

## What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual act done by one person to another. This can mean anything from unwanted touching of a sexual nature to rape. There are many types of sexual assault that appear in the Criminal Code. They include descriptions of a variety of acts (for example, the use of a weapon, causing bodily harm and making threats) as well as the types of relationships within which sexual contact is or may be a criminal offence (for example, where one person is in a position of authority over the other or where there is a relationship of dependency by one person towards the other). The penalties for committing these different types of sexual offences vary from one to the other.

## How often does sexual assault occur?

We know that many women do not report sexual assaults when they occur. It is estimated that only 6% of sexual assaults are reported to police (OWD 1995, 1). Many women may never tell anyone that they have been sexually assaulted. As such, it is difficult to provide a statistic that accurately reflects how often sexual assault occurs.

We do know that in 1999, in Canada, 23,872 sexual assaults (total of all types) were reported to police. This translates into a rate of 78 sexual assaults per 100,000 people and marks a 7.3% decline from 1998 (Statistics Canada 2000). Given that this figure represents only approximately 6% of the sexual assaults that occur each year, sexual assault is not uncommon in this country.

## Don't women lie about sexual assault?

People lie about all types of crimes, and the rate of false reporting of incidents of sexual assault is the same as for other crimes. If anything, sexual assault has a very low reporting rate. According to Statistics Canada, only 6% of sexual assaults are reported to the police and only 1% of date rapes are reported to the police (OWD 1995, 1, 5). Indeed, many women do not report their assaults to the police for fear of not being believed.

## Who is most at risk for sexual assault?

Any woman, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, or geographic location is at risk for sexual assault. That being said, some women are at greater risk than others. For example, 63% of sexual assaults reported to the police involve girls and young women under the age of eighteen (Russell 1996). Women living in poverty (low household incomes, low levels of formal education and/or who are un/underemployed) also are at heightened risk for sexual assault (Johnson 1996, 108-109). As well, women with disabilities are at greater risk than non-disabled women. Eighty-three percent of disabled women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime (OWD 1995, 1).

## Am I more likely to be assaulted by a stranger or by someone I know? In my home or in a public place?

Contrary to popular belief, you are more likely to be assaulted by someone you know than by a stranger lurking in the bushes. For example, sixty-nine percent of women who have been sexually assaulted are assaulted by men they know (OWD 1995, 1). Thirty-eight percent of women were assaulted by their intimate partners (husband, common-law partners, or boyfriends) (OWD 1995, 3). Statistics demonstrate that 31% of sexual assaults occur in dating and acquaintance relationships (OWD 1995, 5).

Again, contrary to popular belief, most sexual assaults occur in private places. Of all incidents of sexual assault, 24% took place in the victim's home, 20% in the perpetrator's home, 10% in someone else's home, 25% in a car, and 21% in a public place (Johnson 1996, 127).

### **What can I do to prevent sexual assault?**

The best way to prevent sexual assault is to work with others to change a society that presently condones sexual assault and other forms of violence against women. Until that time, however, there are some steps that can be taken to promote your safety.

As most sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim, it is important that you trust your instincts. If you are dating someone who does not respect your body or your autonomy, or seems untrustworthy, you may want to end the relationship. In public spaces, stay aware of your surroundings and leave situations where you feel unsafe or threatened. METRAC recommends doing a Safety Audit of your surroundings. Some women's groups, such as the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape, advocate taking a self-defence program designed for women. A good program will help make you aware of your personal safety and ways to maximize it.

If an assault does occur, do whatever feels safe and appropriate for you, in the circumstances. It is important to remember that even if you cannot prevent an assault from occurring, sexual assault is never the victim's fault. It is the perpetrator who is responsible for his actions.

### **Where can I go for help if I have been sexually assaulted?**

If you have been sexually assaulted, there are a number of options that you can choose from. First, you may choose to contact the police. Many women are reluctant to deal with the police for a number of reasons. These may include the fear of not being believed and police insensitivity to sexual assault survivors' needs. While it is important that sexual assault survivors access the legal system, women may also need alternatives.

In addition to police, there are a number of places that women can go if they need assistance.

You can talk to family, friends, teachers, counsellors or someone else you trust.

You can get medical assistance from your family doctor, a clinic or a hospital. Sexual Assault Care Centres are located in hospitals and offer specialized care for sexual assault survivors.

You can get help through a sexual assault or women's crisis centre or a local 24-hour crisis line. These places will be listed in the front pages of your local telephone book. These centres are staffed

by women and they provide a number of important services: non-judgemental crisis counselling (both in person and on the phone), referrals, court support, and advocacy.

It is important that you get support from someone you trust, whether or not you choose to report the assault. Supporters can provide you with emotional support and they can help you if you choose to use the legal system.

### **What can I do to help someone who has been sexually assaulted?**

If a friend, relative or acquaintance discloses that she has been sexually assaulted, it is critical that you let her know that you believe her. This first step is very important in helping her begin to heal.

Second, let her know that she is not alone. The Violence Against Women Survey found that 51% of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of sexual or physical violence in their lifetime (Statistics Canada 1993, 1). Surviving a sexual assault can be an isolating and lonely experience, and this information can help alleviate this.

Third, support any decision that the woman makes. Whether she chooses to go to the police or not, or whether she chooses to go to a crisis or sexual assault centre or an emergency room or not, it is important that she feel she has made the right decision for her, without judgement from others.

Fourth, work to help change conditions in our society which condone many forms of violence against women. This can be done through a number of means: supporting organizations and individuals working in this area, lobbying politicians at all levels of government, and educating yourself and others close to you about violence against women.

### **Works Cited**

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