A Special Class of Victims

The Criminal Investigation Division’s Special Investigations Section – Sex Offense Unit is responsible for investigating all rapes, sodomies, and other sexual offenses pertaining to victims 16 years of age and older. Crimes of sexual violence are among the most challenging for investigators. Because victims commonly suffer emotional and physical trauma, it is the responsibility of the investigator, from the earliest stages of the investigation, to create a safe and trusting environment. Officers and investigators play a significant role in both the victim’s willingness to cooperate in the investigation and ability to cope with the emotional and psychological effects of the crime. Therefore, it is especially important that these cases be handled non-judgmentally so as not to communicate in any way that the victim is to blame for the crime or to imply that the investigator does not believe the victim.

It is a myth that victims of sexual assault respond in a predictable manner. In fact, trauma is often exhibited in a range of behaviors from hysteria, crying, and rage to laughter, calmness, and unresponsiveness. Victims may report the incident after some delay, and may experience difficulty remembering all the details of the assault. These delays and memory lapses are not evidence that the victims are lying or intentionally omitting details.

Detectives shall conduct their investigations with the understanding that certain demographic groups – prostitutes, drug abusers, children, and family members – are often targeted by offenders because they are less likely to report their victimization. Detectives must clearly explain to victims that their purpose is to investigate the incident; they are not to pass judgment on the surrounding circumstances that may have given rise to the criminal incident.

Throughout an investigation, it is essential that detectives remain mindful of the following facts about sexual assault:

- Most sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim;
- Most sexual assaults are committed without a weapon, physical violence, or signs of physical injury;
- The majority of victims do not report immediately to law enforcement, if at all;
- Victims are often young, homeless, have a mental or physical impairment, are belligerent, and/or abusing alcohol or controlled substances;
- Victims often omit, exaggerate or fabricate parts of their account to investigators in order to fit society’s stereotype of a “typical” sexual assault; and
- Suspects often do not fit society’s stereotype of the unknown, masked rapist who lurks in dark places.