

By Joanne Welter

The rapist women need to fear most is not the grimy character hiding in an alley wearing a stocking mask and holding a knife.

The rapist women need to fear most is the guy with the corsage standing at the door; the neighbor dropping by for a chat; the fellow who suggests a quick drink after work.

In 1992, 69% of the felony sexual assaults in the City of San Diego involving victims over the age of 14 were committed by acquaintances. In 1993, that rose to 83%.

Yet the sexual assaults we hear about from the news media, and from many police agencies, are almost invariably brutal "stranger" rapes which, while violent and traumatic, are far less common than "acquaintance rapes."

In March 1993, the San Diego Police Department's sex crimes unit began studying acquaintance rape to determine how it could be reduced. We found the crime had entirely different dynamics from "stranger rapes," was more preventable, and a large part of that prevention rested on an active public education program.

The unit studied sexual assault reports to determine the number of crimes committed by acquaintances and strangers. After separating the cases into two categories, we began to study all the data.

We looked at the type of sexual assault involved, the sex, race and age of the victim and suspect, whether alcohol and drugs were known to be involved, the location of the crime, the time of day, the day of the week, whether weapons or force were used, and the area of the city.

The analysis was startling even for veteran detectives and officers.

We discovered most stranger assaults are random, and although there is a definite high risk time of day, the victim has little control over whether or not the crime occurs.

Assaults committed by acquaintances, on the other hand, are very different. In one recent year, for example, 57% occurred in a residence and 48% occurred between 10 p.m. Friday and 4 a.m. Sunday.

Potential victims have many options which can dramatically decrease their risk and exposure to this type of crime.

In most sexual assaults involving ac-

Local Program Targets Acquaintance Rape

quaintances, the crime occurs in the suspect or victim's own home and many involve alcohol and drugs. The common defense is "consent," which is difficult to disprove without witnesses or significant injuries.

As a result, detectives spend many hours investigating crimes that have little or no promise of adjudication — only 10% of the total number of cases received in the sex crimes unit in 1994 were submitted to the District Attorney's Office for evaluation and prosecution and, of those, only half were issued and taken to conviction.

Almost half — 49% — of rape victims are between 19 and 25 years old. All sexual assaults are traumatic and

have a life long effect on the victims. There is a common belief that rapes committed by acquaintances are somehow less traumatic than those committed by strangers, but that is simply wrong.

Although stranger assaults tend to be more violent, assaults by acquaintances are often more traumatic because the victim, already feeling betrayed, is severely judged by her peers, the community and the judicial system — from the first responding officers to the jury.

Therefore, many of these crimes go unreported and in many cases, the victim sees the difficulties in pursuing prosecution and chooses to suspend the investigation.



"Oh it's you! Come on in! For a moment there I thought it was a stranger...."

If the number of preventable sexual assaults is reduced — and the most preventable are acquaintance rapes — patrol officers and detectives will spend more time working unsolved cases that present a serious threat to the community — and a better chance of locking up those responsible.

So we decided to embark upon some public education in order to help prevent acquaintance rape.

Historically, sexual assault programs have addressed “stranger” suspect issues in classes taught by men with experience in self-defense and martial arts.

Typically, the virtually 100% female audience would be told to fight off an attacker, use Mace or carry a gun.

The problem is, though, that very few women tote a can of Mace to the front door, when greeting a neighbor over to borrow a cup of sugar. And in offering such “beware of strangers” advice, rape programs reinforced the myths about sexual assault.

So we started our own program, a volunteer speakers’ bureau.

To provide accurate public information, we recruited and intensively trained volunteers, sending them as emissaries to any interested group in San Diego County.

The speaker’s bureau is diverse. A third of the group is male and several ethnic groups are represented. Members range from 20 to 65 years old. Each per-

son is motivated and qualified to give presentations to just about any group requesting our services.

All our volunteers have been given thorough background checks and 30 hours of training on this crime and its effects. All were interviewed and selected based on their motivation and their ability to work with this sensitive subject. Members of the speaker’s bureau were also encouraged to go on ride-alongs with sex crimes detectives and patrol officers.

Training began in January 1995 and concluded in February. To date, we have conducted some 50 presentations.

This project has been operating without a budget. All speakers, both officers and citizens, donated their time to attend training and they continue to attend meetings and conduct presentations as volunteers. Expert instructors provided at no charge have come from the San Diego District Attorney’s Office, Children’s Hospital’s Center for Child Protection, Villa View Community Hospital, Chula Vista Police Department, the Center for Women’s Studies and Services, the University of California San Diego, the University of San Diego, and the San Diego Police Department’s Volunteers In Policing program, crisis intervention and the sex crimes unit.

So how about results?

While the percentage of sexual assaults which are “acquaintance rapes”

has decreased in the last couple of years, this is not due to our program. Indeed, we predict the percentage will actually increase in the short term, as women are encouraged to report this crime. Our real impact will probably be seen in four or five years.

Just getting our message out is at times a bit of a struggle, for some people, understandably, don’t want to hear it.

We have been surprised to find that although teenage pregnancy and HIV among adolescents are at an all time high, many parents do not believe sexual assault should be discussed with junior high and high school age children.

We also discovered some top college administrators are reluctant to deal with this issue, out of fear it will increase the number of sexual assault reports, to the detriment of the school’s public image.

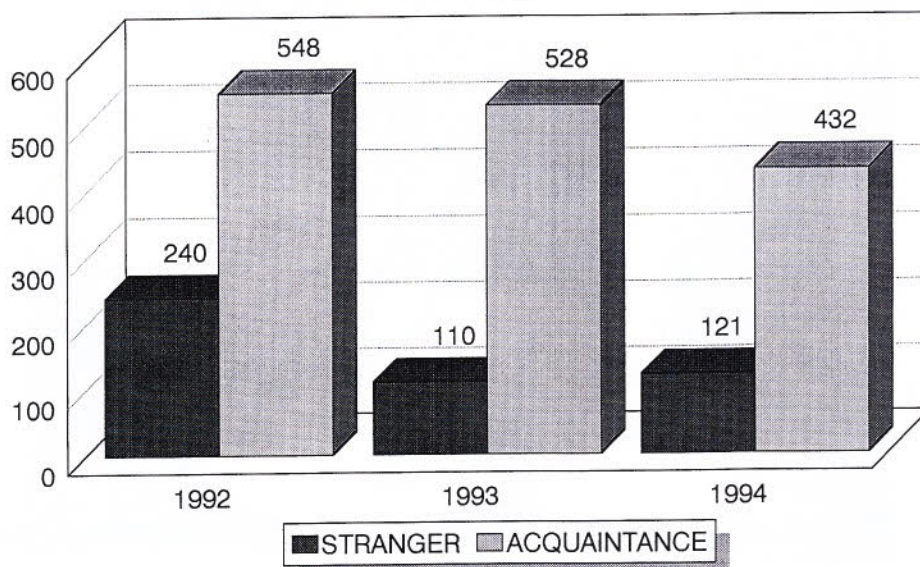
Still, in the name of public safety the facts must get out, and we are working on both those areas. **LEQ**



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STRANGER VS ACQUAINTANCE SEXUAL ATTACKS

1992-1994



DEADLINE
for the next
issue is
December 1st

Slow Learner

Would we make this stuff up?

Sure. But the Miami Herald wouldn’t:

A convicted burglar, serving time under house arrest, cut the strap on her ankle bracelet monitoring device and unplugged the telephone interface unit.

Now off the electronic leash, she took the monitoring interface to a pawn shop where she sold it — as a “telephone answering machine.”

And she doesn’t have to worry about getting calls in the more secure facility where she now resides. **LEQ**