

Fayetteville Observer-Times

SATURDAY
APRIL 4, 1998

Rape: The silent epidemic in America

By Robert B. Adolph Jr.
Fayetteville

Did you know that the greatest window of vulnerability to be raped is in young girls ages 12 to 18?



Did you know that three out of 10 rapes occur to girls before the age of 11?

Did you know that rape is the fastest-growing crime in America?

Adolph Were you aware that 78 percent of rape victims know their attackers — that they are often family friends, relatives, or trusted acquaintances?

Were you aware that one woman in four, in her lifetime, will be the victim of some form of sexual assault?

Were you aware that rape victims are 8.7 times more likely to commit suicide?

Were you aware that 31 percent of rape victims will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder?

Moreover, and contrary to common myth, it is not women of low moral caliber who are disproportionate victims of rape. All women, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, religion, or age, are vulnerable. It appears that no female is safe. There are cases of baby girls being sexually molested from the age of six months, and women over the age of 90 have been sexually assaulted.

Most rapes occur in the home — not, as many of us might think, in ill-lit parking lots, automobile back seats, or seedy alleyways. Tragically, America has the highest incidence of rape in the world.

What can you do to help keep yourself or the women and girls in your family safe from rape? There are no guarantees, but here are a few tried and true tips:

- If you are assaulted, statistics suggest that your best defense is to make lots of noise and, if possible, break free of your attacker and run.

- Drink little alcohol, or none at

all. Alcohol consumption figures prominently in many rapes.

- Travel in pairs when possible.

- Know that those you have come to trust are the ones most likely to rape you. Rapists are expert at making their potential victims comfortable in their presence. Stay alert.

The above tips are only that. The sad fact is that once a rapist has targeted a woman, his chances of being successful are quite good. Many rapists are meticulous planners. Even the most careful of women can make an error in judgment and allow a rapist to get too close. If this happens to you, recognize that your first imperative is to survive. Rapists have been known to kill or brutalize their victims if they feel threatened.

There are many categories of rape and sexual assault today — date rape, acquaintance rape, marital rape, and child molestation, to name just a few. All categories are brutal. All categories are illegal. All categories are about power and dominance. Sex is merely the rapist's mechanism to fulfill his need for control and mastery over a

helpless victim of his choosing. Rape is a physical assault, but the psychological damage done to the victim often takes much longer to heal than any physical scars.

Why is rape a silent epidemic? Because, on average, as many as 85 percent of all rapes committed in the United States are never reported. Victims feel an odd combination of shame and rage over having been assaulted. Unfortunately, many victims wrongly blame themselves. Most rape victims are unwilling to undergo the necessary but sometimes humiliating gauntlet of medical, police, and judicial inquisition in order to successfully prosecute a rapist. Such occurrences continue to rise. There may be as many 600,000 rapes a year in this country alone.

Unfortunately, rape is unusually difficult to prove in court. Many times it comes down to a case of "he said/she said." Concrete proof is often hard to establish. Before a jury sends a man to prison for rape, its members are generally going to demand proof. Women know that their attacker could eventually walk away unpunished

no matter what they do. Many female rape victims choose to deal with their pain privately, without involving the authorities. Their reluctance to prosecute these offenders and open themselves and their families to state scrutiny is regrettable but understandable.

This circumstance is a national shame. Men need to understand that when a woman says no, her answer is not subject to interpretation or discussion.

Information is a woman's best resource in the fight against rape. A woman who arms herself with knowledge about rape prevention can dramatically improve her chances of avoiding becoming a national statistic. For further information, or if you would like to help by volunteering your time and talents, contact the Rape Crisis Volunteers of Cumberland County at (910) 485-7273. You can make a difference in the fight against the silent epidemic.

Adolph is a retired Army Special Forces lieutenant colonel. He teaches Rape Prevention to groups in the Fayetteville area.