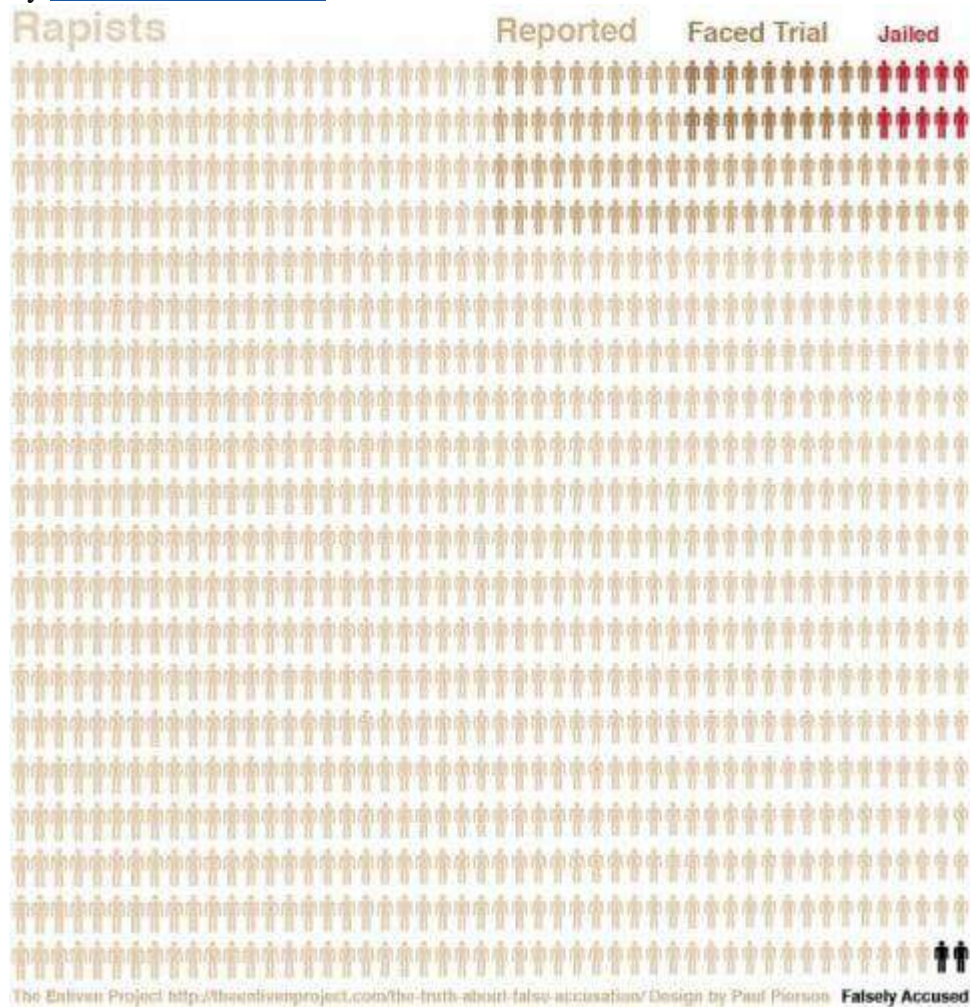


[Fact Checker](#)

The truth about a viral graphic on rape statistics

By [Michelle Ye Hee Lee](#) December 9, 2014



The Enliven Project

Social media has exploded following revelations that there were [discrepancies](#) in the *Rolling Stone* story of an [alleged gang rape](#) at the University of Virginia. Using the hashtag #IStandWithJackie, Twitter users have been rallying around the woman whose story is now coming under attack after the magazine’s statement that its trust in her was “misplaced.”

Among the tweets being circulated is a jarring graphic from December 2012 by the Enliven Project, intended to show the low rate of false reporting among rape victims. The Enliven Project is described as “a campaign to bring sexual violence out of the closet and lift survivors to their full potential,” according to its Web site. Here’s an example of how it shows up on Twitter:

[#IStandWithJackie](#) bc 90% rapes go unreported; just 2% reports are false. Power's still w perpetrators [@ProjectEnlivenpic.twitter.com/stYZ5q6j8i](#) – NARAL Pro-Choice MA (@ProChoiceMass) [December 8, 2014](#)

How accurate is this graphic?

The Facts

The graphic, titled “The truth about false accusation,” is broken into five parts: Out of 1,000 rapists, 100 are reported, 30 faced trial, 10 were jailed, and two were falsely accused. This fact check will examine each component separately.

“Rapists”

This graphic started circulating on social media at the beginning of 2013, and Slate immediately [called out](#) some of its assumptions.

It uses illustrations of a male figure to quantify “rapists,” but the information it cites refers to cases of rape or sexual assault. As Slate pointed out, this is an incorrect assumption that there is one rape per perpetrator.

There are various studies that show the frequency of rapes being perpetrated multiple times by the same person. Sarah Beaulieu, founder of The Enliven Project, agreed to this point in a [follow-up post](#) on the Web site.

National studies generally refer to completed or attempted acts of sexual penetration using force or threat of force, which may be specifically labeled “rape” or generally as “sexual assault,” depending on the study.

“Reported”

The graphic showed a rape reporting rate of 10 percent, but that is relatively low. Using the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey statistics from 2008 to 2012, the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network [estimated](#) 40 percent of rapes get reported to the police. This is close to the 2013 criminal victimization rates, which [estimated](#) 35 percent of rape or sexual assault cases are reported. Compared to other crimes in the 2013 survey, the reporting rate of rape or sexual assault was low compared to other crimes. The most frequently reported crimes were motor vehicle theft and robbery.

Experts have pointed out limitations of the National Crime Victimization Survey in quantifying reports of rape. For example, the survey’s definitions of rape or “sexual attack” is inconsistent with states’ legal definitions or with standard methodology for sexual assault research, according to research by End Violence Against Women International’s Kimberly Lonsway, who is one of the most-cited experts on the topic. The limitations in this data collection method reduce estimates for prevalence and incidence, according to Lonsway’s research, because victims of sexual assault may not identify with the particular wording presented in the survey.

Moreover, estimating the rate of cases that were *not reported* is always going to be just that — an estimate.

Given the difficulty of making estimates, most experts offer a range, not a single number. Depending on the population studied, experts estimate a range of 5 to 20 percent of sexual assaults being reported to law enforcement.

“Faced Trial”

Among the 100 reported cases, 30 faced trial, according to the graphic. To define “faced trial,” Beaulieu used data “reflecting the terms prosecution, arrested and faced trial.” She used four types of reports that showed between 19.5 percent and 40 percent that fit those definitions. It’s important to note that “arrested” does not necessarily mean the alleged perpetrator faced trial.

Research shows rape cases are difficult to prosecute. There may be insufficient evidence, or victims may appear to make inconsistent statements (a behavior attributed in part to trauma).

There is a range of estimates for prosecution as well, between 8 and 37 percent. While this particular portion of the graphic fits within that range, it’s not accurate either. “Prosecution” and “arrested” are not terms that can be wrapped under “faced trial.”

“Jailed”

The graphic shows one-third of the “rapists” who “faced trial” (which are not really rapists, but are cases of rape) were jailed. She provides three sources of information — a 1999 [study](#) on the probability of prison for rape, BJS data that show the percentage of convicted rapists and the percentage that were incarcerated, and a report by RAINN that in 3 out of 100 rapes, the perpetrator “will spend even a single day in prison.”

Only one of the sources she cites uses the one-third figure, so her rationale is unclear here.

One of the sources she used was BJS [report](#) on felony defendants from 2006. Even based on that data, the rate of incarceration among people convicted of rape is much higher than one-third. That report also shows that 46 percent of felony rape convictions resulted in guilty pleas — a much higher rate than ones that went to trial, an observation not noted in this graphic.

“Falsely accused”

These two figures stand out at the bottom right corner of the graphic. It is portrayed as two of the total 1,000 figure. But Beaulieu explains it actually portrays a 2 percent figure from the total reported rapes. So the two figures, while visually striking, should be included among the reported figures.

False reporting is a difficult number to measure. The Enliven Project uses 2 percent of “falsely accused” cases, out of the 100 reported cases of rape. There is an important distinction that must be made here, between accusations and reports. “Accusations” may refer to claims that were not made in official police reports, whereas “reports” generally refer to cases that were filed with law enforcement.

That, again, seems to be the lower end of the estimate range. The “Making a Difference” Project, which used data collected by law enforcement agencies over 18 to 24 months, found 7 percent of cases that were classified as false. That study is the “only research conducted in the U.S. to evaluate the percentage of false reports made to law enforcement,” [according to](#) the National Center for the Prosecution of Violence Against Women. Other studies also estimate somewhere between 2 and 10 percent.

The Enliven Project’s Response

When The Fact Checker asked Beaulieu why she did not change the graphic to fix errors she admitted, she said: “The original one is already the one that has gone viral and is the one that’s continuing to be circulated. I think what I did do was make sure that the link back to the site that’s on the graphic links to the full explanation that acknowledges the distinction.” Yet the link isn’t even a hyperlink, so the explanation is not readily accessible to those who may be scrolling through their news feeds. You literally have to type out a complex URL to find her explanations.

Beaulieu said she intended the graphic to be a conversation-starter: “The intention of the graphic was to create a way to capture people’s attention so that there can be dialogue about it.”

The Pinocchio Test

The graphic correctly portrays an argument made by advocates for sexual assault victims: There is a relatively low false-reporting rate. Advocates say the statistics are contrary to what they believe is general public assumption that sexual-assault victims are more likely to falsely report or accuse perpetrators. (In context, violent crimes generally do not have high rates of false reporting.)

But for a graphic titled “the truth about false accusation,” it is quite misleading, and incorrect in many aspects. It’s a pretty graphic, but pretty does not mean accurate; it should serve as a cautionary tale to those in the public prone to retweets or reposts of attractive graphics. In many cases, when faced with a range of figures, Beaulieu put her finger on the scale by choosing the number that grabbed as much attention as possible, such as choosing two for false reports rather than 10.

While Beaulieu said she wanted to have a conversation-starter, in the end her graphic is so confusing and misleading that it potentially sends the conversation into a dead end. The conversation needs to start with accurate facts, and Beaulieu had a responsibility to correct the graphic when her errors were first highlighted two years ago, rather than bury them in a difficult-to-find blog post. Thus the Enliven Project earns Three Pinocchios.