

Sexual Assault: Myths and Facts

MYTH: Victims are usually raped by a stranger in a dark alley.

FACT: 3 out of 4 victims of rape and sexual assault know their attacker. In addition, more than half of all rapes occur in the victim's home or at the home of a friend, neighbor, or relative.¹

MYTH: If people are careful and alert they can avoid being victims of crimes of sexual violence.

FACT: Most victims are assaulted by someone they have reason to trust – a friend of a friend, a parent, or a neighbor.² In many sexual assaults of adult women, the offender knows the victim and has used that familiarity to gain access to her. While people can take precautions to reduce their risk of being sexually assaulted, there is no foolproof way to prevent sexual assault.

MYTH: Sexual assault is an impulsive crime of sex committed by a sexually frustrated man.

FACT: Sexual assault is a violent crime of power and control, and sexual abusers often plan their assault on a victim. Adults who perpetrate against other adults often have intimate partners with whom they have ongoing sexual relationships; offenders who choose children frequently nurture a friendship with the child before the sexual assault occurs.³

MYTH: Sexual assault isn't so bad unless there's a lot of physical violence involved.

FACT: By definition, in that it involves an activity one person does not consent to, sexual assault is an act of violence. However, more than any physical injuries the victim sustains, the violation of trust that accompanies most sexual assault has been shown to dramatically increase the level of trauma the victim suffers.⁴ Emotional and psychological injuries cause harm that can last much longer than physical wounds.

MYTH: Child sexual abusers usually find their victims by frequenting such places as schoolyards and playgrounds.

FACT: Most child sexual abusers offend against children whom they know and with whom they have established a relationship.⁵

MYTH: Women "cry" rape.

FACT: Approximately 8% all rape claims are found to be false. This percentage of false reports is similar to that of other reported crimes.⁶

MYTH: The majority of sexual offenders are caught, convicted, and in prison.

FACT: Only a fraction of those who commit sexual assault are apprehended and convicted for their crimes. Most convicted sex offenders eventually are released to the community under probation or parole supervision.⁷

MYTH: All sex offenders are male.

FACT: Males commit the majority of sex offenses but females commit some, particularly against children. Studies indicate that females commit approximately 20% of sex offenses against children.⁸ However, the vast majority of sex offenders are male.

MYTH: Youths do not commit sex offenses.

FACT: Adolescents are responsible for a significant number of rape and child molestation cases each year. Currently, it is estimated that adolescents (ages 13 to 17) account for up to one-fifth of all rapes and one-half of all cases of child molestation committed each year.⁹ In 1995, youth were involved in 15% of all forcible rapes cleared by arrest – approximately 18 adolescents per 100,000 were arrested for forcible rape. In the same year, approximately 16,100 adolescents were arrested for sexual offenses, excluding rape and prostitution. The majority of these incidents of sexual abuse involve adolescent male perpetrators.¹⁰ However, prepubescent youths also engage in sexually abusive behaviors.

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