



# UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL ABUSE, ASSAULT, AND HARASSMENT

Sexual violence impacts everyone. Anyone can be a victim of sexual violence, and people who commit sexual abuse, harassment, and assault exist in all our communities. This underscores why it's important for all of us to care about sexual violence and take steps to promote the safety and well-being of others.

## What is Sexual Violence?

- Sexual violence is any type of unwanted sexual contact – including sexual assault and rape.
- This can include words and actions like sexual harassment, street harassment (sometimes called “catcalling”), and nonconsensual sharing of private images, which is sometimes called “revenge porn.”
- Sexual violence may or may not involve force, and the types of sexual violence considered a crime vary from state to state. Regardless of whether a form of sexual violence is considered a crime, everyone deserves to be treated with respect and have their boundaries listened to.

As artificial intelligence (AI) has become more popular, some have used it to create “deepfake pornography,” which is false, nonconsensual sexual imagery of real people. This is also a sexual violation.

## Sexual Violence Impacts Everyone

- Sexual violence occurs across the lifespan, from children to teens, adults, and seniors.
- Nearly 1 in 4 women in the U.S. have experienced rape or attempted rape some time in their lives (Basile, et al., 2022).
- 42% of men reported some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime (Raj, Patel, & Kearl, 2024).

- More than 1 in 4 non-Hispanic Black women (29%) in the United States were raped in their lifetime (Basile et al., 2022).
- 1 in 3 Hispanic women (34.8%) reported unwanted sexual contact in their lifetime (Basile et al., 2022).
- More than 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native women (84.3%) have experienced violence in their lifetime (Rosay, 2016).
- 32.9% of adults with intellectual disabilities have experienced sexual violence (Tomsa et al., 2021).

## **People Often Know the Person Who Sexually Assaulted Them**

- Most survivors know the person who sexually abused them. People who commit sexual abuse can be family members, friends, romantic partners, or other trusted individuals, which can further complicate the trauma experienced by the victim.
- People who sexually abuse may use coercion, manipulation, threats, or force to commit sexual violence.

## **Victims are Never to Blame**

- It doesn't matter what someone was wearing, how they were acting, if they were drinking, or what type of relationship they had with the person who abused them. Everyone deserves autonomy, dignity, respect, and safety.

## **Sexual Assault is Often Not Reported**

- Most sexual assaults are not reported to police (Thompson & Tapp, 2023).
- A person may not report what happened for many reasons, including:
  - Concern they won't be believed
  - Fear of retaliation
  - Distrust of law enforcement and other authorities
  - Shame
  - Fear of being blamed

- Pressure from others
- Desire to protect the person who perpetrated the violence
- Most often, survivors disclose to friends, families, and other trusted individuals. It commonly takes survivors time to talk about their experiences, and they may not share everything at once.

## **Healing and Justice Look Different For Every Survivor**

- It's important to recognize survivors face many barriers and challenges in the criminal legal system. Not every survivor wants to move forward in that way, and these processes can be very difficult and retraumatizing for survivors.
- Survivors should always have a say in what justice and accountability look like for them.
- Healing is an ongoing process. Everyone heals in their own time and in their own way.

## **You Can Support Survivors**

- Chances are you know someone who has experienced sexual violence, even if they haven't told you.
- Your words and actions can help survivors feel seen and supported and can help to shift the attitudes and beliefs of others.
- Sexual violence thrives when it is not taken seriously and victim blaming goes unchecked.

## References

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