He continues to work with police departments to advance problem-oriented, intelligence-led, and evidence-based policing, and has trained police officers in more than 20 countries.

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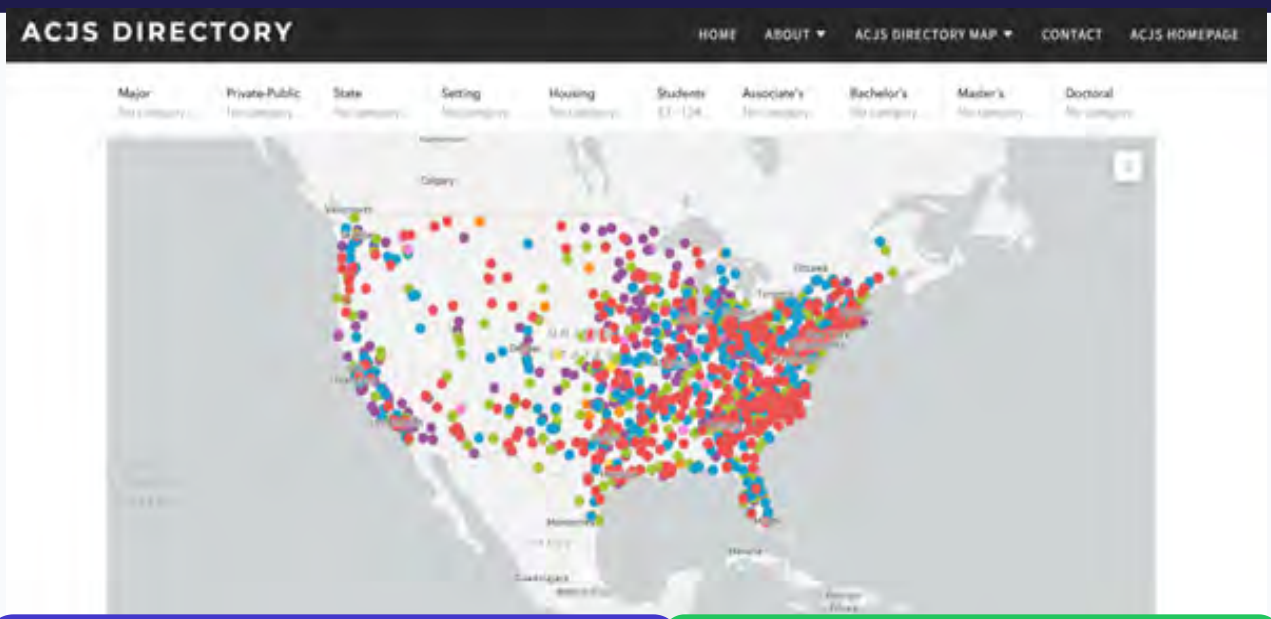

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