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Capstone Article

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The Epidemic of Sexual Assault in the United States

Every 68 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted. Sexual assault in the US is common. According to the *CDC*, “Over half of women and almost one in three men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes. One in four women and about one in 26 men have experienced attempted or completed rape” (p 5). On average, there are 463,634 victims of rape and sexual assault each year in the United States (*RAINN* 1).

It is incredibly likely you know someone who has been assaulted at some point in their lifetime. It is also likely you know someone who has assaulted someone else at some point in their lifetime. Sexual assault in the US is an epidemic; we must protect our victims and hold offenders responsible for their actions.

Too often victims, especially women, are afraid to come forward after they have been assaulted due to the likelihood that either nothing will be done, or the assailant will not suffer the consequences of their actions. *RAINN*, the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization, writes, “The vast majority of perpetrators will not go to jail or prison” (p 1), and states that out of 1,000 sexual assaults, 975 perpetrators will walk free (p 2). *RAINN*’s statistics claim that out of the 1,000 sexual assaults, 310 will be reported to the police, 50 reports will lead to arrest, 28 of those arrests will lead to a felony conviction, and only 25 of those perpetrators will be incarcerated (p 3). There are multiple examples of this in the media: boxing legend Oscar de la Hoya didn’t receive jail time for either of his two rape cases and Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson got benched for 11 games and fined five million dollars for his 26 sexual

assault allegations. Some assailants do receive the justice they deserve, but until all assailants get justice for their crimes sexual assaults will continue to happen and haunt victims.

When victims are not believed, or fear they won't be believed, it leads to silence. When a victim stays silent about their experience, that lets one more assailant walk free to potentially harm someone else. A prime example of this is Dr. Larry Nassar, the former U.S. Olympic women's gymnastics sports doctor. It was regarding Nassar's sentence that the *New York Times* wrote, "Who is serving what amounts to life in prison for multiple sex crimes involving girls and women, including members of the 2012 and 2016 U.S. Olympic women's gymnastic teams" (p 3). The newspaper *Indianapolis Star* was the first to break the sex abuse story in 2016, and on their original article from 2016 the editor wrote, "Since this article published, at least 150 people have come forward with allegations of sexual abuse against Dr. Larry Nassar. He was sentenced Jan. 24, 2018, to 175 years in prison after pleading guilty to sexually abusing seven girls. This story was originally published Sept. 12, 2016" (p 1). When victims are not believed, abusers like Larry Nassar continue to assault innocent people. Sexual assault is an issue that must be looked at more seriously.

Another example of an assailant who got away with years of abuse due to the lack of legal action taken is Harvey Weinstein. In the 2017 *New York Times* expose on Weinstein's sexual harassment history, authors Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey wrote, "An investigation by The New York Times found previously undisclosed allegations against Mr. Weinstein stretching over nearly three decades" (p 5). While *The New York Times* was conducting their investigation on the sexual assault allegations, Weinstein told the newspaper that the claims Lauren O'Conner, one of his victims, made were off base. O'Connor's claim in question: "I am a 28 year old

woman trying to make a living and a career. Harvey Weinstein is a 64 year old, world famous fam and this is his company. The balance of power is me: 0, Harvey Weinstein: 10” (*The New York Times*, p 10).

And perhaps one of the most famous abusers of all of these, Jeffery Epstein and his girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell also got away with sexually assaulting teenage girls for years without being incarcerated. Though Epstein allegedly committed suicide while waiting on the verdict of his 2019 New York trial, Maxwell had her own trial in 2021. *Sky News* wrote, “Federal prosecutor Lara Pomerantz told jurors that Maxwell and Epstein were ‘partners in crime’, describing them as ‘dangerous predators who sexually exploited and abused’ children for a decade. She said the pair enticed girls as young as 14 to engage in ‘so-called massages’, in which sex abuse came to be seen as ‘casual and normal’ after vulnerable victims were showered with money and gifts” (p 39-40). Epstein began his abuse and exploitation of young girls and women in 1985- at 32 years old- and targeted victims as young as 13. These perpetrators managed to escape justice for nearly 34 years, and countless girls became victims of heinous crimes in which they felt coerced, threatened, manipulated, and sexually abused. If these two abusers had been caught earlier- if the victims who came forward had been believed- innumerable women would have been saved.

With 97% of perpetrators walking away unscathed, there must be significantly more incarcerations, but there also must be a dramatic shift in the amount of women who are believed. According to the Central Minnesota Sexual Assault Center, “Even in the 39% of attacks that are reported to police, there is only a 16.3% chance the rapist will end up in prison. Factoring in unreported rapes, about 6% of rapists will ever spend a day in jail” (p 14). This indicates that, not

only are assailants not being taken to prison, but also majority of women are not being believed or their reports are not being taken seriously by law enforcement. Until this changes, the amount of attackers that go to prison will continue to produce shockingly low numbers, and more sexual assaults will occur in the U.S. than ever before.

Steps can be taken to ensure that this happens- because police departments are paid for by “property, business, and sales taxes; federal and state grants; local fees and fines; and voter-approved increases in general and special sales taxes” (*Public Policy Institute of California* p 3), this means local governments can raise local taxes to better fund police stations so more money can be put towards investigations of sexual assault reports. If police departments are able to receive adequate training for dealing with a sexual assault victim, as well as more resources like rape kits, victims see that their stories and experiences are valued and taken seriously. More and more people will come forward seeking help once they see that justice for their assailant is possible.

Although this is a straightforward solution to the epidemic of sexual assault, there is always potential problems and limitations. Due to police departments working under the shackles of local government’s budgeting, the decision to raise taxes in support of sexual assault resources being implemented in police departments lies with local governments. Though, democracy allows the people to raise their voice in support of what they want. If enough attention was brought to the sexual assault crisis through raising awareness and public outreach, more local governments would be pushed to support the vote as well.

Statistics show that sexual assault cases in the United States are neglected by our government and justice system; 97% of assailants walking free is a disgusting statistic that

communicates the indifference towards victims of these heinous crimes. This epidemic can be fought if victims start being believed and taken care of. There is no way to take down an assaulter if the report filed by the victim is not investigated. Sexual assault in the United States must be taken more seriously for change to happen, but with good intentions and persistent work, statistics can shift in favor of the victim, not the abuser.

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