

Fabricated stories could harm true rape victims

Brett Kelman The Desert Sun

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A recent revelation that a Palm Springs teenager fabricated a story about a kidnapping and sexual assault is a costly back step in the cultural campaign to combat sexual violence, which some experts say may dissuade true rape victims from reporting their attackers to police.

On the evening of Oct. 1, a 15-year-old girl vanished while jogging in Palm Springs. After relatives reported the girl missing to authorities, police launched an emergency search using aircraft, a bloodhound and officers on horseback to comb parts of the valley for clues.

The missing girl was found the following morning in a vacant lot near the intersection of Ramon and Cahuilla Roads. When questioned by investigators, she said she had been abducted by a man in a pickup truck, then sexually assaulted.

In that moment, the investigation transformed from a search for a missing person to a manhunt. Palm Springs police asked the public for tips on the identity of the kidnapper. The FBI was brought in to assist with the case. Local schools warned parents to take extra precautions with their children.

Then the case went quiet, and the investigation moved behind the scenes. Months passed with no arrest.

This past Monday, the Palm Springs Police Department announced that its detectives' "meticulous" investigation revealed the girl had fabricated her story. It remains unclear where she was during her disappearance, but police said they are no longer looking for a suspect in her case.

'It hurts us'

False reports of rape are rare, but even a few cases can do incalculable damage to the nationwide efforts to expose and apprehend sexual predators. False reports make the public more suspicious of actual rape victims, and can disillusion law enforcement so they are less receptive to future reports of such offenses. The ramifications are magnified when a few false reports are given more media coverage than real cases of rape, which strike every day.

Worst of all, false reports make actual rape victims question whether their stories will be believed. Afraid to come forward, these victims are more likely to suffer in silence, leaving their attackers free to strike again.

"It hurts us," said Scott Berkowitz, president of the Rape Abuse & Incest National Network, the largest anti-sexual violence organization in the country. "False reports make the public doubt, and they make police more skeptical the next time a real victim walks in the door. Anytime police put a lot of energy into a case that turns out not to have been true, it is naturally going to discourage them and make them more suspicious next time."

Generally, experts believe that false reports occur in about 2 to 8 percent of sexual assault cases. However, that estimate is far from perfect, in part because most sexual assaults are never reported to police, and some honest reports are recanted due to fear, shame or societal pressure.

According to the U.S. Justice Department, only about 40 percent of sexual assaults are reported to law enforcement. Reporting rates are even lower in areas with larger populations of undocumented immigrants, such as the Coachella Valley.

False reports rare

A false rape report starts a "ripple effect" that reaches "far beyond their numbers," said Kimberly Lonsway, research director at End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI), a Washington-based nonprofit.

Lonsway said stories like the one from Palm Springs bolster bias against rape victims, who already face more scrutiny than victims of any other kind of crime.

In an effort to erase this bias, EVAWI trains response professionals — such as law enforcement, social workers and health care providers — on how to better handle sexual assault cases and violence against women. Part of that training deals with false reports, and how to identify fabrication without becoming disillusioned, Lonsway said.

"It's too easy after a case like this to look at the next 15-year-old with skepticism," Lonsway said. "But we need to make sure we are not carrying that attitude forward because the vast majority of reports are not false reports. ... We need to begin in a place of accepting reports as legitimate until we know otherwise."

Although experts agreed that false reports can potentially make police less thorough in future cases, Berkowitz said he sees a silver lining in the impassioned response of the Palm Springs Police Department. After the missing girl was found, the department prioritized the search for her attacker. The frightful case got the attention it deserved, which is a promising sign, even if the story turned out to be fake.

"While it is natural for a false report to discourage police, my hope would be that a department that is really well run, and is that aggressive in investigating cases like these, would not be turned off because of just one case," Berkowitz said. "They have enough experience to know that this is frustrating, but it is an aberration."

The Palm Springs Police Department declined to be interviewed for this story. Sgt. Harvey Reed, a department spokesman, said it would be inappropriate for him to

talk about the ramifications of false reports of sexual assault, even generally, at this time. Reed also said he had no estimate of the amount of tax dollars or man hours expended on the investigation.

A cry for help

An official with Coachella Valley Sexual Assault Services, a Riverside County agency that assists rape victims in the desert, also would not comment on the investigation involving the teenage girl.

Speaking generally, Program Director Winette Brenner said false reports often stem from deep-seated pain. Every case is different, but most of the time a person who makes a false report is in desperate need, and does not have any malicious intent, Brenner said.

"It's a cry for help ... from a person who is in so much pain that they don't know how to deal with that pain any further," she added.

As troubling as a false report can be, some experts argue that the larger issue is disproportionate media coverage given to these cases.

Dr. Brenda Ingram, director of clinical services at Peace Over Violence, an organization that works to stop sexual and domestic violence in Los Angeles, said she believes that American media scandalizes cases of false sexual assaults, doing more damage with excessive news coverage than is done by the actual false report.

For example, although journalists often write about false reports of sexual assault, they rarely give the same coverage to false reports of other crimes, such as robbery. In the end, the public is convinced that false reports of rape are far more common than they actually are, Ingram said.

The blitz of media coverage does more to dissuade true victims from coming forward than the actual false reports, Ingram said.

"There is already a bias against reporting sexual assault. And there is a bias against believing the victim that has been sexually assaulted," Ingram said. "And when (the media) focuses on false reports and false allegations, that heightens the idea that a victim will not be believed."

The Desert Sun has chosen not to identify the teen girl at the center of this story, despite the fact that her name has previously been made public by police. The girl is a minor, and there is no way for the newspaper to independently verify that she is not the victim of a sexual assault.

It is unclear if the girl will be arrested for making false statements to police. Because she is a minor, any court case against her would be closed to the public.

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