

Male survivors of sexual assault

ACSSA talks to SAMSSA Coordinator Tim Bavinton about a support service established in Canberra to assist male survivors of rape and sexual violence.

The Service Assisting Male Survivors of Sexual Assault, known as SAMSSA, is a non-profit community service providing support, information and referral services to male survivors of sexual assault in the Australian Capital Territory, and their partners, friends, family and other supporters.

SAMSSA also provides professional development training, community education and schools programs on male sexual assault and related issues. The Service is auspiced by the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre, with which it works collaboratively while maintaining an autonomous service delivery and management structure.

Researchers at the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA) asked Tim Bavinton, the Coordinator of SAMSSA about the development of the Service, and the kinds of issues that relate to working with male survivors of sexual assault.

ACSSA: What was the need for a men's sexual assault service?

Tim: In 1995 the ACT Government conducted a review of sexual assault services for adults that highlighted the need for sexual assault support services for male survivors. The need for a separate service for male survivors was identified primarily by counsellors, youth workers and other community service providers who worked directly with men who were increasingly disclosing experiences of sexual abuse as children or adolescents, but as adult men were often being excluded from counselling and support services that were exclusive to women and children. Moreover, little research had been conducted at this time to explore the issues that faced male survivors of child sexual assault, or the extent to which men were also the victims of adult rape.

ACSSA: How did SAMSSA get started?

Tim: The Service initially took the form of a pilot "needs assessment" project in 1997. The survey results of the project overwhelmingly supported the establishment of services for men and helped to design the framework and philosophy that would inform service delivery. The surveys also contributed important information about the nature and impact of sexual violence against men, which was also consistent with the more rigorous academic studies reported in the field. The results led to SAMSSA receiving funding through a service-purchasing contract with the ACT Government that enabled the employment of a second part-time worker.

ACSSA: What is the SAMSSA philosophy or framework for providing service?

Tim: One of the early tasks of the SAMSSA Steering Committee was to develop a comprehensive statement of philosophy and clear aims and objectives that would inform service delivery. Specifically, the Service aims to support men recovering from sexual assault and child sexual abuse, to educate and inform the community about male sexual assault issues, and to assist men to eradicate sexual violence perpetrated against men, women and children.

SAMSSA also aims to offer a service that is relevant, responsive, safe and accessible for individual service users within a pro-feminist analysis of sexual violence, and to work cooperatively with, and acknowledge the work of, women's services in the area of sexual assault.

The Service's philosophy states explicitly that:

- SAMSSA is opposed to all forms of sexual violence and domination.
- SAMSSA is a male-positive, gay-affirming and pro-feminist service.
- SAMSSA supports healthy, non-violent, life-affirming and creative ways of being men.
- SAMSSA recognises and welcomes the challenges and opportunities of diversity in the Australian community.

ACSSA: What are some of the difficulties you face in running a sexual assault support service for men?

Tim: The main difficulty arises from being a small agency with two part-time workers and finding a sustainable balance of resourcing versus need. In particular:

- the potential need to provide individual support services must be balanced against what is realistic within funding resources;
- the demand for education and training services (schools programs, professional development training, community groups) is high, and must be balanced against making information, referral and support services accessible and responsive to the needs of individual men seeking support;
- adequate time must be allocated to address service development, issue and profile-raising in the community, and participating in the infinite range of possible network development, systems advocacy, and consultations processes which are never reflected in funding agreements (that is, service contracts).

In terms of providing a sexual assault service for men, the difficulties lie in ensuring that the service is accessible and relevant to men, who are not a homogenous group, and hence a “one size fits all” approach is neither effective nor reflective of the diverse needs of Indigenous men, young men, gay and bisexual men, men from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, men with a disability, and so on.

We have found that having a separate service identity that specifically names male sexual assault has been critical to men’s identification with the service.

ACSSA: What are the general characteristics of male victim/survivors (for example, recent assault against adult males as distinct from adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse/assault)?

Tim: The vast majority of men who use SAMSSA’s support services are adult survivors of sexual violence that occurred in childhood or during adolescence. Survivors of recent assaults are generally referred through the 24-hour Sexual Assault Crisis Counselling Service operated by Canberra Rape Crisis Centre, or through the police. Many men do not define their experience as sexually abusive even when they may have had very negative feelings and long-term impacts from particular experiences, and this is where community education work is important in allowing men to name that experience as sexual violence.

ACSSA: What are some of the key issues facing male victim/survivors of sexual assault?

Tim: The SAMSSA *Needs Assessment Survey*, undertaken in 1998, asked respondents to list the impact and effects of sexual violence in the lives of men, and the kinds of issues that are relevant to consider when working with male survivors.

The issues identified through the survey ranged from concerns about sexuality and gender (which are almost universal for male survivors); men’s sense of isolation (“I’m the only person this has happened to”) arising from a combination of personal and social shame and community silence on male sexual assault issues; and issues about the gender of the counsellor/worker allocated to work with survivors. With respect to this last issue, SAMSSA’s experience is that most men are either ambivalent about the gender of their counsellor, or appear in roughly equal numbers in terms of having a strong

Table 1		Impacts and effects of sexual violence in men’s lives
<i>SAMSSA Needs Assessment Survey, June 1998</i>		
Concerns about sexuality, gender roles and/or body	84%	
Fear of not being believed or not being taken seriously	80%	
Low self-esteem and self-care	80%	
Depression	80%	
Guilt and/or self-blame for the assault or abuse	76%	
Relationship difficulties or breakdown	72%	
Anger / Hurt at being a victim	72%	
Anxiety and Stress	72%	
Concerns about mental health / wellbeing	64%	
Sexual difficulties or dysfunction	64%	
Thoughts about suicide	60%	
Distrust of others (particularly men)	60%	
Fears about safety and security	56%	
Anger at / hatred of men	52%	
Workaholism (to avoid feelings and memories)	52%	
Dissociation (psychological distancing)	48%	
Self-harming	44%	
Difficult relationships with co-workers	44%	
Addictive/compulsive use of drugs and alcohol (to avoid and repress feelings and memories)	40%	
Feelings of anger and rage	36%	
Sleep disturbance / nightmares	36%	
Addictive/compulsive sexual behaviour	32%	
Extreme risk-taking behaviour	32%	
Flashbacks to and memory triggers of the assault or abuse	28%	
Suicide Attempts	28%	
Fears of becoming a perpetrator	20%	
Isolation and alienation	16%	
Fear of other men	12%	
Eating disorders	12%	
Helping others a lot, training in the helping professions	12%	
Shame and humiliation	8%	
Loss of confidence and assertiveness	8%	
Sense of injustice / passion for justice	8%	

preference for working only with men or women. This is often influenced by the gender of the perpetrator, or specific socio-cultural needs.

ACSSA: How are male victim/survivor's needs similar to and/or different from women's?

Tim: The issues for male survivors are often similar to the issues identified by women. The major exception concerns sexuality and gender roles – most male survivors report confused feelings and thoughts about their sexuality, where this is not so prominent an issue for women. Alongside the fear many men have of being disbelieved, the level of social homophobia that exists across communities works to often silence men from speaking out about their experiences of sexual violence. The order of processing emotional responses can also be different for men. Workaholism as a numbing strategy is socially sanctioned for men much more so than women. The degree of self-harming behaviour or suicide may also differ between men and women survivors.

ACSSA: Are there unique issues at stake for male victim/survivors when considering whether to pursue a criminal justice response?

Tim: Not generally. I think the same issues are relevant for men and women – the difficulty in prosecuting historical matters, the emphasis on consent in the burden of proof (“my word against his”), re-victimisation through the process. These are all issues of concern to men as well as women. I think the issues survivors consider in pursuing a criminal justice outcome are less related to gender, and more to culture and ethnicity, (dis)ability, access to legal advice (financial resources), and credibility in “the system” (mental health status, previous criminal history etc). Clearly some men and women are more advantaged than others on this basis.

The basic problem arises because the justice system purports to be the forum where rights are upheld and grievances addressed in our community, but this is rarely the experience of the sexual assault survivor within that system. Instead, it becomes the forum where a survivor's overwhelming experience of sexual violation is reduced to a few generic charges, where once a report is made to police decisions are made outside of their control: they can be harassed and bullied in the giving of their testimony, they are not generally recognised or treated as the aggrieved party in our criminal justice process but a witness to a crime against an impersonal State/Crown, and sex without consent is routinely deemed consensual (or at best unproven) by judicial fiat.

ACSSA: What advice would you give others in the community about responding to a male friend/partner/relative who discloses sexual assault to them?

Tim: We consistently advocate that everyone in the community can respond to a disclosure of sexual assault or sexual abuse without requiring a specialist degree or years of training. The two messages that are most important for a survivor to hear at the time of disclosure are “It's not your fault,” and “I believe you,” because these are the two things that survivors fear – that they are to blame for what happened, and that they won't be believed when they tell. These messages allow a survivor to continue to talk and to seek further assistance.

Another useful tool for us all is to consider how we respond if someone tells us they have been in a car accident. The range of emotional, psychological and behaviour reactions are similar for survivors of sexual violence. And if partners, family and friends respond as they would, giving plenty of space to tell the story, assisting with medical and legal information, expecting a range of reactions etc, then they will be on the right path. Community acknowledgement and acceptance are central to the recovery process for survivors of all kinds of traumatic experiences.

ACSSA: Do counsellor/advocates need different or additional skills when working with men?

Tim: The diversity of men and men's needs and experiences requires a diversity of support options. The critical skills and attitude of the supporter are the same regardless of the gender of the client. A willingness to listen, understand and empathise with the client's experience, and the capacity to engage and build rapport is central to the therapeutic or support relationship. No single counsellor, therapist or support worker is capable of being all things to all people. I think there are useful strategies and ideas for working with young men, or Indigenous men, for example, that facilitate that rapport and allow the greatest opportunity for sustaining the connection, but I don't think it's a simple gender issue. My general response to any “working with men . . .” question is to ask “which men?” ➤

ACSSA: Does SAMSSA have a working relationship or established procedures with ACT police? For example, in Victoria the Police Code of Practice mandates that police must ensure victim/survivors of recent assaults receive crisis care from a Centre Against Sexual Assault within two hours of the report being made.

Tim: SAMSSA has call-out arrangements with Canberra Rape Crisis Centre in terms of providing an immediate crisis care response. Under the auspice of the Centre, SAMSSA is also party to protocols with the Australian Federal Police Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Team. The relationship with that unit is very positive, but further work in building and extending the protocol to general duties officers is required.

ACSSA: Is the recognition that men can be victims of sexual assault stalled or growing?

Tim: I think recent media coverage of sexual abuse of boys in education, religious and sporting institutions has increased community awareness of male sexual assault in general. However, I think we will face difficulties in having sexual abuse within the family (and extended social network) recognised and addressed.

It is easy to be scandalised by the paedophile priest, or outraged by stranger assaults. It is much harder to sustain that rage when it is our family members and friends. This is the most difficult aspect of sexual violence for the Australian community to grasp – that the family and the family home are foundational to the stability of society, and are happy, safe places for many people and at the same time the family (and school, church, club, sporting team etc) is the location of horrendous levels of violence and abuse for many others.

The other impediment to the recognition of the impact of sexual violence for boys and men is the attitude that even if it does happen, they are not harmed or affected by it, that sexual abuse is not really an important issue for our community. I think that the scale of sexual victimisation and exploitation of women, children and men, and the way it is normalised and/or ignored, is so overwhelming that most people cannot stay aware of it for too long without having their basic ideas about the safety of the world and the goodness of humanity profoundly challenged. So most people simply don't think about it for very long.

■ ACSSA is grateful to Tim Bavinton for taking the time to discuss the work of SAMSSA.

Service Assisting Male Survivors of Sexual Assault

Contact SAMSSA on (02) 6262 7377
on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays
from 9 am to 5 pm.

New estimates on the hidden figure of sexual assault

Non-reporting and Hidden Recording of Sexual Assault: An International Literature Review, **Dr Denise Lievore of the Australian Institute of Criminology for the Australian Government's** **Office of the Status of Women, Canberra.**

While there is a substantial international literature on sexual assault, much about its extent and nature remains unclear, partly due to the hidden nature of the offence and high levels of under-reporting to police.

A recently published report by Dr Denise Lievore draws on a range of international data sources to offer a comprehensive analysis of:

- socio-cultural, personal and situational factors influencing women's reporting decisions;
- differences in reporting and recording of sexual assault in rural and urban areas;
- the hidden recording of sexual assault as an aspect of attrition within the criminal justice system;
- recording of sexual assault in other systems; and
- current gaps in knowledge.

Dr Lievore gives particular emphasis in her report to how these various issues and factors impact on Indigenous women, women from other culturally diverse communities, women in prison, and women in rural Australia.

Her overview highlights that there are many commonalities in the reasons for non-reporting across countries and cultures. However, cultural and social specificities often mediate the significance of particular barriers to reporting for women in certain cultural groups, thus demonstrating how marginalisation is both a key risk factor for sexual assault and a barrier to accessing the justice system. The report suggests that a range of initiatives are required to increase the confidence victim/survivors have in seeking support from services, from their communities and from the law.

This report provides an excellent resource for those who seek contemporary and reliable estimates on the hidden figure of sexual assault in Australia.

To obtain a free copy, phone Jennifer Farley on (02) 6271 5623, or download a pdf file version from the Office of the Status of Women website: www.osw.dpmc.gov.au.