

Sexual Assault Awareness, Prevention and Response

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We currently live in a time when the definition of sexual assault and rape is undergoing a shift. Until 2012, the FBI defined rape as, “the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will.” In 2012, the FBI updated this definition to omit gender specificities and focus on penetration. In 2010, the Center for Disease Control also created a “new” category of sexual violence, “being made to penetrate,” to describe cases where a victim was coerced or forced to use their body parts to penetrate someone else.

Today sexual assault is commonly defined as, “any type of forced or coerced sexual contact or behavior that happens without consent.” This means that sexual assault includes rape, attempted rape, child molestation, and sexual harassment. In the United States, 1 in 5 women has been raped and almost half of all women have experienced some other type of sexual assault. In April of 2017, a new study was published that revealed that despite prior assumptions, made more prevalent by the old definition of rape used by the FBI through 2012, the statistics are not that different for men.

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, there were over 1,400 reported cases of rape and over 3,400 cases of non-rape sexual assault in 2015. In 79% of these cases the victim knew the offender, in 84% of cases the victim was female, and in 60% of cases the victim was a minor.

On average, over half of all occurrences of sexual assault occur in the victims’ home or residence, and over 30% of offenders are either family members or dating partners of the victim. Because of this close connection many victims have to their assaulter, 32% of victims in Virginia reported having to relocate or become homeless as a result of their abuse in 2012.

There are many services currently available to victims of sexual assault offered across the region, however the majority of these programs are focused specifically on rape survivors, offering legal assistance or providing housing for victims who need to relocate. There still is a need for more comprehensive support for victims as they recover psychologically and physically from these traumas and many of the organizations that offer resources need support helping their clients fully recover.

Old Dominion University has a great program for their students offering medical care, counseling services, legal support and even academic support. Other universities in the region offer similar programs. The services offered by these universities are great templates that outline the comprehensive support the victims need in all areas of their lives.

There is also a great opportunity for advocacy in this area. Through legislative changes, much can be done to help prevent sexual assault from occurring and to help offer victims state-supported services they need. Also by raising awareness about the issue, there is the opportunity to remove some of the stigma associated with being a victim and to help encourage victims to seek the support services they need.

RESOURCES

<https://www.sentara.com/hampton-roads-virginia/hospitalslocations/locations/sentara-norfolk-general-hospital/about-us/nursing.aspx>

http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2014/04/male_rape_in_america_a_new_study_reveals_that_men_are_sexually_assaulted.html

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/sexual-assault>

<https://www.odu.edu/sees/sexual-assault-resources>

http://www.vsp.state.va.us/downloads/Crime_in_Virginia/Crime_in_Virginia_2015.pdf

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_assault

<http://www.oag.state.va.us/images/DomViolence/2013StatewideDVReport.pdf>