

# Initial Response for Care of a Victim of Sexual Assault

**Pacific Police Development Program**  
**Global Justice Solutions**



# Overview

## Helping people to report sexual assault

- **Introduction**
- **Definitions**
- **Prevalence**
- **Impact of sexual violence – short and long term**
- **Responding to disclosure**
- **Barriers to reporting**



# One stop service for recent assault

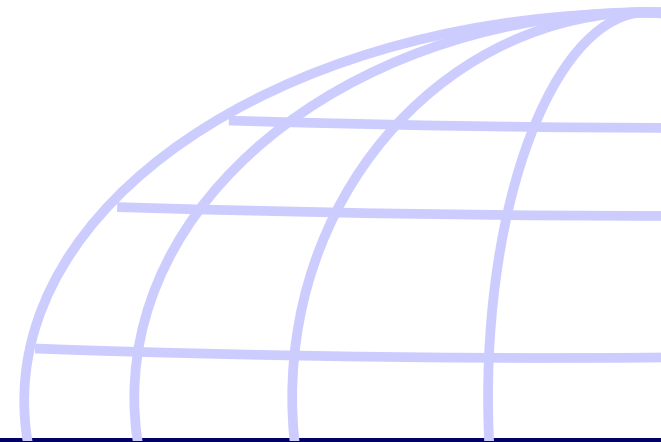
- **Medical**
- **Forensic**
- **Counselling**
- **Free**
- **Confidential**
- **24 hr service for people who have been recently sexually assaulted.**
- **Access to and from Police**





# What would make it work better?

- Knowing how to respond to assist victims
- Confidentiality
- Priorities
- Timeliness



# Broad definition of Sexual Assault

- **Sexual assault is defined as any sexual behaviour which is threatening, violent, forced, coercive or exploitative.**
- **It is a sexual act in which the victim has not given, or was unable to give consent.**
- **Sexual assault is an act or event that can be part of a process of ongoing sexual abuse.**



# LEGAL DEFINITION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

*The legal definition is different in each country.*

## **1. SEXUAL PENETRATION**

vagina (beyond labia) and anus with penis, finger, object

mouth with penis

## **2. LACK OF CONSENT**

**'consent' must be freely and**

**voluntarily given w/o force, threat, etc**



# Definition - Sexual Abuse

- **Child Sexual Abuse:** a person in a position of power or authority, uses that power or authority over another to engage them in a sexual activity.
- **Sexual abuse also can, and does, happen to adults.**
- **Perpetrators of sexual abuse are usually in a position of trust and power over the victim.**
- **For example a doctor and patient.**



# \*Scenarios for sexual abuse

- Turn to your colleague
- Take five minutes to think of types of situations in which sexual abuse may occur?
- You will need to feedback these scenarios to the group.





# Child Sexual Abuse

- Sexual abuse is usually ongoing.
- “Grooming” is the process where the perpetrator, over time, breaks down the natural resistance the victim may present to sexual behaviour.
- For example, befriending a child, buying toys, taking them out, telling them they are special
- This leads to enormous confusion for the child.
- Most children (75% approx) are sexually abused by someone they know.



# Prevalence

- **How many people are sexually abused as children?**
- **How many are sexually assaulted as adults?**



# Prevalence

- **1 in 3 girls and 1 in 6 boys are thought to be sexually abused as children (Fergusson and Mullen 1999, Dube et al, 2005).**
- **1 in 6 women experience sexual assault (Personal Safety Survey, Australia, 2006) and 1 in 10 sexual assaults are reported by male victims (National Crime Victimization Study 2003 USA),.**
- **Most offenders are thought to be male, however up to 40% of abused boys, are abused by a female (Dube, et al. 2005).**



# Prevalence in a Pacific Country

- **Sexual abuse below the age of 15 years**
  - Lower than in most other countries...reported as 1 in 50 girls (WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women)
- **First ever sexual intercourse forced**
  - 1 in 12 girls
  - In all cases, the younger the age of first sex, the more likely that it was forced



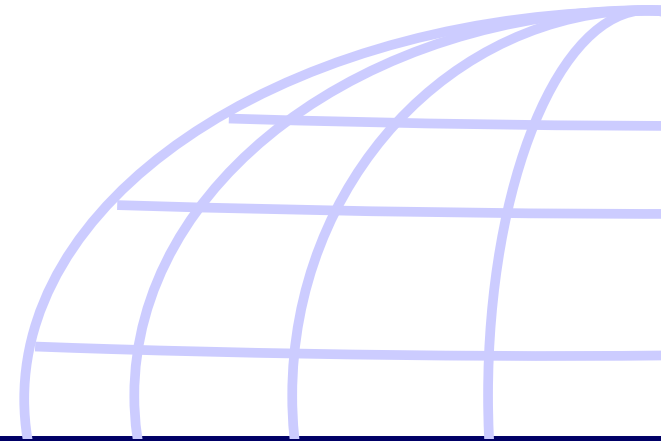
# Who is sexually assaulted?

- In most cases (85%) of sexual assault, the perpetrator is known to the victim of the assault.
- The most vulnerable members of our community are over-represented. These include:-
  - youth
  - people with disabilities or mental illness
  - refugees
  - sex workers
  - people who have experienced violence as children
  - within domestic violence
  - elderly



# Immediate response to sexual violence

- **?Fight**
- **?Flight or run away**
- **?Freeze**



# Short term effects of sexual violence

## Emotional and Physical

- Shock and disbelief
- Fright and panic
- A subjective state of terror
- **Overwhelming fear of being killed.** (Rape trauma syndrome, Burgess and Holmstrom, 1970)



# Short term effects (continued)

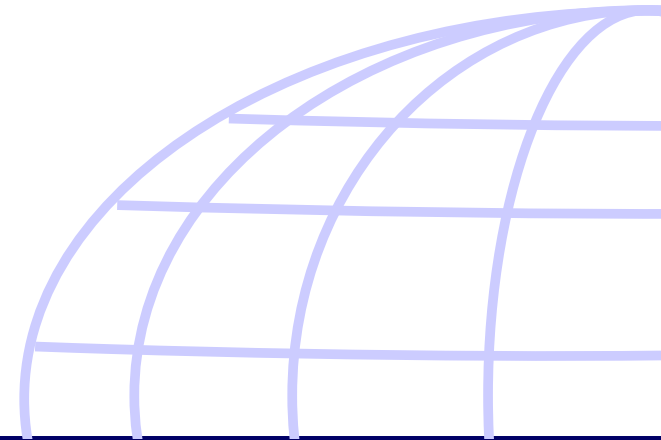
- **Acutely distressed and crying**
- **Detached and controlled.**
- **Distortion of thinking, perception and judgement**
- **Anger**
- **Feeling Unclean**
- **Wanting revenge**
- **Concern for others**
- **Feeling isolated and alone**
- **Physical symptoms-**
  - nausea, tremors, dizziness, diarrhoea, chest pain etc





# Short term effects (continued)

- **Feeling powerless**
- **A sense of having no control**
- **Feeling depressed**
- **Fear**
- **Shame**
- **Numbness**
- **Guilt**



# \*Impact on Police Reporting

- **Work with a colleague**
- **Think of a case you may have seen**
- **Without discussing the confidential details of the case, consider how these emotional responses impacted on the police report and investigation**
- **Feedback to the group**





# Males as victims of sexual assault



# Issues for male victims

- Many services do not consider that men are victims of sexual assault.
- Interview statistics show that 1:10-20 males are sexually assaulted as adults and 1:6 are sexually abused as boys.
- Factors that prevent women disclosing sexual assault are compounded for males.
- Many males will not report to the police or seek any medical attention.
- Most perpetrators of male s/a are male.



# Specific concerns for males

- **Shame**
- **What does the assault mean in terms of their masculinity?**
- **Why were they not strong enough to fight off an attacker?**
- **Does this mean that they are thought to be homosexual?**





# Responding to disclosure



# Responding to disclosure (victim perspective)

- Provide a private space for discussion
- Offer a female police officer if available
- Ask whether they would like a support person present
- Provide practical support.
- Check their safety.
- Ask whether they have any injuries
- Believe them.



# Responding to disclosure

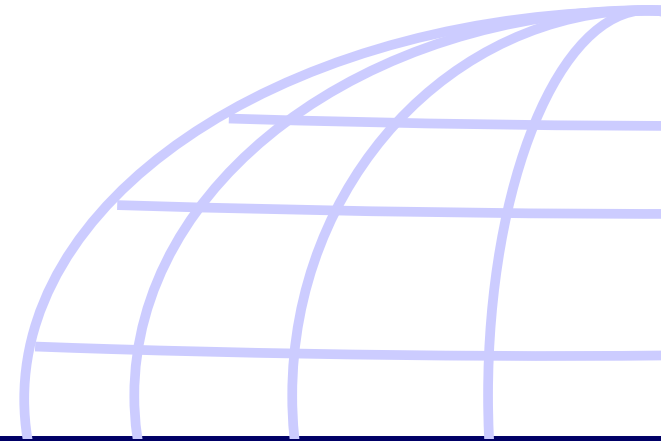
- Listen, don't try to rush them.
- Don't judge them.
- Reassure them that you are there to help.
- Identify their concerns - what do they want you to do?
- Provide information so they can make informed choices.
- Find out what happened and when it happened.
- If recent assault, offer immediate medical check up.





# Barriers to reporting sexual crimes

**Personal**  
**Legal**  
**Community**



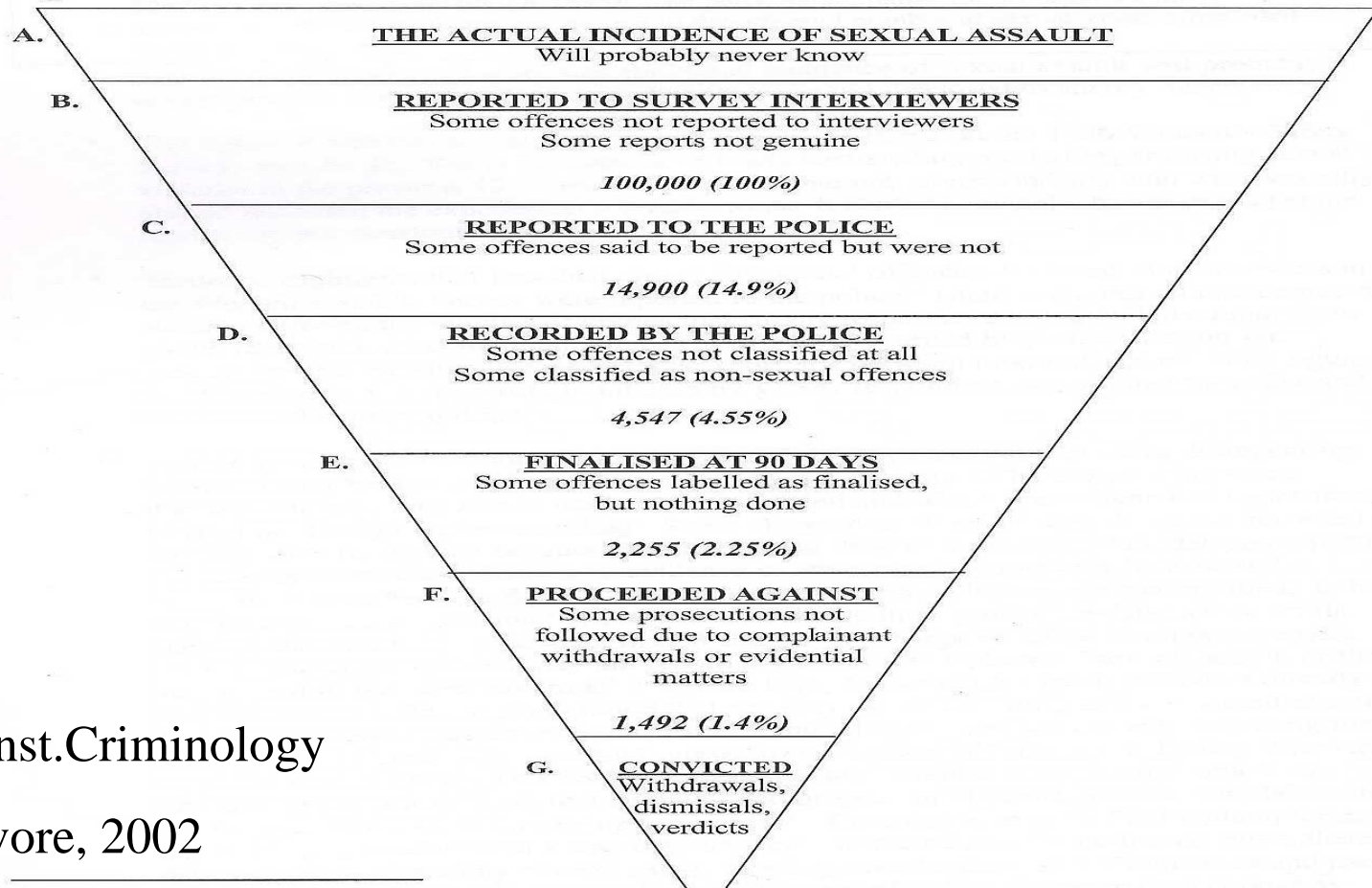
# Outcomes for victims

- Only a small percentage of victims of sexual violence report to the police
- A minority of these cases result in a conviction
- How you will respond in the initial stages of disclosure will increase the likelihood of reporting the crime and proceeding through the criminal justice system
- If you respond supportively and appropriately you will get a better witness



## Attrition of sexual assault cases

Figure 2. Attrition of sexual assault cases



Aust.Inst.Criminology

D.Lievore, 2002



# False reporting

- **The Women's Safety Survey conducted by the ABS (1996) estimated that only one in ten sexual assaults is ever reported to the police.**
- **British Home Office report (2005) estimates 3% false reporting. Estimates by police much higher.**
- **Withdrawal by complainant or inconsistencies in statement are not always indicators of a false report.**



# Barriers to reporting - Personal

- Too trivial or inappropriate to report to the police.
- Dealt with it themselves.
- Regard it as a private matter.
- Not a “real” crime.
- Not clear that harm was intended.
- Shame and embarrassment.
- Did not want friends and family to know.



# Barriers – Personal cont'd

- **Fear of reprisal from assailant or family.**
- **Self-blame or blame by others for the attack.**
- **Desire to protect offender, relationship or children.**



# Perceived barriers in the justice system

- **Police would not or could not do anything.**
- **Police would not think it was serious enough or would not want to be bothered.**
- **Fear of not being believed by the police.**
- **Fear of being treated with hostility by the justice system**
- **Fear/dislike of the police.**



# Perceived barriers in the justice system

- **Lack of proof that the incident happened.**
- **Fear of the legal system.**
- **Did not know how to report.**

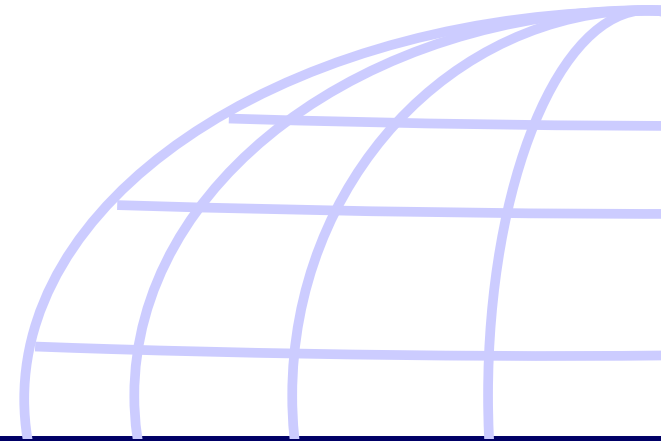




# Why police drop cases.

(UK 2001-2)

- **Insufficient evidence**
- **Victim withdrawal of complaint**
- **Victim did not complete initial process**
- **Offender not identified**
- **False allegation**
- **Other**



# \*What are the barriers here?

## Small group work

**18 year old girl**

**Had some alcohol at a family party**

**Went with a boy she liked who had also had alcohol**

**His 2 male friends arrive and the three youths have sex with her.**

**What would stop her from going to the police?**

**What would help her to go to the police?**



# Summary

**Sexual assault and abuse is common.**

**Responding to disclosure needs to be:-**

- **nonjudgmental and supportive**

**MOST VICTIMS IDENTIFY A RESPECTFUL RESPONSE  
AS MOST IMPORTANT**



# Reference

- **Sexual Assault Resource Centre, Perth, Western Australia. Education and Training Service resource materials.**

