

Reflections on costing sexual assault

While costing sexual assault will inevitably leave many costs out, and while there are inherent problems in putting any monetary figure on some effects of sexual assault, those costs that have been measured are substantial. Costs of sexual assault in terms of many billions of dollars indicate the serious impact sexual assault has on victim/survivors and the communities within which they exist. On the basis of economics alone, sexual assault has collective costs. As the authors of the Michigan study concluded: “laws and public policy that ignore the economic burden sexual violence places on society at large, as well as on individual survivors, are laws and public policy that misunderstand and underestimate the nature and cost of sexual violence” (Post et al., 2002, p. 780). Burden of disease methodology shows the effects of violence against women are cumulative and persistent, and violence against women is the major factor in premature death, poor reproductive health and poor mental health among women. Sexual assault should no longer be thought of as private burden and experience, but rather as a significant social cost in urgent need of reduction. Some writers have asked: who benefits economically from violence against women? For example, Stanko (cited in Laing & Bobic, 2002) wrote:

If studies showing the economic costs of violence against women are not effective in directing government and business efforts towards reducing male violence, it may be because the economic costs revealed in such studies are less than the unspoken economic benefits of maintaining male dominance in social institutions. The millions of pounds in costs resulting from male violence may be a small price for men to pay in exchange for their continued control of political and economic power, resources and status. (p. 11)

Certainly, however, it needs also to be emphasised that, in the end, violence hurts all of society, not only certain groups within it. Overall, it is important to raise awareness of the ripple effects of sexual assault, and draw attention to how these may harm many members of society, as well as society itself.

Conclusion

Sexual assault and violence against women in general have often been only characterised as “private experiences”. This means that sexual assault and other violence remain hidden and taboo, and are believed by many to be rare events. It also renders the ripple effects of sexual assault and other violence invisible. This paper has recognised that sexual assault affects many individuals in profound ways, and has demonstrated that the effects of sexual assault spread out into the community in a ripple effect among those close to the victim/survivor, those who work with her or him, and the communities and wider societies within which the violence of sexual assault exists. A number of implications flow from this.

- *In relation to family members and friends*—If we acknowledge that many family members and friends will also be profoundly harmed by the sexual assault of a significant other, then specialist services will need to be adequately funded to formalise and expand already existing services for these people. These people’s “wounds” must be validated, and their recovery assisted.
- *In relation to people working in the sexual assault field*—Given that the latest research suggests vicarious traumatisation is at least to some degree inevitable

when working in this field, and that individual coping strategies are not necessarily correlated with reduced levels of vicarious trauma, better efforts must be made to recognise vicarious traumatisation in the whole range of professions dealing with sexual assault. Occupational health and safety measures need to be put in place to protect workers from harm. This should not result in a stigmatisation of these professions, but rather the recognition of the extraordinary efforts of these workers and the wisdom they hold about an important yet under-recognised aspect of our society. Increased prestige should be given to these workers and mechanisms created to politically and culturally mobilise them as a group.

Overall, this paper has documented the profound harm and sheer costs of sexual assault. While people and communities do and will recover from sexual assault, sexual assault is a trauma that is preventable, and significantly more effort needs to be made in this direction. It is simply not good enough for sexual assault to continue to be largely privatised and a taboo topic. Awareness-raising about these issues needs to be such that talking about sexual assault becomes commonplace. Strategies to prevent sexual assault need to be increased, including strategies that focus on creating greater respect for women and other disempowered people, and on communicating the social unacceptability of all violence. Non-violence should be promoted as a fundamental social and community value.

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