

Sexual assault is a challenging topic to bring up in polite conversation. This crime is deeply personal and deeply traumatizing for the people victimized. Yet, this is a crime that could affect anyone and does affect thousands of Minnesotans each year. A sexual assault happens every 68 seconds in the U.S. It's important to remember that the numbers we read are real people; our family members, friends, and community members. They are the reason why everyone should be concerned about sexual assault and join in efforts aimed at curbing this crime.

When asked about sexual assault, most people will picture a stranger accosting his victim in a dark secluded place or maybe their thoughts flow to warnings circulating in social media on the dangers of zip-tied windshield wipers. In reality, survivors tell a different story. The overwhelming majority of sexual assault victims had some kind of pre-existing relationship with their abuser. According to Briana Theising, Director of Client Services at the Central MN Sexual Assault Center (CMSAC) in St. Cloud, roughly 90% of victims they help knew their perpetrator prior to their assault. Theising said sexual violence can and does happen in all communities. According to Theising, "one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime and about 3% of American men have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime."

The responsibility for sex assault crimes always lies with the perpetrator who chooses to break the law. Like all crime, there is no way to completely eliminate the possibility of becoming a victim and discussing ways in which people may minimize their risk of victimization does not mean those who fail to heed such advice have contributed to their victimization. There are no exceptions to the requirement in Minnesota law of freely given and coherent consent prior to engaging in sexual conduct. This requirement remains regardless of how a person is dressed, the specifics of what intoxicants they chose to consume, or their relationship status. Theising encourages people to clearly communicate their boundaries in their relationships and be assertive about these boundaries. Theising said "it's okay to be loud and assertive to someone who is sexually pressuring you; even if it hurts their feelings."

Sexual assaults are generally accomplished when a perpetrator gains access to a victim and is able to exploit the level of trust given to them. The access piece is especially important when we discuss child victims. The best defense a child has against becoming the victim of sexual assault is an involved parent with a healthy amount of skepticism. Sexual exploitation of minors is generally a gradual process perpetrated on children over time. Parents who know the people interacting with their children, both in person and online, are better able to detect and prevent the early efforts of perpetrators seeking to groom and abuse them. When adults are victims of sexual assault, a violation of trust is most often the perpetrator's primary tool. Being cautious about the people in whom you place enhanced levels of trust may serve to keep you clear of those who would abuse that trust and perpetrate sexual assault. Being alert for and avoiding situations that force you to place more trust in a person that you normally would will serve you well. Theising encourages people to trust their feelings about others, especially if you feel you are being pressured into unwanted situations or sexual activity. Theising recommends people pay attention to behaviors that raise alarm. Theising says these behaviors might include someone sitting or standing too close or who seems to enjoy your discomfort; a person who stares excessively or blocks your way; or someone who, in their words or actions, is inappropriately intimate with you.

When asked if there are things everyone can do to reduce the prevalence of sexual assault, Theising said "Challenge rape culture. Sometimes our silence about inappropriate comments or jokes can perpetuate attitudes that allows sexual violence to happen. Educate yourself so you are aware of

the facts rather than the misperceptions. Don't buy sex or utilize pornography. Obsessive use of pornography has normalized sexually violent acts. Practice bystander intervention." The CMSAC has many more resources available for people who have been victims of sexual assault or those looking to become more involved or educated on combatting sexual assault on their website at www.cmsac.org.

Sexual assault affects all communities, including ours here in Central Minnesota. We hope you will join us in working to change that and help make a better tomorrow. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.