

Knowing the Facts: Discussing Sexual Assault

With sexual assault and harassment discussed consistently in the news and the mass media, it is an important opportunity to open the discussion about sexual assault, harassment and consent with youth. Below are FAQs that can help the conversation.



DEFINING IT: WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual assault is any act of a sexual nature committed against someone without that person's freely given consent. This includes but is not limited to:

- Inappropriate touching, sharing nude photos, verbal harassment or threats, forced/coerced penetration, and any other behavior of a sexual nature that makes one feel unsafe and/or uncomfortable.

For specific, legal definitions for the state of Virginia visit: <https://law.lis.virginia.gov>.

#METOO: HOW OFTEN DOES SEXUAL ASSAULT HAPPEN?

Every 98 seconds someone is sexually assaulted in the United States.¹

In Arlington, we know how youth are impacted. According to the 2017 Youth, Risk Behavior Survey:²

- Nearly 50% of APS female students in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade report having been sexually harassed at school.
- 20% of APS female students in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade report that a dating partner made unwanted sexual contact with them.

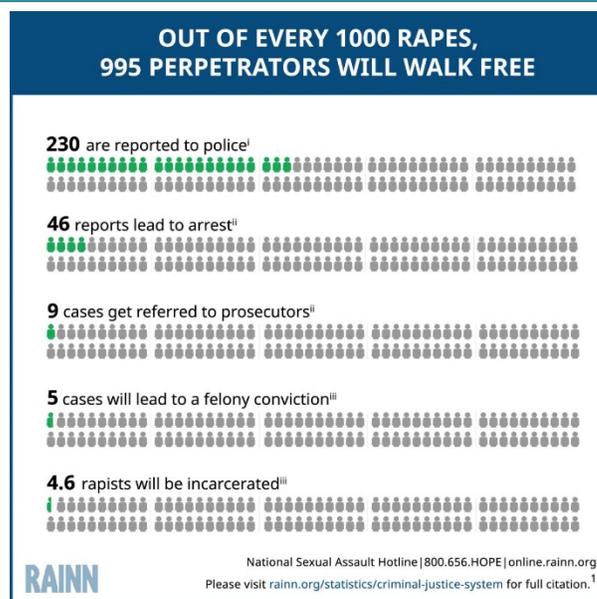
Anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of sexual assault, regardless of race, class and gender. While statistics often show that women/girls are disproportionately the victims of sexual assault, men/boys also experience high rates of victimization. The Department of Justice estimates that 1 out of every 10 rape victims are male.³

#WHYIDIDNTREPORT: WHY DO PEOPLE WAIT TO, OR CHOOSE NOT TO, REPORT AN ASSAULT?

Sexual assault is an under-reported crime with only about 1/3 of all sexual assault cases reported to the police.⁴

There are many reasons someone may not report a sexual assault. Studies show that women are less likely to report a sexual assault/rape when they feel "ashamed or blame themselves, when their experience was not a stereotypical violent rape by a stranger, or when they feared retaliation by their perpetrator."⁵

Youth are often less inclined to report or disclose an assault. They may have been doing something they weren't supposed to (drinking alcohol, breaking curfew, etc.) when the assault happened and fear getting into trouble. Youth are also sensitive and vulnerable to social retaliation by the perpetrator, who might spread rumors about the victim. Add in the fear of not being believed, and many youth may not know who they can tell and which adults they can trust.



¹ Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>

² Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2017. Retrieved from <https://apcyf.arlingtonva.us/youth-risk-behavior-survey-2017-results/>

³ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010 (2013).

⁴ Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>

⁵ UK Center for Research on Violence Against Women. *Top 10 Things Advocates Need to Know*. 2011. Retrieved from https://ops.vaw.as.uky.edu/sites/default/files/01_Needs_of_Rape_Survivors.pdf

BEING A RESOURCE: AM I A TRUSTED ADULT?

Adults who want to support youth must actively work to create a positive relationship with them. A fostered, positive relationship is key to ensuring youth know who they can go to when they need help.

Trusted adults always:

- Make time to talk.
- Listen-without judgement.
- Ask open-ended questions to learn more.
- Recognize and validate feelings.
- Discuss expectations and boundaries.
- Remain calm, *regardless* of what is shared.

Additional ideas for having conversations with teens about difficult topics can be found at www.apcyf.org.

ALCOHOL AND SEXUAL ASSAULT: HOW OFTEN DOES IT HAPPEN?

Alcohol is the number one drug used to facilitate sexual assault. Alcohol is often used because it is legal, easily available, and people consume it on their own.

Alcohol does not make someone commit sexual assault. However, situations where alcohol is available can create scenarios in which people may feel more comfortable or confident to perpetrate:

- Alcohol can unmask aggressive behavior and inhibit decision-making or make someone less able to read another person's social cues.
- Alcohol can contribute to some people's expectations about sex. It can be used as an excuse for bad behavior.

MEMORIES AND TRAUMA: WHY ARE THE DETAILS HARD TO RECALL?

The brain responds to and remembers traumatic events differently.

While memory of past day-to-day events is often poor, research has shown that memory of traumatic events is stored differently in the brain. Some memories are so emotionally charged that they become frozen in time, and some particulars can be recalled in excruciating detail, as if the event just occurred, while others may be forgotten.⁶ Many victims of sexual assault do not understand that it is normal to have fragmented memories of a traumatic event, such as an assault, and that often it can be difficult to recall specific memories (the exact time, etc.). Not understanding these uncertainties in their memories keeps many victims from coming forward and reporting the crime.

Learn more about how the brain responds and remembers traumatic events by searching "Neurobiology of Trauma."

ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORTS: WHEN AND WHERE CAN SOMEONE GET HELP?

Survivors of sexual assault can seek help at any time- no matter how long ago the assault took place.

While there are statutes of limitations on prosecuting a sexual assault as a criminal offense, *there is no time limit* on seeking supportive services.

- For local information and resources about sexual assault and domestic violence visit www.DoorwaysVA.org. For immediate crisis support, call the Doorways Hotline at 703-237-0881 (available 24/7).
- For general information and resources about childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault, and intimate partner sexual assault visit www.rainn.org. For male survivors and those who support them also visit www.1in6.org.

Created by Project PEACE 2018

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⁶ American Psychological Association, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/09/report-sexual-assault.aspx>