

## Allegations of Sexual Assault & Media Coverage

In light of intense media interest regarding the validity of sexual assault allegations, the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA), one of many coalitions committed to ending sexual violence, strongly feels the need to insert a voice for survivors into the conversation. We are disheartened with the trivialization of sexual assault and the false assumptions made about victims of sexual abuse. To that point, we provide the following context to the conversation and implore the media and others engaging in the current discourse to do the same.

- **Sexual assault is pervasive in our society** – According to the University of Texas-Austin School of Social Work, 6.3 million Texans have experienced sexual assault at some point in their lifetimes.<sup>1</sup> This equates to 1 in 5 men and 2 in 5 women in our state. Sexual violence is a highly misunderstood public health issue. These skewed perceptions work against survivor disclosure and the public response to those disclosures.
- **Delayed and Under-Reporting** – According to that same study, **only 9.2%** of sexual assaults in Texas are reported to law enforcement. Reasons cited for not reporting included the fear of not being believed, afraid to report, and internalizing and minimizing their experience. Power and control are at the heart of sexual and domestic violence and help explain why delayed disclosures are so common.
- **The misnomer of “false allegations”** - The prevalence of false allegations of sexual assault is between 2 – 10%.<sup>2</sup> This range is in line with false allegations of other crimes. To suggest women lie about sexual assault is dangerously misleading and contributes to a culture of silence and shame for all survivors.
- **Media coverage of sexual abuse allegations** – As members of the media strive to objectively report allegations and incidents of sexual violence they must keep in mind the dynamics and external forces that enable sexual violence to occur. Although independent verification of allegations are routine, it can be extremely difficult to independently verify an incident that is grossly underreported, highly misunderstood, and most often occurs without a witness. Furthermore, sexual assault allegations are routinely and flippantly dismissed as a “he said/she said,” which only benefits the alleged perpetrator. The dynamics of power, privilege, and vulnerability positions survivors at a distinct disadvantage.

Sexual assault is not an easy subject to broach. Hats off to the many organizations working on behalf of survivors on a daily basis and to the survivors who bravely disclose in the face of ridicule and doubt. TAASA continues to advocate for survivor-centered policies in Texas. Included on TAASA’s agenda for the 85<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session is a bill to increase the penalties for groping. Current law classifies the intentional touching of an adult’s intimate parts without consent as a class C misdemeanor – the legal equivalent of most traffic tickets. Laws that classify groping so negligibly is one of many examples of how the culture of violence can trivialize sexual violence and impede a survivors’ search for justice.

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<sup>1</sup>Busch-Armendaris, N.B., Olaya-Rodriguez, D., Kammer-Kerwick, M., Wachter, K. & Sulley, C. (2015). Health and well-being: Texas statewide sexual assault prevalence. Austin, TX. Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault, The University of Texas at Austin

<sup>2</sup> Lisak, D., Gardinier, L., Nicksa, S., Cote, A. (2010). False Allegations of Sexual Assault: Ten years of reported cases. Violence Against Women 16 (12) 1318-1334

