

UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL ASSAULT

- All cases present with different sets of circumstances, but all survivors feel they were violated and that is an important element of this crime. Sexual assault is an emotional, psychological, and physical assault on the survivor. The survivor's response to the sexual assault primarily reflects his/her reaction to the violation of self.
- The defendant is usually known to the complainant, which makes reporting more difficult.
- Survivors of sexual assault are often reluctant to go to the police for a variety of reasons, including being a natural response to a traumatic experience and to the systemic barriers which diminish a complainant's access to the legal system. In addition, commonly held attitudes and beliefs about sexual assault engender feelings of shame in the survivor.
- Survivors of sexual assault are often unsure about whether or not they have been the victim of a crime, due to confusion over what constitutes a sexual assault and the contexts in which the crime can arise (e.g. where there is intoxication or previous relationship).
- Societal beliefs about sexual assault, including wholly wrongful stereotyping that someone was "asking for it" due to intoxication and dress, can permeate into the police service, as well as the prosecution service. Sexual assault is a crime where blame is very often incorrectly placed onto the survivor.
- Sexual assault complainants are often first seen by a police officer who responds to a call for assistance. As there are seldom witnesses to the sexual assault, the police officer's initial interaction with the complainant is the most critical part of the police investigation. The treatment that a complainant receives will influence his or her entire recovery process.
- Police officers must remember that the survivor is discussing a most personal and traumatic experience of his/her life with a stranger.
- There are often no physical injuries and little, if any, forensic evidence.
- Some of the shame the survivor feels may impede the investigation. Shame arises due to the intimate nature of the assault, the survivor's self-blame that perhaps if they had done something different it wouldn't have happened, and the views of those around them that purposely or inadvertently lead to blame being directed toward the survivor.
- Emotional reactions may also not be as expected and cannot be relied upon as "proof" an offence occurred (e.g. a teen calmly discussing the events may be experiencing numbing from repetitive abuse, in contrast to the hysterical teen facing a first-time assault). In addition, stress, alcohol, and drugs can also have significant effects on memory as to the detail, clarity, and consistency of the recounting of events.