

## What lies behind the hidden figure of sexual assault?

Issues of prevalence and disclosure

Alexandra Neame and Melanie Heenan

The real extent to which women, children and men experience sexual assault remains difficult to estimate at a national level. While crime victimisation studies have helped to provide better estimates of the prevalence of certain crimes across population groups, including incidents that are unreported to police, the methods they adopt considerably reduce the visibility of particular groups of victims. For example, the National Crime and Safety Survey in Australia relies on written questionnaires that are restricted to people living in private residences, who are registered voters, who are English-speaking, and who are 15 years of age and over (ABS 2002).<sup>1</sup>

While the methodology used for the Women's Safety Survey (ABS 1996) was sensitively designed to prompt greater participation from women who had experienced sexual violence (using trained interviewers to survey women face-to-face), participation depended upon women being at least 18 years of age and living in a private residence. Some attempt was made by the researchers to provide interpreters for women from certain language groups. However, participants identified as non-English-speaking were interviewed by telephone only. Given the sensitivity of the issues being discussed, the likelihood of these women participating may well have been considerably reduced.

More targeted research, and approaches that place greater emphasis on understanding the nature and extent of the experiences of victim/survivors,<sup>2</sup> have tended to increase the likelihood of disclosure and contributed to a broader understanding of how supplemental "measures" for estimating the prevalence of sexual assault must be considered (Russell 1986). It is within the contexts of these studies that more accurate estimates of the extent of rape in marriage, date-rape, and rape in families, in war, and within church communities, have been produced.

This briefing paper draws on these more targeted approaches to highlight some key issues when considering the prevalence of sexual violence against victim/survivors within a number of specific communities or contexts. The focus of this paper has been partially directed by other new publications that give particular attention to the issues of non-reporting and the hidden recording of sexual assault. For example, it is acknowledged that the experiences of Indigenous victim/survivors are, at worst, systematically ignored or, at best, simply "added on" to issues raised by non-Indigenous women. However, a new



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The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault aims to improve access to current information on sexual assault in order to assist policy makers and others interested in this area to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent, respond to, and ultimately reduce the incidence of sexual assault.

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report (Lievore, in press), prepared by the Australian Institute of Criminology for the Australian Government's Office of the Status of Women (OSW), provides a detailed literature review on the prevalence of sexual assault. It uses both Australian and international sources, and gives particular emphasis to the issues for Indigenous victim/survivors, to rural women, and to the experiences of women in prison.

The following analysis is designed to provide a useful complement to the Australian Institute of Criminology publication. It assesses what is currently known of the "hidden" prevalence of sexual assault experienced by adult survivors as a child or in the past, women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, sex workers and homeless young people. It considers some of the barriers that continue to act as disincentives to disclosure and reporting, as well as the problems faced by victim/survivors when they attempt to access a criminal justice response.

In focusing on issues relevant to these groups, the experiences of others who are also rendered less visible through the design of the more formal survey measures may be neglected. For example, although acknowledging the need to highlight the prevalence of sexual assault against people with disabilities and older or elderly victims of sexual victimisation, these populations are beyond the scope of this paper. Future publications by the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault will attempt to address the victimisation of these groups.

## Adult survivors of childhood sexual assault

As community awareness surrounding the realities of sexual assault has improved, victim/survivors have appeared to gather more confidence in speaking out about their experiences. This has particularly been the case for survivors of childhood and/or previous (adult) sexual assault. In 1992, a national survey was undertaken with the intention of better understanding the hidden incidence of sexual assault across Australia (Easteal 1992). The research effectively challenged what had been a dominant perception, that the majority of rapes and sexual assaults were single lifetime events, perpetrated by unknown offenders, with prompt reports being made to police, and convictions readily secured.

Almost 60 per cent of the 2642 victim/survivors who responded to the survey had been raped more than once in their lives. One-third disclosed that they had also been victims of incest or intra-familial rape. Nearly half of the respondents (46 per cent) described incidents that had occurred over a decade earlier. Moreover, a staggering 37 per cent of all those who responded had, prior to the survey, never told anyone about their experiences (Easteal 1992).

While the Women's Safety Survey (ABS 1996) did not report on the lifespan of women's experiences of violence, nor focus on the incidence of violence (physical or sexual) experienced in childhood, it did ask women to reflect on any experiences of violence since the age of 15 years. The survey estimated that 1.2 million Australian women (18 per cent) have experienced at least one incident of sexual violence from age 15 years and over, and that one-third of these have experienced more than one incident.

In 1998, a Victorian based phone-in prompted 347 victim/survivors to call and relate any experiences of sexual assault that had occurred regardless of age or when the incident(s) occurred. Almost two-thirds of women callers (198 of 304), and 86 per cent (37 of 43) of male callers disclosed having experienced child sexual assault. The survey also found that the highest risk of child sexual assault was posed by a parent, usually a father or stepfather, with whom the victim lived (D'Arcy 1999).

Adult survivors have given testimony as to the many reasons why, as children, they often felt unable to disclose. Fear of family breakdown, a sense of ongoing responsibility for the safety of other children or family members, and fears for their own personal safety were all dominant themes in this context (Rush 1980; Russell 1986; Easteal 1994; Mullinar and Hunt 1997).

There is also the pervasive fear that if survivors do tell, they will not be believed. That is, survivors have internalised the effects of what remains a deeply entrenched mythology surrounding sexual assault – that victims, particularly women and children, are prone to lie about sexual abuse. A survey of community attitudes, conducted in 1995 by the Office of the Status of Women confirmed the extent to which this perception continues to inform the contemporary response to sexual assault. One-third of the survey respondents disagreed with the statement that “women rarely make false claims of being raped” (OSW 1995: 39).

### **Male victim/survivors**

Male victims are increasingly likely to be represented among sexual assault survivors, who as adults feel more able to disclose incidents that occurred to them as children (Watkins and Bentovim 2000). Approximately 70 per cent of the male victims represented in the 1992 national survey were assaulted prior to the age of 17, most commonly by family members or other adult male acquaintances (Easteal 1994). Almost half (47.4 per cent) of the male respondents had, prior to the survey, never disclosed their abuse to anyone (Easteal 1994).

While men describe similar disincentives to reporting sexual assault (McAdam and Fitts 1999), there are other factors that have historically worked against any serious public or legal recognition of the sexual victimisation of men and boys. For

example, prior to 1980 in Victoria, the offence of rape was gender-specific – men could only be the offenders of rape, not the victims (Bargen and Fishwick 1995). Further, prior to the last decade, most studies examining the prevalence of sexual violence have tended to focus almost exclusively on women's experiences. Any public recognition of the extent to which men and boys experience sexual violence has therefore been minimal. Moreover, male victims have themselves been hesitant to disclose their experiences for fear of being labelled future perpetrators or homosexual, or because they fear being treated as social outcasts, liars or as emotionally weak (Mezey and King 2000; Stott 2001).

However, in recent years there has been an increasing awareness of sexual violence crossing gender boundaries, particularly in terms of adult men disclosing child sexual assault. The Victorian Law Reform Commission's *Interim Report* (2003) indicated that just over one-fifth of reports of penetrative offences such as incest and other sexual assaults against children were made by male victims over the past eight years. Some counsellor/advocates from the Centres Against Sexual Assault also suggested that men were accessing their services in greater numbers than they had in the past and relating experiences of both childhood and adult sexual assault (VLRC 2003).

### Reporting and prosecution

While official reports of rape and other sexual assaults to police reflect a minority of all those victimised (Women's Safety Survey 1986; Crime and Safety Survey 2002), recent research published by the Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC 2003) reveals that reporting trends for victims of *past* sexual assault have increased considerably in the last eight years. Between 1994 and 2002, almost a quarter of rape reports were made at least six months after the offences occurred (VLRC 2003). For offences such as incest and other penetrative offences against children, almost one-third of reports (30.6 per cent) were in relation to assaults that occurred more than five years ago (VLRC 2003). Ten years ago, the proportion of rape reports involving offences that occurred five or more years ago was a mere 1.7 per cent (Victorian Community Council Against Violence 1991)

While only a small proportion of these cases will ever result in prosecution, the Commission's report reveals, nonetheless, that most victims of incest and other penetrative offences who are involved in court proceedings are now adults, or nearing adulthood (VLRC 2003). Further, the Commission reported that the relationship between victim and identified offenders was predominantly familial, not "unknown", as sections of the public might still expect.

Heenan and McKelvie (1997) also noted an increase in rape prosecutions involving close family members. Almost one-fifth of the 282 incidents they examined in case files involved immediate family members as offenders, including fathers and stepfathers (1997). However, they also suggested that these cases struggled to obtain convictions. Feminist legal scholars (Mack 1998; Taylor 2000) at least partially blame the structures within law that continue to prejudice the outcomes of sexual offence cases. In particular, proponents of reform criticise the continued use of corroboration warnings, where judges routinely caution juries against convicting unless other evidence can independently support the victim's version of events.

This substantially impacts on cases involving adult survivors who in recounting either past or childhood sexual assault often have nothing more than their sworn testimonies to convince juries of the accused's guilt. Advocates of abolishing the corroboration warning suggest that the high standard of proof in criminal trials ("beyond reasonable doubt") and the usual standards for testing the evidence through cross-examination should preclude the giving of such a warning as is the case with other criminal proceedings where the prosecution must establish the accused's guilt through the oral evidence of a single witness.

## Women from non-English-speaking backgrounds

Research on the prevalence of sexual violence experienced by women in Australia from non-English-speaking backgrounds remains limited<sup>3</sup>. Most large victimisation surveys target general population groups, and have paid little attention to developing approaches that might ensure greater participation from, and sensitivity towards, culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The Women's Safety Survey collected information on whether respondents were born in Australia, other English-speaking countries, or non-English-speaking countries, but the small sample size made it impossible to produce data on women's country of origin or the cultural background with which they principally identified, and their experiences of violence (ABS 1996). Yet it appeared that women born in Australia were almost twice as likely to have experienced an incident of violence in the last 12 months compared with women from non-English-speaking countries (ABS 1996). However, given that the relative standard error for that figure was 25-50 per cent, the Australian Bureau of Statistics advises that this finding needs to be treated with caution. The reliability of these figures is even more questionable when considering the difficulties that face victim/survivors from non-English-speaking communities, particularly the limits placed on their options for disclosure or making a police report.

### Barriers to identifying and reporting sexual assault

Non-English-speaking background organisations and agencies in Victoria recently came together to discuss how to progress a more sophisticated response to the issue of sexual assault in communities where English was not the first language (VLRC 2003). The group emphasised how many of the same issues identified a decade ago remain on the agenda for these women, demonstrating how little has changed in terms of attempts to make the system more responsive to the difficulties these survivors face.

The representatives spoke of a lack of culturally appropriate service provision from mainstream sexual assault services, police and the criminal justice system. They highlighted the extent to which existing models for community education remain under-resourced or not integrated across services that need to work collaboratively to be effective,<sup>4</sup> and they also raised deep concerns about the lack of data that is available to non-English-speaking communities on the prevalence of sexual assault. In Victoria, for example, no data on victims' cultural identity or background is routinely collected by police when a report of sexual assault (or any other crime) is made (VLRC 2003).

Findings from the Women's Safety Survey indicated that less than 5 per cent of non-English-speaking women reported sexual assault to the police, compared with 17 per cent of Australian-born women (ABS 1996). These overseas-born women are also greatly under-represented as clients of counselling and support services. Alwashewa (1996) conducted focus groups with 59 women from non-English-speaking communities, which revealed that few women were aware that sexual assault services even existed.

Non-English-speaking background participants in the research conducted by VLRC (2003) indicated that they might be hesitant to use such services, especially if the service was perceived to be culturally insensitive or unresponsive to their specific needs. The women participating in Alwashewa's focus groups also spoke of factors that might prevent them from accessing a sexual assault service. "Shame" was cited as the principal reason why most of the women would not make a report to the police and might be reluctant to access counselling support. They spoke of how being a victim of rape would bring dishonour to the family, their children and the community. They also spoke of their anxiety about protecting their confidentiality, particularly where workers or interpreters may also be members of the victim's community. Concerns about disclosure leading to alienation and stigmatisation within the community were also raised.

An important role identified for sexual assault services aiming to support non-English-speaking women is to increase awareness within communities of the nature of sexual assault. Women's lack of awareness of what constitutes sexual assault, and a weak sense of entitlement to sexual self-determination, can also inhibit disclosures. These factors were highlighted by some of the views expressed by the women Alwashewa spoke to, who noted: the difficulty in accepting the concept of rape in marriage; a tendency to believe that women were themselves responsible for sexual victimisation; and that rape is thought of as less serious if the woman is sexually active.

Several recommendations geared towards improving sexual assault services for women from non-English-speaking backgrounds are made in the report *Cultural Diversity and Services Against Sexual Violence* (Weeks 2002). Weeks advocates moving away from short-term, ad hoc projects in favour of sustained programs, designed and developed using the women's knowledge of their own communities and specific needs. However, this does not reduce the need for mainstream services to develop models of service provision for non-English-speaking women. These models would treat diversity as a feature of "core business", to be addressed systematically, rather than as a peripheral concern. If implemented, such changes may be effective in dismantling some of the barriers to disclosure/reporting faced by women from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and facilitate a better understanding of both the prevalence and characteristics of sexual assault amongst this diverse population.

### **Refugee women**

Refugee women face perhaps the greatest barrier to reporting sexual assault to police, or, indeed, counselling services. Pittaway (1991:21) notes that "the level of torture and trauma experienced prior to arrival in Australia is the most significant difference between women who have entered Australia as refugees and other migrant women". Of the 204 refugee women sampled by Pittaway, 37 per cent had experienced a high degree of torture and trauma, and 73 per cent had experienced a high or medium degree.

Experiences of torture by refugee women almost always include sexual torture. Refugee women who have been victims of trauma and torture, particularly at the hands of police or other authorities in their home country, are extremely unlikely to report an incident of sexual assault to police in Australia (Gonzalez and Gilmore 1992; Dimopoulos 1998). For instance, it is often not recognised that the “interviewing” styles of service providers and counsellors may be intensely confronting to women who have experienced prolonged interrogation. Clearly, these women require access to specialist services that are situated within a framework that recognises the unique needs of victims of torture/trauma (Godinjak 1999).

## Violence and sexual assault against sex industry workers

Regulation of the sex work industry<sup>5</sup> has not been directed at protecting workers from violence, improving their working conditions, or challenging the social prejudices that marginalise them from mainstream services. Rather, the regulations that do exist take the form of punitive sanctions against workers (not their clients) and, at least implicitly, support the vulnerability of sex workers and the rage and hostility often directed toward them by the public (Hatty 1989; Treleaven 1995; O’Connell Davidson 1998). Nonetheless, there is growing community concern for the rights of sex industry workers to physical safety, personal dignity, legal recognition, and access to services. However, while community opinion remains divided and legislative reform is stalled, women working in the sex industry will continue to be at greater risk of sexual violence.

### Prevalence and characteristics

Few Australian studies have focused specifically on sex industry workers’ experiences of sexual assault. Over a decade ago, Perkins (1991) reported that 20 per cent (26 of 128) of respondents to a survey of New South Wales prostitutes had been raped in the course of their work, half of these more than once. However, the same study reported a much higher incidence of rape *outside* of work: almost half of the 128 women had been raped while not working, with 95 per cent of these assaults perpetrated by a husband, lover or acquaintance (Perkins 1991). The author suggests that the disproportionately high rate of sexual assault against prostitutes in their private lives results from “men who knew that they worked as prostitutes and . . . assumed they had access to them at any time” (Perkins 1991: 224).

Surveys from other countries indicate much higher levels of violence and sexual assault against sex industry workers. However, it should be noted that several of these studies focused exclusively on street work which is generally regarded as more dangerous than brothel, parlour or escort work (Kinnell 2001; Church et al. 2001; Hatty 1989). Moreover, given the focus on street workers, the survey populations also contained much higher proportions of workers who were young, homeless and experiencing drug addiction.

Youth, homelessness and substance abuse have all been identified, both by researchers and sex workers themselves, as factors which dramatically reduce the ability of sex industry workers to control their working conditions, and greatly increase their vulnerability to sexual violence. As is discussed in the next section, homelessness is often related to the experience of intra-familial child sexual assault. While it cannot be claimed that all sex workers are survivors of

child sex abuse, the potential for revictimisation, particularly in the context of homelessness and substance abuse, is an essential part of understanding the high level of violence experienced by street workers.

A number of authors have documented the high levels of violence directed at street involved sex workers. A 1972 study of Seattle prostitutes found two-thirds had been victims of assault (James 1972); a 1982 sample of 200 San Francisco prostitutes found 70 per cent had been raped by clients on average 31.3 times, and 78 per cent had been forced into “an act of perversion” on average 16.6 times (Silbert and Pines 1982); in a 1993 interview survey of sex workers in Vancouver, 77 per cent reported experiencing violence in the last six months (with an average of seven incidents per person) – sexual assault was the most frequently reported type of violence, comprising 62 per cent of all incidents (Currie et al. 1995); and in a 1996 British study involving 40 teenage prostitutes, 27 (67.5 per cent) reported being raped by clients or pimps in the preceding year (O’Connell Davidson 1998).

Surveys such as these, and anecdotal evidence from sex worker advocates and service providers (for example, Gilbert 1993; Treleaven 1995), indicate that sexual offences against prostitutes often have different characteristics from those committed against non-sex workers. In particular, sexual violence against sex industry workers is more likely to be accompanied by physical injury. These injuries are often severe enough to require hospitalisation, and the offences are more likely to involve a weapon (Silbert 1988). Several authors indicate that perpetrators with a prior history of sexual offences or violence may specifically target sex workers in the knowledge that they are less likely to be charged or to face prosecution for sexually assaulting a sex worker (Gilbert 1992; Kinnell 2001).

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of literature documenting the strategies which sex workers have themselves put in place to decrease the risk of violence, such as refusing to provide services for more than one client at a time, not working from home alone, or in clients’ cars (Perkins 1991; Lowman and Fraser 1996). Some sex workers have also networked together to share safety information to avoid clients who are known to be violent. The former Prostitute’s Collective of Victoria developed the “Ugly Mugs” list, which compiles licence plate numbers and other information to identify offenders. The “Ugly Mugs” strategy is also used in the United Kingdom and Canada, where it is known as the “Ugly Punters” list or “Bad Date” sheet.

### **Police and the courts**

The exchange of sexual services for money is not illegal in any Australian state or territory. However, there are various penalties surrounding different actions associated with prostitution (for instance, loitering and soliciting). These sanctions generally target workers, rather than clients, and often mean that there is little choice about the circumstances under which sex workers provide services; this then reduces workers’ ability to screen for dangerous clients<sup>6</sup>. Hatty (1989: 242) argues that: “The law plays a critical role in determining the physical vulnerability of prostitute women . . . [and that] the dominant legal approaches to prostitution (prohibition and regulation) institutionalise physical and sexual violence against . . . prostitutes.”

In this context of social stigmatisation and legalised discrimination, sex workers face several unique barriers to reporting. Like other women, sex workers may blame themselves for the assault, especially if they have deviated from taking their usual safety precautions (Perkins 1991). Concern about their occupation

being exposed to friends or family is also cited as discouraging sex workers from reporting (Gilbert 1993; Treleaven 1995). However, the primary reason for non-reporting by sex workers, is a lack of faith in the police and the courts to hold the offender accountable through the criminal justice system.

Sex workers have in the past described some police as unsympathetic and/or unwilling to act on reports of sexual assault, dismissing their complaints on the grounds that “it’s part of the job”. Other sex workers have faced being charged with offences after disclosing that the assault(s) occurred in the context of sex work, while others have been arrested for outstanding fines related to their work (Treleaven 1995; Gilbert 1992).

The treatment of sex workers by the courts and the judiciary has also been the subject of strong criticism by women’s groups and sex worker advocates. Judges in particular have given voice to the conventional view that the harm suffered by sex workers is minimal or at least significantly different to that experienced by “chaste” women (Gilbert 1993; Scutt 1993; Hatty 1989; Treleaven 1995). Massive public outcry greeted the decision of *R. v. Hakopian*, in which it was ruled (sustaining the precedent established in *R. v. Harris*) that the sexual assault of a prostitute was less harmful, and therefore less of a crime, than the rape of other women.

The trial process is also likely to be particularly distressing and humiliating for sex workers. Rape trial studies have revealed that defence barristers are often allowed to cross-examine sex workers about their sexual pasts despite provisions aimed at restricting the use that the courts can make of women’s prior sexual history (Henning 1998; Heenan and McKelvie 1997; Treleaven 1995).

In considering the alarming prevalence of violence against sex workers, and the difficulties they face in both reporting and seeking redress through the criminal justice system, the argument made repeatedly by sex worker advocates is particularly salient: sex workers are not inherently more “rapeable” than other women; nor is sexual assault a necessary and inevitable facet of the sex work industry. Rather, according to Treleaven (1995: 300): “Prostitution laws are what make sex workers particularly easy targets for violence, not the existence of the sex industry itself and not their participation in it. Sex industry workers are forced by regulation and criminal sanctions into high-risk modes of work such as street and escort work.”

Given that most community lobbying has in the past actively promoted sanctions against sex workers, improving their safety will require a significant shift in community attitudes. The outcry over the decision in *R. v. Hakopian* raised some hope in this regard for a potential increase in the community understanding of, and sensitivity towards, sex workers. It appears that the conventional view of women in the sex industry as legitimate targets of sexual violence is gradually being eroded.

## Sexual assault and homelessness among young people

The literature on sexual assault often refers to the phenomenon of “revictimisation”, where a history of sexual abuse or assault is seen as a prime predictor of further abuse across the lifespan (Messman and Long 1996; Humphrey and White 2000). The experiences of homeless youth are a disturbing example of this cycle. Sexual assault is deeply implicated in the problem of youth homelessness, both as a primary or hidden cause of homelessness, and as an ongoing fact of life on the streets.

### Sexual abuse as a causal factor in youth homelessness

There is a general consensus amongst service providers working with homeless youth that sexual abuse is often implicated in young people's decision to leave the family home (Brown 1993). However, official statistics, such as those recorded by agencies providing housing assistance, tend to record very low rates of sexual abuse as a reason for leaving home.

For instance, data from Supported Accommodation Assistance Programs (SAAP) for 1990-1991 recorded sexual assault and/or incest as the cause of homelessness in only 3 per cent of all referrals (Robson 1992). Brown's review of official statistics indicates that these sources generally put the figure between 2 per cent and 7 per cent, and notes that "such data collection procedures require workers to ask sensitive questions under circumstances which oblige many young people to provide inaccurate information" (1993: 63).

Sexual assault emerges far more prominently as a cause of homelessness in various localised interview studies of homeless young people. *Forced Exit*, a 1989 profile of 200 homeless youth in Melbourne, indicates that 43 per cent of females and 16 per cent of males left home as a result of sexual abuse (Hirst 1989). Alder's interview survey of 51 homeless young people (28 males and 23 females) aged 14-18, recorded that 23 per cent of the participants left home because of sexual violence (the reason for leaving home was not a primary focus of the study however, and Alder suggests that the survey may have failed to capture the true incidence).

A Sydney survey of 92 homeless youth found that 24 per cent of males and 89 per cent of females indicated that they had been sexually abused (as cited in Brown 1993). These figures also accord with international studies. Margetts (1989) cites a United States study that reported 74 per cent of girls and 38 per cent of boys left home to escape sexual abuse. Overall, Brown (1993) reports service provider estimates that homelessness for young women is prompted by experiences of intra-familial sexual assault in between 50-90 per cent of cases.

### Sexual assault as a feature of homelessness

Young people's risk of physical and sexual violence is increased dramatically as a result of being homeless. Alder's survey revealed that 76 per cent of female and 29 per cent of male respondents had been sexually assaulted since becoming homeless. Virtually every report or survey on young people's experience of homelessness revealed accounts of rape and sexual harassment in hostels, refuges and squats.

The consequences of homelessness, and its links with drug use and prostitution, heighten the prevalence of sexual assaults amongst young people. Homeless youth are also likely to spend time in some form of corrective or protective custodial residential institution (over 62 per cent of the *Forced Exit* respondents had done so), and there are reports of sexual assault perpetrated by other detainees, and occasionally staff, in this context (for example, Forde 1999). Most disturbing, perhaps, is that several reports record incidents of sexual assault by police (Robson 1992; Hirst 1989).

### Barriers to reporting

Young people in these contexts are clearly unlikely to disclose or report sexual assault, particularly given how little trust they have in authority figures. They are also less likely to disclose to parents or teachers given their family context

may have precipitated their homelessness in the first instance. Alder (1989) reports that while 58 per cent of young people had sought help from some other person or agency, only 20 per cent had reported incidents of violence to anyone. Further, victims are unlikely to report incidents of sexual assault to police. In Alder's study, 58 per cent of males and 47 per cent of females reported being physically assaulted by police; the *Forced Exit* report found 68 per cent of males and 47 per cent of females charged with criminal offences claimed to have been physically assaulted while in police custody (Hirst 1989).

While these figures may appear exaggerated, researchers argue that the findings cannot be dismissed as merely the result of "antagonistic and prejudicial youth sub-cultural norms" (Alder 1989: 39). The accounts were consistent across different homeless populations and locations and respondents described abuses that were strikingly similar. Moreover, respondents tended consistently to underestimate the significance of such assaults and often attempted to justify the police action by suggesting that they probably "deserved it", or the police were "just doing their job" (Alder 1989: 34-39).

Most of the current knowledge about sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse amongst homeless youth comes from those who work directly with them, and develop the relations of trust necessary for disclosure. However, youth support workers often describe feeling uncertain of how to approach the issue of sexual assault, and are generally not specifically trained to deal with this issue.

The cycle of sexual exploitation and abuse of young people, often implicated in homelessness, is an example of the extent to which vulnerable individuals can slip through the networks established to protect and support them. Moreover, the difficulties in gathering accurate data describing the association between sexual assault and youth homelessness poses a challenge to conventional understandings of what makes "good research" on sexual assault prevalence.

## Conclusion

Victimisation studies have proved critical in the context of understanding the prevalence of sexual violence and in exposing the extent to which sexual assault is a reality in the lives of large numbers of women, children, and men. This paper has been primarily concerned with describing some of the "hidden" populations of sexual assault. However, it underlines the limits of national surveys and other victimisation studies in exposing the prevalence of sexual assault for many specific sections of the Australian community.

So far, large-scale victimisation studies have been unable to systematically document the experiences of, amongst others, adult survivors of child sexual assault, women from non-English-speaking backgrounds, sex workers, and homeless women. More effective have been small-scale, targeted research designs that give emphasis to the details of victim/survivor's experiences, which often document the many disincentives that continue to operate against victims disclosing and/or reporting sexual violence to police.

However, in the absence of more sophisticated instruments or more sensitive measures that can better estimate the diversity of victim/survivors experiences, it is critical that such studies are given equal attention by policy-makers, governments, and service providers in working towards developing more inclusive and effective responses to sexual violence.

## Endnotes

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- 1 There is also the issue of terminology. Studies define “sexual assault” in various ways to accord with particular research aims and design. Some may rely on the legal definitions of state and territory jurisdictions, while others employ broader definitions that capture a wider range of experiences. In this paper, the terms sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual violence are used interchangeably, except where reference is made to particular studies. In these instances, the terminology used by the researchers/authors is retained.
- 2 The phrase “victim/survivor” is widely used in the sexual assault field. The term “victim” recognises the realities of sexual assault and implies a rejection of norms that have often positioned victims as deserving of, or complicit in, offences committed against them. The term “survivor” denotes respect for the courage and strength of those who have experienced sexual assault.
- 3 Currently there is no research documenting the prevalence of sexual assault experienced by men from non-English-speaking backgrounds.
- 4 Weeks (2002) documents a range of effective approaches, programs and initiatives undertaken by services and communities that attempt to enhance access and equity practices across Australian services against sexual assault.
- 5 Sex industry work, sex work and prostitution are used interchangeably in this paper to denote the exchange of sexual services for money or goods. However, terms such as “street work”, “brothel work” or “escort work” are used to refer to specific contexts in which sex work occurs.
- 6 The restrictions on public soliciting, or street walking, often forces sex industry workers into back alleys, or to minimise preliminary negotiations with, and assessments of, clients who approach them in cars (Treleven 1995).

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