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An Analysis of Sexual Assaults
Reported to Rape Crisis Centers in Massachusetts

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This report is a summary of data collected from the publicly funded rape crisis centers (RCC's) throughout Massachusetts during an eighteen (18) month period, from January 1984 through June 1985. These centers are located in battered women's shelters, social services agencies, community mental health centers, and women's centers. None are formally affiliated with a hospital and all have 24-hour crisis hotlines. The data is from a total of sixteen (16) RCC's: fourteen in 1984 with two additional centers in 1985.

The data was collected by using a questionnaire which was completed for each sexual assault incident reported to an RCC. The questionnaire protected the confidentiality of victims by requesting no identifying information. The instrument gathered data with regard to the incident, the victim, the assailant and the victim's immediate response. While this is the largest population ever studied in Massachusetts with regard to rape (1947 in 1984; 1357 for the first six months of 1985), it is a self-selected population in that respondents were people who initiated contact with these publicly funded services. This data set is unique in that it documents a large number of incidents of sexual assault (3304) as reported to RCC's rather than those reported to traditional services for rape (hospitals and police).

PROFILE OF THE VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT:

Sex: The vast majority of people victimized by rape and using the services of an RCC are women-- 92.5% for 1984 and 93.4% for the first six months of 1985.

Age: Two-thirds (67%) of the sexual assaults reported to RCC's during the first six months of 1985 occurred when the victim was under twenty years old. Another 22% occurred when the victim was between 20 and 29 years of age.

Race: Eighty-three percent of those calling an RCC during the first 6 months of 1985 were White; 7% were Black; 4% were Hispanic; 1% were Asian. The remaining 5% were listed as "other."

THE ASSAULTS:

Place: For both 1984 and 1985, one-third of the sexual assaults occurred in the victim's own home with another 15% occurring in the shared home of the victim and the offender (father, partner, etc.). This brings the total of sexual assaults occurring in the home of the victim to nearly 50%. Other places of risk are outdoors (woods and street; 13-17%) and the assailant's home (12-15%).

Weapon: In eighty-seven percent of the sexual assaults occurring in the first six months of 1985 there was no weapon present. Thirteen percent involved weapons including knives, guns, bottles, screwdrivers, etc.

Medical Care: For 1984, 51% of the victims did not seek medical care while 43% did. Six percent required hospitalization as a result of the rape. For 1985, 43% of the victims did not require medical care while another 21% required medical care but chose not to seek it. Thirty-three percent received medical care and 3% required hospitalization.

THE ASSAILANT:

Sex: The vast majority of people committing rape and sexual assault are men-- both alone and in groups. For 1984, 92% of the offenders were males acting alone and 6.5% were males acting in groups. Females accounted for 1.5% of the assaults. Similarly in 1985, 88.7% of the offenders were males acting alone while 8.6% were males raping in groups. Females accounted for 1.2% of single-offender assaults and participated in multiple assaults with men 1.2% of the time.

Age: Most single-offender assaults are committed by males ranging in age from 20 to 45. The 1984 data show most assailants to be in their twenties while the 1985 data show them being between 30 and 45. Most multiple-offender assaults are committed by males ranging in age from 13 to 29-- a slightly younger population than single-offender assailants.

Victim/Offender Relationship: Nearly two-thirds of sexual assault offenders knew their victims (65% in 1984 and 66% in 1985). The majority of sexual assaults were committed by relatives (parents, step-parents, other relatives) and acquaintances or friends. Less than one-quarter of all the sexual assaults were committed by strangers (24% in 1984; 17% in 1985).

REPORTING:

Police: A total of 39% reported the sexual assault to the police in 1984 compared to 32% reporting to police during the first six months of 1985.

Hospital: A total of 34% reported the sexual assault to a hospital in 1984 compared to 25% in the first six months of 1985.

Friends/Family: A total of 36% told friends and/or family of the sexual assault in 1984 with 40% telling family and 32% telling friends in 1985.

Rape Crisis Center: During 1984, one-quarter of the victims (497) using rape crisis services told only the rape crisis counselor of the sexual assault.

Seeking to Prosecute: For 1984, 40% of the victims reported that they were filing criminal charges against the assailant(s). For 1985, only 26% reported that they were seeking to prosecute their assailant(s) while another 19% said they were undecided.

The data were analyzed in an attempt to find correlations between two variables. The following trends are cited because all of them show statistical significance (Chi-square).

ASSAULTS BY STRANGERS:

Age: Women 20 to 29 years old are more at risk for sexual assaults by strangers than other age categories. Forty-two percent of the victims of stranger rapes were of this age. Four percent of those assaulted by strangers were children, 28% were adolescents and 26% were women over 30 years of age.

Place: The most common location for sexual assaults by strangers is outdoors in the woods, a park, a street or parking lot (45%). The second most frequent location for a stranger assault is the victim's own home (20%). A third common location is in a car or vehicle (14%).

Medical Care: Two-thirds of the victims of stranger rape sought medical attention indicating that women raped by strangers are more likely to seek the help of medical professionals than victims of acquaintance rapes. One reason for this may be that victims feel less ambivalent about how they will be perceived by others when the assailant is a stranger. There is also some evidence indicating that stranger assaults may be more physically violent than acquaintance assaults. Nine percent of stranger assaults required that the victim be hospitalized for additional physical injuries compared to 4% of the non-stranger assaults resulting in hospitalization.

Reporting: Two-thirds of the victims of stranger rape reported the assault to the hospital and police, and one-half indicated their intention to seek prosecution. These figures drop significantly for assaults by acquaintances/relatives (see below).

ASSAULTS BY ACQUAINTANCES/RELATIVES:

Age: Children (0-12 years old) are at a higher risk of sexual assault by a parent or other relative than any other age group. Forty-seven percent of all child sexual assault reported to RCC's in 1984 were committed by parents, step-parents and other relatives. Only 5% (20 children) were assaulted by strangers and during the first six months of 1985, 17 children were assaulted in school or day care centers.

Place: The most common location for sexual assaults by an acquaintance is in the victim's home (32%), followed by the assailant's home (25%). This does not include assaults committed by partners, parents or close friends but simply those people who are known to the victim. Should the latter relationships also be included, the number of rapes taking place in the victim's home would increase dramatically. Analyzed another way, the data indicate that most of the sexual assaults (over 60%) that occur in an assailant's home, other home or building and at the workplace are committed by those whom the victim knows.

Medical Care: Less than half (48%) of the victims of acquaintance rape and less than one-third (30%) of those raped by a spouse or relative sought medical care. The closer a victim's relationship is to the assailant, the less likely she is to report the assault to a hospital or physician.

Reporting: Less than half (47%) of the victims of acquaintance rape and less than one-quarter (24%) of those assaulted by a spouse or relative reported the assault to the hospital and police. Again, the closer a victim's relationship to the assailant, the less likely she is to report the assault to a hospital or police. This trend holds true for the decision to seek prosecution as well. Forty-four percent of those raped by an acquaintance and 28% of those raped by a spouse or relative indicated their intention to file criminal charges. There is a clear decline in a willingness to seek help from traditional services or utilize courts when the victim knows her rapist.

AGE:

The age of the victim had a significant bearing on the following variables:

Place: Children (0-12 years) are at greater risk for sexual assault in their own homes (54%) than all other victims (44%). Teens (13-19 years) are at greater risk for sexual assault in a car or vehicle (12%) than all other victims (7%).

Reporting: The decision to use the criminal justice system declines with increase in the victim's age. Fifty-nine percent of the child sexual assaults are involved in criminal proceedings and those numbers drop as follows: 48% (13-19 years); 33% (20-29 years); 27% (30-45 years); 26% (46-59 years). Since children and adolescents are usually dependent upon the decisions of their parents, guardians and DSS in this matter, it may be that when left to the victim herself, the decision, more often than not, is not to turn to the courts for justice. Underscoring this trend is the fact that there is a clear increase in the likelihood that a victim will rely solely on rape crisis centers with increase of age. Sixteen percent of adolescent sexual assaults (13-19 years) are reported only to RCC's and those numbers steadily increase as follows: 26% (20-29 years); 33% (30-45 years); 35% (46-59 years).