

Identifying the needs and uses of sexual assault data

In the 2001-2002 Budget, the Australian Government announced funding of \$16.5 million for a *National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault*, which represents the Government's commitment to reduce and prevent sexual assault. The initial focus of the Initiative has been on establishing a sound evidence base, including an information strategy, to facilitate access to national, policy-relevant data.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has recently published an information paper, *Sexual Assault Information Development Framework* that forms the basis of this information strategy. The Framework is designed to facilitate the development of strategies to produce more uniform data from existing sources, as well as to inform future collection processes. It identifies the various requirements for sexual assault data, and reviews available sources (as well as their potential uses) in order to identify the gaps that currently exist in national data on sexual assault.

While it is acknowledged that "perfect" recording of the incidence and nature of sexual assault will never be possible, the Information Development Framework is a valuable resource for informing a broad-based, long-term perspective on the needs and uses of sexual assault data. The elements underpinning the Framework include: the context of sexual assault; actual

and perceived risk; the number of incidents and the responses made; and information on the impacts and outcomes of sexual assault.

These elements allow a long-term analysis of sexual assault as a social problem; an assessment of how the various support, police and legal services are responding to sexual assault; a more accurate view of service effectiveness that will better inform the ongoing development of appropriate programs and services; and the capacity to measure changes in sexual assault patterns over time.

A key part of the Information Development Framework is the proposal of strategies with regard to the tracking of sexual assault data over time. Specifically, this will include following trends in reporting, the nature of incidents, and the characteristics of victims and perpetrators.

Further collaboration in the development of a data collection plan, as proposed in the Framework, is a crucial initiative as a means of boosting what is known about the prevalence and nature of sexual assault.

Information Paper, Sexual Assault Information Development Framework, Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003), Catalogue No. 4518.0. lyn.tucker@abs.gov.au

Copies of the paper are available by phoning Jennifer Farley in the Office of the Status of Women on (02) 6271 5623. It may also be accessed on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website www.abs.gov.au under Themes\Crime and Justice.

Sexual offences and the criminal justice system

In June 2003, the Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission released *Seeking Justice*, the results of an inquiry into how all sexual offences (against adults and children) are handled by the Queensland criminal justice system.

There were three terms of reference for the inquiry:

- the training, expertise and supervision of police officers investigating sexual offences;
- the adequacy of existing guidelines and procedures for the initiation and discontinuance of the prosecution of sexual offenders by police and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP); and
- the appropriateness of, and the circumstances in which, the publication of identifying information about a person charged with a sexual offence should be suppressed.

The greatest concern to emerge in submissions to the inquiry was the high levels of attrition of sexual offence matters from the criminal justice system: only 17 per cent of reported sexual offences result in conviction.

The commission made 24 recommendations in response to the issues raised by the enquiry. Some of the major recommendations are as follows:

- to enhance the understanding of sexual abuse at all levels of the criminal justice system by introducing training for specialist police and ODPP staff
- to improve the response of regional police to allegations of sexual abuse
- to improve the level of support police and the ODPP offer victims through specialist training, and the implementation of a formalised complaints-handling process
- to improve the transparency of ODPP decision-making processes, both in relation to police and complainants, by requiring written summaries of decisions made about cases
- to retain existing prohibitions on the publication of the identity of a person accused of a sexual offence, and to close the gaps that exist in the legislation

Seeking Justice: An Inquiry into the Handling of Sexual Offences by the Criminal Justice System, Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission (2003).

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