Acquaintance Rape

• 7 out of 10 rapes are committed by someone known to the victim (RAINN, 2015)
  o 45% - committed by an acquaintance
  o 25% - committed by a current or former partner
  o 6% - committed by more than one person or the victim cannot remember
  o 1% - committed by a non-spousal relative

Overview

As is demonstrated with the statistics above, acquaintance rape actually accounts for the majority of reported sexual assault cases. Acquaintance rape is defined as being a rape perpetrated by someone known to the victim, including friends, spouses, first dates, and relatives. Another term, “date rape”, is a sexual assault by an individual with whom the victim has a "dating" (even if it’s the first date) relationship and the sexual assault occurs in the context of this relationship. The perpetrators of acquaintance rape do not fit an easily recognized profile, hence the high propensity for acquaintance assaults. However, some similar characteristics have been found in acquaintance rapists, including:

• A propensity towards violence in problem-solving;
• Aggressiveness in intimate relationships; and
• Being overly demanding of partners.

While most victims of acquaintance rape identify as female, identified males and particularly those within the trans* community are at risk as well. Victims of acquaintance rape are from every background no matter their gender, sex, religion, race, sexual orientation, ability status, or any other identifying status. In addition to the myth that stranger rape is more prevalent than acquaintance, other myths incorrectly characterize rape victims as "sexually loose" individuals who are "asking for it." On the contrary, victims of acquaintance rape are victims of violence and domination. The prejudicial myths and attitudes surrounding rape victims are what hinder the criminal justice system. Quite often the evidence depends on the victim's word against that of the rapist; in the absence of physical evidence, the life of the victim is often picked apart to find the cause of the rape and to determine their believability. As a result, convictions are difficult to get, and police and prosecutors are often reluctant to pursue acquaintance rape cases. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (2016) reported from the Bureau of Justice Statistics that for every 1,000 rapes, 994 perpetrators will walk free.
Another factor in the reluctance of the criminal justice system to pursue acquaintance rape cases is that alcohol is often involved. Social standards condemn individuals for getting drunk and our society tends to place blame on the victim when they are raped while drinking any alcohol, regardless of whether they were intoxicated at the time of the assault. No matter the amount of alcohol consumed, should someone decline any sexual advances, whether intoxicated or not, they have the right to not be violated. If the victim is intoxicated, then there can be no capacity to consent. However, the voluntary intoxication of an offender cannot be used as a legal defense for committing the crime of sexual assault. The same can be said for other substances such as marijuana, cocaine, or other “party” drugs; regardless of what the victim or perpetrator took, rape is rape.

Victims of acquaintance rape face problems which are very specific to their type of victimization. Because the rapists may have been a part of their lives or someone with whom they socialize, victims often have to face their assailants after the rapes—sometimes causing distress, fear, and humiliation. Victims of acquaintance rape frequently blame themselves for a violent crime over which they had no control. Because the assailants are previously known to them, many victims hold themselves accountable for not having better judged the character of their perpetrators, or for allowing themselves to be in the situation in which the rape occurred. Acquaintance rape victims also experience an extreme violation of trust because this individual they allowed into their life violated their trust and committed a horrible crime against them.

The trauma caused by acquaintance rape is no less severe than the trauma that is associated with rape by a stranger. Victims can suffer physically, emotionally and financially. Rape-related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition suffered by almost one-third of all rape victims, includes sleeping and eating disorders, nervousness, fatigue, withdrawal from society and distrust of others. Many victims suffer from one or several of these symptoms, and some victims are affected for many years. Many acquaintance rape victims never reach out for the services and assistance they need in the aftermath of their victimization. The National Institute of Justice (2010) found that “victims who had been raped by an acquaintance or intimate partner increased significantly between 1973 and 2000”, most likely due to an increase in social awareness surrounding sexual assault. However, The Washington Post (2014) cited research completed by the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network and the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that in 2013, “35% of rape or sexual assault cases are reported”.

Victims of acquaintance rape are entitled to a variety of rights and services including:

- Confidentiality and privacy protection within the criminal justice process, medically, and through counseling/therapy;
- Medical care (including a Forensic Rape Exam, preferably completed by a Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner [SAFE]);
- Accurate information concerning HIV/AIDS and STDs as well as follow-up care and testing;
- Counseling/therapy (many rape crisis centers offer these on a sliding scale or free of charge);
• Compensation and/or restitution through your local victim service office (for example, in New York State, victims may apply for compensation reimbursement through the New York State Office of Victim Services).

Victims also need information about the criminal case during the investigation, trial and corrections system, as well as information about the offender's known HIV/AIDS status. It may be difficult for acquaintance rape survivors to even come forward about their assault for fear of losing a potential family member, significant other, or friend. Acquaintance rape victims have myriad concerns: fear of being blamed, fear of their families (particularly if the perpetrator is a family member) finding out, friends or the general public knowing about their victimization, or a sense of not being believed by law enforcement. It is important for all rape crisis providers and collateral contacts to be supportive and patient through the criminal justice process as it can often be one of the most difficult decisions the victim will have to make.

References:


For additional information, please contact:

RAINN – National Sexual Assault Hotline:
1-800-656-4673

National Sexual Violence Resource Center:
resources@nsvrc.org
(717) 909-0710

Your local rape crisis center:
Check in the front of your local phone book under "Community Services Numbers" or "Emergency Assistance Numbers” or Google “rape crisis center near me”.

Your state Attorney General, county/city prosecutor, or county/city law enforcement.