

Sexual violence cases among teens on the rise

by David Boyle
News Director

The San Juan County Attorney's Office reports an increasing trend of reported sexual violence and the vast majority of victims and perpetrators of sexual crimes in the county are underage children, mostly teenagers.

From 2000 to 2010, the county averaged 4.1 reported cases of sexual violence per year. That average jumped to 18.75 a year from 2011 to 2018. In 2019 the county had 21 cases of sexual violence.

Over the past 12 months, the county attorney's office has prosecuted or is currently prosecuting 47 crimes of sexual violence. Of those crimes, 38 were committed against or by a student in the San Juan School District.

Currently, 90 percent of the victims are students in the district. The figures are only for the northern portion of the county, as crimes committed on the Navajo Nation fall under a different legal jurisdiction.

San Juan County Attorney Kendall Laws attributes the increase in reported cases partially to the bravery of survivors of sexual violence who are coming forward.

"Just about every kid in Monticello or San Juan High School probably is aware of some of those cases, and the fact that those victims came forward and held up under scrutiny, I have to give credit to victims for inspiring others to come forward."

The county attorney's office has conducted interviews with multiple victims over the past 12 months. Those conversations have revealed some disturbing trends in the county.

The county attorney's office says among students there is an issue of objectification, especially of girls.

Fifteen underage victims report being asked for nude photographs of themselves by their classmates. The victims reported that it was regular behavior from their peers.

Six victims report being asked to exchange sex for money by their classmates, some online and others in person.

Another large problem the attorney's office reports is victim blaming. One victim's parent was approached by an adult community member who "slut-shamed" the parent's daughter for coming forward.

One victim told authorities she chose not to report her case after she saw the way an-

other victim had been treated poorly by students and staff in the school.

"Part of the not reporting unfortunately comes from this idea that nobody will believe me. Nothing will happen if I report it. I'll be gaslighted or belittled in the community or in the school or on my team or whatever group I hang out in," said Laws.

"I think it's important that law enforcement, my office, the school district, and anybody else who deals with students make it clear that we are listening."

Laws says the statistics are showing that law enforcement and the attorney's office are committed to following through with any allegations they hear.

He adds that his office follows the evidence which, more often than not, leads to charges being filed.

"Statistically it's actually a very small number of cases that are false reports of such crimes," says Laws. "It's not statistically as big of an issue as is sometimes perceived in the community."

Another factor contributing to the increase in assaults in the county is a lack of third-party reporting.

The attorney's office

referenced at least eight cases where a victim told a friend, classmate, co-worker, or family member about their assault but those told did not report the crime to the authorities.

Finally a lack of knowledge and education about consent and what constitutes assault is a repeating trend the attorney's office found in interviews.

Only in three of the current rape cases over the past 12 months did victims report they attempted to physically fight off the assailant.

The rest of the victims report they "froze," which is a common response when a victim cannot perceive a way to escape a situation.

Interviews with victims reveal that in at least four cases, victims did not originally believe they had been raped because they did not physically fight back.

Several victims also reported that because they had consented to other actions, they believed they had not experienced rape when an offender went past a point the victim had consented to.

Laws says education of both children and their parents is of critical importance.

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Without a proper understanding of consent, children are more susceptible to becoming perpetrators of a sexually violent crime or a third-party who doesn't report what they know about a sexually violent crime.

Laws points out that if students don't learn about consent from trusted accurate sources, they'll learn it somewhere else. Ill-education can come from readily-available sources such as pornography or from other misinformed teens.

Without knowledge of consent, perpetrators of these crimes as young as 18 years old could appear in adult courts.

In this case Laws says, "They're looking at 15 years to life. They're looking at felonies that will follow them for the rest of their life.

"So this isn't just a victim-centered discussion. It's also trying to look out for and educate potential perpetrators as well, so that we can maybe curb some of that behavior."

Another challenge of education for some kids can be parental insecurity surrounding discussions about sex.

"I think there is a sense of reservation or hesitancy to talk about sex with their kids or whatever else," Laws says. "Whether that comes because they don't understand it, or they grew up where it wasn't discussed.

"I think it's important to try and chip away at those reservations and bring the conversation into the light.

from somewhere else, and it's not going to be a reliable or trustworthy source."

At the August 12 San Juan County School Board meeting, Laws presented the statistics to the board, along with three options the district could pursue to help curb the sexual violence issue plaguing the community.

One option would be to create a student body committee with highly-respected faculty to oversee the committee to better help the district understand the problems students are seeing.

For example, students on the committee could inform the district of the pervasiveness of a problem, such as the epidemic of students requesting nude photographs from others via the smartphone application SnapChat.

Another would be to solicit teachers to receive training from organizations such as the Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault. Those organizations can help teachers know how to make themselves approachable to victims and more prepared to handle reports of sexual abuse.

A third recommendation would be to provide self-defense training to students that is already available through a course offered by the county sheriff's department.

The board did not adopt any of the recommendations at the meeting but did instruct Superintendent Ron Nielsen to work with Laws on the issue.

"The data in these

was definitely eye-opening to see the numbers put to a chart and a visual.

"I committed to Mr. Laws, and to anyone else we've met with, that we do have a role in this concern."

Nielsen added, "I think all the ideas in here we want to further explore because they do look very do-able. We want to look at what we have in place, some of the things...we just started implementing last year."

The school board invited Laws to report back in November.

Laws says the county attorney's office wants to get as many agencies involved as they can, including Seekhaven, a nonprofit serving Southeastern Utah survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Laws says they also eventually want to reach out to ecclesiastical leaders in the county as well to help educate the community as a whole.

While this report is on the cases in northern San Juan County, *The San Juan Record* is investigating to uncover the extent of the issue of sexual violence by and of minors in the Navajo Nation portion of San Juan County.

The *Record* is in contact with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and is reaching out to the Navajo Nation Police.

According to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), Native Americans are twice as likely to experience a rape or sexual assault compared to all other races.

If you or someone you know is a victim of do-

sources available locally and nationally:

Seekhaven, a local nonprofit that assists survivors, 435-259-2229 or seekhaven.org.

The San Juan County Sheriff's Office, 435-587-2237

Blanding City Police, 435-678-2334

National Sexual Assault Hotline, 800-656-HOPE.

The Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) defines consent as an agreement to engage in sexual activity. The network says consent is about communication and should happen every time.

Positive consent can include partners asking "is this ok?" while engaging in activities and through verbal agreements that are not coerced.

Positive consent does not include:

Refusing to acknowledge "no."

Assuming that wearing certain clothes, flirting, or kissing is an invitation for anything more.

Pressuring someone into sexual activity using fear or intimidation.

Assuming you have permission to engage in a sexual act because you've done it in the past.

Someone being under the legal age of consent.

Someone being incapacitated because of drugs or alcohol.

Giving consent for one activity, one time, does not mean giving consent for increased or recurring sexual contact.

For example, agreeing to kiss someone doesn't give that person permission to remove your clothes. Having sex with someone in the past doesn't give that person permission to