

## Sexual assault

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual behaviour or activity that makes the victim feel uncomfortable, frightened or threatened. It is sexual activity that the person has not consented to and refers to a broad range of sexual behaviours, including the use or threat of violence to force another person to engage in a sexual activity against their will.

Sexual assault is a serious crime, commonly committed by men against women and children. Approximately one third of Australian women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes – 18 per cent before age 16. In most cases, the woman knows the perpetrator, with only 20 per cent of sexual assaults committed by strangers. Around half of all sexual assaults occur in the victim's home.

A common misconception is that sexual assault is motivated by desire – on the contrary, it is about power and violence. Men are also victims of sexual assault, but less frequently. According to the Australian Institute of Criminology a woman over her lifetime is 3.5 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than a man.

### The emotional impact

The terror, pain and humiliation suffered during a sexual assault can have dramatic short and long term consequences for the victim. These impacts may have wide-ranging effects across every aspect of a victim's/survivor's life including emotional, mental and physical health, family and social relationships, schooling, employment, career and housing. Emotional effects may include:

- Shame and embarrassment
- Fear, including fear of the offender, and men in general
- Anxiety and depression
- Feelings of guilt, regret and self-blame
- Low self-esteem
- Broken trust in others
- Post traumatic stress responses with symptoms including flashbacks, nightmares and withdrawal from people and situations.

### The hidden crime

Sexual assault is vastly under-reported, under- investigated and under-convicted. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, of those women sexually assaulted in Victoria every year, only 15 per cent report the crime to the police.

Of all those committing sexual assaults in Victoria, less than five per cent face legal punishment. Women are more likely to report the crime to police if the offender is a stranger. Women are less likely to report current husbands, de facto partners or boyfriends.

### Reasons for under-reporting of sexual assault

Research shows that women don't report sexual assault to the police for a number of reasons including:

- Lack of faith in police and the justice system
- The fear they won't be believed
- Fear of coping with the medical and legal procedures
- Fear of reprisals
- They don't want family and friends to know

- Humiliation and shame
- Prevalent social attitudes, which blame the victim for sexual assault.

## Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs)

Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) respond to every victim/survivor with belief, respect, sensitivity and recognition of their struggle and ability to survive. CASAs provide a safe place for them to talk about their feelings in their own way and own time. Victims/survivors are informed of their fundamental rights to medical, legal and support options.

Victorian Police – in conjunction with Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA) – has adopted guidelines for responding appropriately to people reporting sexual assault. This approach is outlined in the *Victoria Police Code of Practice for Sexual Assault*. Key aspects of the code include providing victims of sexual assault with information, choice and access to support and advocacy.

## Physical evidence

If a woman reports a sexual assault to the police, she may be required to have a medical examination. A doctor who is a forensic medical officer will conduct this examination.

Physical evidence of the crime is sometimes the only undisputed fact presented in court, so it may help not to shower, change clothes, eat, drink or go to the toilet before the examination. The examination may include:

- **General examination** – to look for and treat any injuries, including cuts or bruises. Photographs may be taken of the injuries, but only with the victim's consent. Clothing may be retained for forensic testing.
- **Pelvic examination** – similar to the procedure for a Pap smear.
- **Fluid samples** – swabs will be taken and sent to a laboratory.

## Medical attention

Whether or not a woman decides to report the crime to police, she should see a doctor to treat any injuries and check for pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. If pregnancy is suspected, the woman can take the 'morning after pill', which is available from chemists as well as doctors.

Sexual assault is a deeply traumatic ordeal. There are support services available for victims that offer confidential counselling, advocacy and referral.

## What to do

Someone who thinks they have been sexually assaulted recently, or in the past, can contact any of the services listed below. While the police and centres against sexual assault work cooperatively to respond to victims of sexual assault, the organisations operate separately. You can use the support services, even if you don't want to report a sexual assault to the police.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Police
- In an emergency, call 000 (triple zero)
- CASA House Tel. (03) 9635 3610 or 1800 806 292 (after hours)
- Sexual Assault Crisis Line Tel. (03) 8345 3495 or 1800 806 292 (after hours)
- National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service (Australia) Tel. 1800 737 732 – free telephone counselling hotline (24 hours, 7 days)
- 1800RESPECT – for real-time online counselling
- Victim Support Help Line Tel. 1800 819 817

## Things to remember

- Victims are never to blame for sexual assault.
- Around 34 per cent of Australian women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime.

- Around half of all sexual assaults occur in the victim's home and, in most cases, the woman knows the attacker.
- Most women don't report sexual assault to the police because of fear, humiliation and shame.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA)

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