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False Sexual Assault Allegations

After literally decades of feminist lobbying and demands for better treatment of rape victims, many police agencies across America are still stuck in a 1950s-era view of sexual assault.

Despite the official promises that victims would be treated with sensitivity, police frequently don't understand how to achieve that goal. And although thousands of dedicated law enforcement officers want to do the right thing, there often is little support for sex crimes investigators. Rape complaints often are not properly investigated when police departments don't allocate the necessary resources to do the work or train their investigators.

There are huge differences in the estimates given for the rate of false reporting of sexual assault. Studies and surveys range from 0% to 98%. This is not surprising given the differences in definitions and the different ways of determining a complaint to be false and then recording it. Many professionals working in the field of sexual assault contribute to the problem by citing statistics from the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Code without understanding the definition or the source.

Recently, a 22-year female veteran of a state police agency told me she had never investigated a valid complaint in her entire career. This situation suggests that the discrepancies are caused not only by differences in perception and terminology, but also in how the information is gathered and how a report is determined to be “false”. One of the primary sources of confusion stems from the terminology of “unfounded” versus “false allegations”.

Upon completion of this course, participants will be able to recognize:

- The severe limitations regarding the definitions and law enforcement policies and reporting procedures regarding unfounded crime reports
- That data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report is often cited incorrectly and how this has contributed to the misconceptions about false allegations of sexual assault
- False, versus unfounded, allegations of sexual assault
- Why investigators should not be able to “unfound” a sexual assault allegation without evidence that the crime did not occur
- How unbounding is often used for cases that don't fit the stereotype of “real” rape
- That many of the victims affected by improper unbounding are women of color, prostitutes, drug addicts or simply acquainted with their assailant
- How improper unbounding fuels the myth of false allegations

Participants will evaluate actual case scenarios to determine whether an investigation was conducted properly and if the investigation should be cancelled as unfounded. The goal of the workshop is to motivate participants to return to their own communities to begin multi-disciplinary discussion to establish appropriate procedures for unbounding sexual assault investigations by first defining “baseless” and “false”.