



FACT SHEET: Debunking Popular Misconceptions About Sexual Violence

REALITY: Sexual assault is about power and control. It violates not only an individual's personal integrity, but also their sense of safety and control over their life. Research indicates that while there are many "types" of people who offend sexual violence, with varying etiologies for offending¹ the underlying motivation of sexual assault is to degrade, humiliate and dominate the victim.² Therefore, there is a strong connection between sexual violence, power and gender inequality.³

MYTH: People commit sexual assault because they are "sick," "deviant," or "mentally ill."

REALITY: The majority of sexual assaults (62%) reported to police occurred on private property such as in someone's home (41%). 16% occurred in an open area, 7% in commercial spaces such as workplaces or hotels 7% in other locations such as bars, restaurants and 4% on school property.⁴

MYTH: Sexual assault usually occurs in a dark, isolated location.

REALITY: Nobody is immune to sexual assault. Women and men, children and seniors, individuals with disabilities – there are people who have been sexually assaulted or sexually abused in every Alberta City and community, in every cultural and demographic segment of our society.

Women make up the vast majority of victims of police-reported sexual assault (87%), particularly young women and girls.⁴ Indigenous women and women with disabilities are at even higher risk.⁵

The most extensive study of child sexual abuse in Canada found that 54% of women and 32% of men encountered some form of sexual abuse as children.⁶ In fact, it's very likely that each of us knows someone who has experienced sexual assault or abuse during their lifetime.

¹ Lussier, & Cale. (2016). Understanding the origins and the development of rape and sexual aggression against women: Four generations of research and theorizing. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 31, 66-81.

² WHO. (2003). *Guidelines for medico-legal care for victims of sexual violence*. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/med_leg_guidelines/en/

³ UN Women. (2015). *A framework to underpin action to prevent violence against women*. Retrieved from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/11/prevention-framework>

⁴ 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>

⁵ 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>

⁶ Badgley, R. (1984). *Sexual offenses against children. Volume 1: Report of the committee on sexual offenses against children and youth*. Ottawa, ON: Ministry of Supply and Services.

MYTH: Only young, attractive women are sexually assaulted.

REALITY: In order for both parties to feel comfortable and in control, assumptions about consent should never be made. A man may feel he is getting mixed messages but that is not an excuse for sexual assault. If it is unclear what their partner wants, communication is the only way to make sure both people feel safe and comfortable with what is happening. It is the responsibility of the person initiating the sexual contact to obtain consent and not interpret what is said any other way.

The Criminal Code of Canada defines "consent" as a "voluntary agreement" to engage in sexual activity. If a woman says "no" to sex verbally or shows it through her conduct, that consent doesn't exist. If she's asleep, drunk or passed out, she's incapable of consenting to sex. And even if a woman does initially agree to engage in sexual activity, that consent instantly disappears if she changes her mind AT ANY POINT.

Even in a committed relationship there are still two separate individuals involved, and they each have the right to communicate "no". Being in a committed relationship is no different than any kind of hook up, when it comes to consent. Therefore, every time two people engage in sexual activities, consent must be obtained.

Every time a person becomes sexually active with another, consent is required. If a person has consented to sexual relations before with a partner, it doesn't mean that consent is automatic.

MYTH: If a woman says "no" she doesn't really mean it.

REALITY: Nobody ever deserves to become a victim of violent crime, which is exactly what sexual assault is. Sexual assault is NEVER the fault of the person it happens to, not under any circumstances.

People who commit sexual violence will often claim that a woman's dress or behaviour "made" them act out to rationalize their crime. It doesn't matter where the victim was, what they were wearing (or not wearing), or how they were talking or acting. And it doesn't matter whether they were drinking or using drugs. Those who choose to sexual assault others are responsible for their choice to hurt another person.

MYTH: Most victims of sexual assault are at least partly responsible for the assault; their appearance, actions or behaviour directly contributed to what happened to them.

REALITY: Sexual assault is a violent crime whether or not physical resistance or injury occurs.

According to the Criminal Code of Canada, sexual assault is any sexual activity without consent, regardless of whether there are physical injuries, or a weapon used. According to police reported data,

98% of sexual offenses against women were Level 1 sexual assaults which is generally characterized by little or no physical injury.⁷

Due to neurobiology, our brains work in such a way that a “fight” response is rare. During a situation of extreme threat, our brain gets flooded with stress hormones impairing our ability to think clearly and rationally. A freezing response is much more likely.⁸ Many women are too intimidated or terrified to try defending themselves. They may decide that the overwhelming power or size of the attacker makes it very dangerous to resist. Or, they know the person who offended, which compounds their reaction adding a state of confusion to the threatening situation.⁸

MYTH: She didn't fight back and there are no bruises. Sexual assault only occurs when there's an actual struggle or physical injury.

REALITY: Sexual abuse and sexual assault have always been regarded as "women's issues" that women are supposed to deal with. Efforts to stop sexual assault have generally been focused on getting girls and women to change the way they conduct their daily lives in order to reduce risk: not walking alone, avoiding isolated areas, watching how they dress - even carrying pepper spray.

But we know that these defensive tactics don't prevent sexual assault. Public safety is not the sole responsibility of women or of the victims of sexual violence. Most men will never commit a sexual crime, yet men are responsible for the large majority of sexual abuse and sexual assault.⁷

Real, long-term change won't happen until men do their part to challenge the attitudes and behaviours that put down and degrade women. If we keep thinking about the sexual abuses and sexual assaults committed by men as a "women's issue," we're not going to do much about truly preventing that violence.

Every woman has the right to live in a society where male violence against women is not acceptable. Not legally, not morally, not socially. Pepper spray and self-defence classes won't do much to make that happen. For change to occur, non-offending men need to stand up against sexually abusive behaviours and attitudes they see in other men.

MYTH: Sexual assault would decrease if women made a bigger effort to protect themselves.

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%⁷ although there is emerging evidence that male sexual assault is under-reported.⁹ Men who are gay,

⁷ 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>

⁸ Haskell, L. & Randall, M. (2019). *The impact of trauma on adult sexual assault victims*. Ottawa, ON: Department of Justice Canada.

⁹ 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.

transgendered men,¹⁰ and men with disabilities,¹¹ statistically experience higher rates of sexual violence. When males are sexually assaulted, another male is most often committing the offense.¹²

MYTH: Men can't be sexually assaulted.

REALITY: It's commonly believed that children make up stories or lie about sexual abuse, but this is extremely rare. Young children usually don't have the knowledge or language skills to misinterpret adult behavior or to invent such stories.

In child abuse cases reported to Children's Services in Canada in 2008, just 10% of those cases were considered intentional 'false allegations'.¹³ A critical review of the academic literature on false reporting found that 1) most child sexual abuse allegations are true; 2) no research has ever found a sizeable number of false reports; and, 3) false allegations do occur within the 2-5% range.¹⁴ Noncredible disclosures or false negatives are far more prevalent due to developmental level of the child.¹⁵ Research also indicates that false reporting of sexual assault for adult women is low, ranging between 2-10%¹⁶, with a 5% rate found in a recent meta-analysis.¹⁷

MYTH: People lie about being sexually abused or assaulted.

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

¹⁰ 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>

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 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>

¹³ Lefebvre, R., Van Wert, M., Fallon, B., & Trocmé, N. (2012). *Sexual Abuse Investigations by Level of Substantiation in Canada in 2008*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.

¹⁴ O'Donohue, W., Cummings, C., & Willis, B. (2018). The frequency of false allegations of child sexual abuse: A critical review. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 27(5), 459-475.

¹⁵ Azzopardi, C., Eirich, R., Rash, C.L., Macdonald, S., & Madigan, S. (2018). A meta-analysis of the prevalence of child sexual abuse disclosure in forensic settings. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30579645>

¹⁶ Lisak, D., Gardinier, L., Nicksa, S., & Cote, A. (2010). False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases. *Violence Against Women*, 16(12), 1318-1334.

¹⁷ Ferguson, C., & Malouff, E. (2016). Assessing Police Classifications of Sexual Assault Reports: A Meta-Analysis of False Reporting Rates. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(5), 1185-1193.