



Rape report exposes labels

When police conclude a teen fabricated an assault story, a community is left to wonder about racism.

By Noah Brenner

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A suspected false report of a violent sexual assault in Jackson has raised the issue of how some residents stereotype members of the Latino immigrant community.

A Jackson teenager reported that on the night of Nov. 22 she was choked and sexually assaulted in her car in a downtown Jackson parking lot by two Latino men in hooded sweatshirts wielding a knife. While police now allege the girl's story was not true, it led to a run on pepper spray at a local pawn shop and elicited a letter to the Jackson Hole News&Guide calling for vigilante justice.

"Was there a meeting I missed where the people of Jackson Hole voted to allow free reign for the gangs of illegal aliens that have formed in the valley?" asked Mike Craig in his letter. "Did everybody just throw up their hands and say, 'Oh well, they're here so there's nothing we can do about it?' What the hell is going on here, where is the public outrage?"

According to local law enforcement officials, Craig's reaction to the incident was not common. Teton County Attorney Steve Weichman said most of the comments he heard from the public did not even consider the girl's allegations that the men were Latinos.

"I have gotten several comments in the teeth-gritting, oh-my-god-you-have-another-one vein, but I have picked up zero racism," he said. "It really didn't register with me in this case."

Carmina Oaks of the Latino Resource Center declined to comment for this story.

Don Gaitan, owner of Pawn Shop and Sporting Goods, said the report led to an increase in pepper spray sales at his store and prompted some men to bring their wives and girlfriends in to buy a gun.

"I sell a lot of guns all the time, so it's hard to say if I sold more after [the report]," he said. "We had a few guys bringing their wives and girlfriends in, and they did mention it."

Craig's letter, which does not appear in the Letters to the Editor section because editors deemed it too vitriolic, calls for vigilante justice. Craig has written the paper before to attack illegal immigration.

"In the Old West Americans formed gangs when elected officials and law enforcement were either indifferent to the citizens' safety or actually in league with the outlaw element," he wrote. "They called their gangs citizens' vigilance committees. They were kind of crude but they effectively got their point across. Perhaps their time has come again."

Stereotyping of minorities common

In this instance, it appears Craig was reacting to a rape story reportedly hatched by a teenager. The young woman apparently chose to make the assailants Latino.

The stereotyping of minority men as more likely to commit sexual assaults is even older than Western vigilantism, said Ed Munoz, assistant professor of criminal studies and head of the Chicano Studies Program at the University of Wyoming.

"These stereotypes are deeply embedded in U.S. society and have been since colonization," he said. "There used to be the same stereotype with Native American men that they lusted for white women. These sexual stereotypes have been around quite some time, and they often just transfer to another nonwhite group."

While he did not know the specifics of the case, Munoz said false rape reports implicating Latinos in areas such as Jackson are not unexpected.

"It's not surprising to me that it happened, because of different stereotypes associated with Latino immigrants," he said, "and I am not surprised it happened [in Jackson], because there is a high number of Latino immigrants, and it wouldn't surprise me if other incidents are hoaxes too."

Munoz said someone making up a story would be more likely to choose a minority attacker because it would be met with less skepticism.

"That's what I think," he said "and in your community what are the odds that people would believe a black man did it? It depends on the circumstances but also on deep-seated stereotypes and beliefs."

Anne Comeaux, who worked for Teton County Victim's Services for two years, said sexual assault is not bound by race and touches everyone. The perception that Latinos may be involved in a higher percentage of sexual assault case is due to media attention on a few cases, she said.

In recent years, Town Square rapes by Hispanic attackers and the bust of several Latinos for allegedly prostituting a Latino teenager have appeared as high-profile stories in the Jackson Hole Daily and News&Guide.

On Nov. 28, the Daily ran the story "Juvenile reports rape," which contained the youth's allegations as well as a recounting of some of the recent sexual assault cases connected to Latinos.

"The cases involving Latinos have received more press than other cases. That is my perception," Comeaux said. "The reactions of people I talked to were that after spending a lot of time in court, they know that sex violence is not limited to one group. I don't think that was reflected in that specific article."

But is Craig wrong to say that Latinos are more likely to be involved in sexual assaults? Perhaps not, according to Weichman and the Ninth District Court.

"It appears to me that the majority of sexual assault cases right now involve the Hispanic community," Weichman said. "I don't have the numbers, because it is not something I am inclined to count. A victim is a victim, and a defendant is a defendant. We don't track our cases by race and have to rely on memory, and hopefully our memories are not predisposed."

Clerk of court staff have logged six sexual assault charges since January. Of the six, three involved males with Latino surnames, two did not and one was remanded to Circuit Court because it was a less severe case, said one court official.

Truth isn't always politically correct

"We should never tolerate racism in any form, but we should always embrace truth," Weichman said, "and the paper has to be free to report the truth but sometimes the truth is hard to accept. When the truth doesn't conform to contemporary notions of political correctness, the free press is almost always the agent that points it out to the rest of us. The truth isn't politically correct that the majority of sexual assault cases have lately been committed by Hispanic males."

Meanwhile, police have referred the case to the county attorney's office for possible charges of false reporting. Weichman said the case is in the juvenile court system, and he could not comment further on its status.

When people are afraid, they look for patterns to keep themselves safe and often fail to be cautious of the people they already know, even though the majority of sexual assault victims know the perpetrator, said Sharel Love, executive director of the Community Safety Network.

"I think there is a natural inclination to want to know how to stay safe," she said. "It is a reaction to fear. But to try to profile a perpetrator, if people try to do that they are going to miss the bigger picture."

"When we try to find a formula to keep ourselves safe, we are often looking in the wrong direction," she said. "That is not to say we shouldn't use common sense like don't walk alone and lock your doors but there is a very real danger that exists outside the definition of stranger and that is really difficult for people to accept."

Another way some people deal with fear is to arm themselves.

https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/news/top_stories/rape-report-exposes-labels/article_20a30a8a-e948-5939-a357-b5bd4c38b266.html