

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Sexual-Assault Survivors and Vicarious Trauma

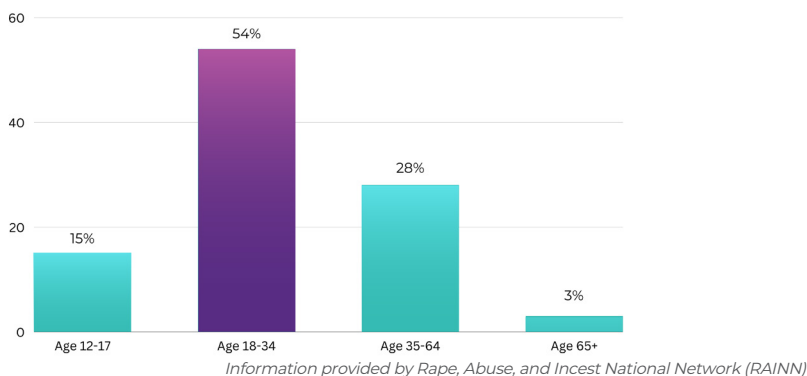
Sexual violence impacts millions of Americans. On average, there are 463,634 victims of rape and sexual assault each year in the United States. Survivors of sexual violence have an increased risk for suicide – 33% of sexually-assaulted women contemplate suicide, 13% of sexually-assaulted women attempt suicide, and those who are ages 12-34 are at the highest risk for rape and sexual assault.¹ Sexual assault can take many different forms, but one thing remains the same: it is never the victim’s fault.

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the victim. Rape is a form of sexual assault, but not all sexual assault is rape. The term ‘rape’ is often used as a legal definition to include sexual penetration without consent.

Consent means a person voluntarily and willfully agrees in response to another person’s proposition. The person who consents must possess the sufficient mental capacity and requires the absence of coercion, fraud, or error.² The laws about sexual violence vary from state to state.

The majority of sexual-assault victims are under 30



What is a bystander?

A bystander is a person who is present when an event takes place but is not directly involved. A bystander might be present when sexual assault or abuse occurs, or they could witness the circumstances that lead to a crime. Since most sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows, a bystander needs to understand their role in helping prevent this crime.

Practical Ways to Help a Survivor of Sexual Assault

- Telling them, “I believe you, and thank you for having the courage to share your story with me,” can be empowering for them.
- Reassuring them, “It is not your fault,” is an effective way to help them stop blaming themselves for their circumstances.
- Reminding them, “You are not alone, and I am here to listen,” is an effective way to help them during their safety planning.
- Speak up if you witness someone not respecting a person’s boundaries.
- Educate yourself on the definition of consent and advocacy and support services.
- Do not say, “I know how you feel.” The situation might be familiar to you, but it is unfair for you to assume how they feel after a sexual assault. Not everyone compartmentalizes trauma the same.
- Do not attempt to hug them, even if you are a friend, loved one, or victim advocate. Bodily contact could be triggering for the survivor. Always ask for permission before making physical contact.

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma can occur in employees or volunteers working in industries involving victim services, law enforcement, EMS, and fire services due to their continual exposure to victims of trauma and violence. Vicarious trauma can occur from work-related experiences such as listening to individual clients recount their victimization, viewing videos of exploited individuals, reviewing case files, and hearing about or responding to the aftermath of violence.

A Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) is susceptible to vicarious trauma and burnout because of their constant exposure to survivors of sexual assault while completing a sexual assault forensic exam (SAFE). Research has demonstrated that the responsibilities of a SANE can be challenging. One study showed that over 50% of SANEs have reported experiencing trauma due to treating sexual assault victims.³ Medical professionals checking in with each other is an effective way to verify if they require additional support, including mental health resources.

Common Negative Reactions to Vicarious Trauma

- Difficulty managing emotions
- Feeling emotionally numb or shutdown
- Destructive coping or addictive behaviors
- Relationship problems (e.g., withdrawing from friends and loved ones)
- Increased irritability: aggressive, explosive, or violent outbursts and behavior
- Lack of or decreased participation in activities that bring joy
- Avoiding work and interactions with clients or coworkers
- A combination of symptoms that comprise a diagnosis of PTSD

To avoid vicarious trauma, and continue to do the important work of helping sexual assault survivors, it is vital that professionals in this space make their mental and physical wellbeing a priority. Remember to reserve some of the care and concern you show to your patients, for yourself.

If you are in crisis or need mental health support, call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 to be connected with a trained professional who can help.

Additional Resources

Sexual Assault Hotline:
1-800-656-HOPE
(4673) or chat online
hotline.rainn.org/online

National Sexual Assault
Violence Resources Center
(NSVRC) nsvrc.org

National Domestic
Violence Hotline: 1-800-
799-SAFE (7233) or text
"START" to 88788

OhioHealth Sexual Assault
Response Network of
Central Ohio (SARNCO)
[ohiohealth.com/
community-health/sarnco](https://ohiohealth.com/community-health/sarnco)

References

- 1 RAINN. Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics. rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence. Accessed February 27, 2023.
- 2 Cornell Law School. Consent. law.cornell.edu/wex/consent. Accessed February 27, 2023.
- 3 Mobile ODT. How to prevent burnout in SANEs. mobileodt.com/blog/how-to-prevent-burnout-in-sexual-assault-forensic-nurses. Accessed February 27, 2023.

ABOUT OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

OSPF gives hope to those in crisis, strength to those in the struggle, and comfort to those in grief. OSPF is a non-profit organization that works tirelessly to help all of Ohio's communities reduce the risk of suicide. Our work includes supporting those impacted by suicide, raising awareness of mental health issues, and coordinating community resources and evidence-based prevention strategies across the state.



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