



FACT SHEET: Debunking Popular Misconceptions About Men and Sexual Violence

Myths about male sexual assault have the effect of minimizing the seriousness of the offender's crime and its impact on the assaulted person. These myths also have an effect on how boys and men who experience sexual assault think about themselves, and the way they're treated by our society.

REALITY: Sexual assault is often considered to be a "women's issue" but males are also sexually assaulted. Police-reported and self-reported sexual assaults in Canada for males is around 13%¹ although there is emerging evidence that male sexual assault is under-reported.² Men who are gay, transgendered men,³ and men with disabilities,⁴ statistically experience higher rates of sexual violence. When males are sexually assaulted, another male is most often committing the offense.¹

MYTH: Men can't be sexually assaulted.

REALITY: Canadian research indicates that gay men do experience higher rates of sexual violence than heterosexual males in Canada.³ Higher rates of violence against members of the LGBTQ2S+ community are largely due to hate-crimes driven by homophobic and transphobic attitudes and beliefs that justify violence, including sexual violence.⁵

Yet, other systematic reviews of the research have found that the majority of individuals experiencing male-on-male sexual assault⁶ are heterosexual men reinforcing the notion that anyone can experience sexual violence.

MYTH: Only gay men are sexually assaulted.

¹ Rotenburg, C. (2017). *Police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009-2014: A statistical profile* [Data set]. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/54866-eng.htm>

² Pearson, J., & Barker, D. (2018). Male rape: what we know, don't know and need to find out: A critical review. *Crime Psychology Review*, 4(1), 72-94.

³ Simpson, L. (2018). *Violent victimization of lesbians, gays and bisexuals in Canada, 2014* [Data set]. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54923-eng.htm>

⁴ Conroy, S., & A. Cotter. (2017). *Self-reported sexual assault in Canada, 2014* [Data set]. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14842-eng.pdf?st=Hhk8zFBY>

⁵ Dunn, P. (2012). Men as Victims: "Victim" Identities, Gay Identities, and Masculinities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(17), 3442-3467.

⁶ Ioannou, M. Hammond, L. & Machin, L. (2017). Male-on-male sexual assault: Victim, offender and offence characteristics. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, 14(2), 189-209.

REALITY: The vast majority of men who sexually abuse or assault other men identify themselves as heterosexual⁶ reinforcing the assertion that sexual violence is about power and control.

MYTH: Only gay men sexually assault other men.

REALITY: Boys who experience child sexual abuse are unlikely to go on to commit sexual offenses. In one large study, only 3% of boys who were sexually abused as children went on to commit a sexual offence as an adult, leaving 97% who did not.⁷ While many individuals who commit sexual offences have a history of child sexual abuse, research suggests that other forms of abuse experienced in childhood are stronger predictors of later sexual offending behaviour such as physical abuse and neglect.⁸

MYTH: Boys who experience child sexual abuse will grow up to become abusers themselves.

REALITY: About 7% of male sexual assault victims who reported to police indicated that they were victimized by a female.⁹ Yet, it is well accepted that male sexual victimization by women is highly underreported to authorities and as such, true prevalence rates are unknown.¹⁰ For sexual assaults that are self-reported by men (not reported to authorities), male offenders were responsible 52% of the time and female, 48% of the time.¹¹ Victimization studies examining sexual offending behaviour by women (towards children or adults) indicates that 12%¹² to 20% of sexual offenders are women.¹³

While research on female sexual offending against male adults specifically, is in its infancy, studies to date suggest that similar tactics by male offenders may be used to commit the offence. Women can use threats, verbal aggression and take advantage of men when they are intoxicated.¹⁴ Other studies that examine female sexual offending in general report that women tend to perpetrate against their own

⁷ Leach, C., Stewart, A., & Smallbone, S. (2016). Testing the sexually abused-sexual abuser hypothesis: A prospective longitudinal birth cohort study. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 51*, 144-153.

⁸ Widom, C., & Massey, C. (2015). A Prospective Examination of Whether Childhood Sexual Abuse Predicts Subsequent Sexual Offending. *Jama Pediatrics, 169*(1), 1-7.

⁹ Rotenburg, C. (2017). *Police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009-2014: A statistical profile [Data set]*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/54866-eng.htm>

¹⁰ Pearson, J., & Barker, D. (2018). Male rape: What we know, don't know and need to find out-a critical review. *Crime Psychology Review, 4*(1), 72-94.

¹¹ Conroy, S., & A. Cotter. (2017). *Self-reported sexual assault in Canada, 2014 [Data set]*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14842-eng.pdf?st=Hhk8zFBY>

¹² Cortoni, F., Babchishin, K., & Rat, C. (2017). The proportion of sexual offenders who are female is higher than thought: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 44*(2), 145-162.

¹³ Mcleod, D. (2015). Female offenders in child sexual abuse cases: A national picture. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 24*(1), 97-114.

¹⁴ Fisher, N., & Pina, A. (2013). An overview of the literature on female-perpetrated adult male sexual victimization. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 18*(1), 54-61.

children or a young relative, are more likely to choose male victims, and can use coercion and physical violence to facilitate the offence.¹⁵

MYTH: Men can't be sexually assaulted by women.

REALITY: Getting an erection or ejaculating during a sexual assault is a major source of guilt and confusion for men who experience sexual assault. Research indicates physical stimulation and physiological states can cause an erection and even ejaculation whether the recipient wants it to happen or not.¹⁶ Having an erection or ejaculation is a normal, involuntary physiological response, and does not automatically equate with arousal — or with consent.¹⁶ A male experiencing erection during sexual assault may be bewildered or confused about his physiological response, feel guilt or shame, and therefore be inclined not to report it.

MYTH: Getting an erection or ejaculating during a sexual assault means the survivor “really wanted it” or even consented.

REALITY: No matter who provokes it — a relative, babysitter, teacher, boss or other woman in a position of power or authority over a young male — sexual assault is all about control and domination, not gratification and pleasure. Premature or forced sex causes confusion, anger, depression and other major psychological problems. To be used as a sexual object by a more powerful person is always abusive and traumatizing.

MYTH: If the individual committing the sexual assault is a woman, against a boy or male teenager — the boy should consider himself to have been “initiated” into the exciting world of sex.

REALITY: All people who experience sexual assault suffer many of the same reactions: depression, anger, anxiety, confusion, fear, numbness, self-blame, helplessness, suicidal feelings and shame are common.¹⁷ While men are not at risk for pregnancy following an assault, there may be physical injury as male sexual assault tends to involve some level of violence¹⁸ and anal injury is higher in men than women.¹⁶

MYTH: Males who are sexually assaulted don't suffer as much as females who are assaulted: after all, they don't risk becoming pregnant.

¹⁵ Colson, M., Boyer, L., Baumstarck, K., & Loundou, A. (2013). Female sex offenders: A challenge to certain paradigmes. Meta-analysis. *Sexologies*, 22(4), E109-E117.

¹⁶ Mclean, I. (2013). The male victim of sexual assault. *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, 27(1), 39-46.

¹⁷ Lowe, & Rogers. (2017). The scope of male rape: A selective review of research, policy and practice. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 35, 38-43.

¹⁸ Ioannou, M. Hammond, L. & Machin, L. (2017). Male-on-male sexual assault: Victim, offender and offence characteristics. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling*, 14(2), 189-209.

REALITY: Sexual abuse and sexual assault can occur within any relationship. Through physical, psychological or emotional coercion, some gay men are forced by their partners to engage in non-consensual sexual acts. Studies from the United States estimate that between 3% -14% of gay men have experienced sexual assault from their partner.¹⁹

MYTH: Sexual assault between gay partners does not exist.

AASAS welcomes your suggestions and recommendations about other relevant Canadian research references that could be included on this handout. Please e-mail us at mailbox@asas.ca

¹⁹ Brown, T., & Herman, J. (2015). *Intimate partner violence and sexual abuse among LGBT people*. Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.