

# What is sexual violence?

## *Understanding and responding to abuse and assault*

*Sexual assault has lasting effects on individuals and communities. When someone is assaulted or harassed it can affect their ability to concentrate on their job, relationships, and other aspects of life. Sexual assault can also damage a community's sense of safety and togetherness. Each individual and community has the power and responsibility to address the problem of sexual assault in a proactive and intentional way. This fact sheet offers background on sexual violence in the United States and resources to start vital conversations.*

### WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence is **any type of unwanted sexual interaction**, ranging from personal attitudes and comments to sexual assault. Sexual violence is not a single act or situation—it is a series of nonverbal, verbal, and physical events that make people feel unsafe or afraid. Sexual violence thrives in silence and impacts everyday interactions.

In New Jersey, someone commits a sexual assault when they sexually penetrate another person against that person's will, and

- The person is younger than 13 years old
- The person is between 13 or 16 years old and the abuser is related to them by blood or acting as a guardian or parent.
- There is a weapon or threat of a weapon.
- The person has a developmental, cognitive, or physical disability.
- The person is unconscious or incapacitated.

**Sexual assault can happen to anyone regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, geography, ability, appearance, sexual orientation, or gender identity.** Social patterns like using power over others, traditional gender roles, and silence contribute to ongoing abuse and sexual violence.



### SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE U.S.

A recent survey found that **nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men in the United States have been raped at some time in their lives** (Black et al., 2011).

In the same national survey,

- 45% of women reported experiencing sexual violence other than rape during their lifetime.
- 34% of women reported experiencing non-contact unwanted sexual experiences during their lifetime.
- Of the 1 in 71 men who experienced a completed rape, 28% said that an assault happened before the age of 10.
- 12% of men have experienced unwanted sexual contact at some point in their lifetime.

## LEARN MORE. SUPPORT EACH OTHER.

The valuing of some people over others causes sexual violence, as well as other forms of violence and abuse. Because women and girls are given less power and value in society, some people feel they can violate women and girls' boundaries and commit acts of violence against them.

The crucial first step is to acknowledge that sexual violence is a community problem, not an individual problem. We all share the responsibility of creating safer communities and promoting respect and consent. There are a number of ways communities can respond to and take steps to prevent sexual violence.

Each of us can create a world free of sexual violence. We can:

- **Create safe homes and schools** for the children and teens in our lives.
- **Support workplace policies** that prevent sexual harassment and protect the needs of survivors of sexual assault.
- **Promote faith communities and spiritual spaces** that empower survivors and hold people accountable for their actions.

We all play a role in preventing sexual violence and establishing norms of respect, safety, equality, and helping others.

### ***Partner with local organizations helping survivors***

There are 21 county-based rape crisis centers throughout New Jersey. Rutgers University serves victims of sexual violence through the Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance.

These programs have staff and volunteers knowledgeable in the dynamics of sexual violence and are trained in serving survivors and their families.

You can create a supportive space for survivors by:

- Believing that the victim is **never** to blame for an assault.
- Saying **"I believe you"** when a survivor shares the experience with you.
- Believing that **we each have a role** in creating safer communities.

**You have the power to create change and support a survivor of sexual violence.**

## RESOURCES

### **New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault**

[www.njcasa.org](http://www.njcasa.org)

*A full listing of rape crisis centers and contact information can be found on NJCASA's website. For immediate assistance call the 24-hour Statewide Hotline at 1-800-601-7200.*

### **National Sexual Violence Resource Center**

[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

### **New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women**

[www.njcbw.org](http://www.njcbw.org)

### **Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey**

[www.preventchildabuse.nj.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.nj.org)

### **Workplaces Respond to Domestic & Sexual Violence**

[www.workplacesrespond.org/](http://www.workplacesrespond.org/)

## REFERENCES

Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. (2011). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 summary report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/>