

Sheriff's rape comments send wrong message

By Kelly Miller Guest columnist

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Bingham County Sheriff Craig Rowland recently told a news reporter that “the majority of rapes (in Bingham County), not to say that we don’t have rapes, we do, but the majority of our rapes that are called in, are actually consensual sex.”

Sheriff Rowland’s comments raise significant concerns as they infer gender bias in policing by disbelieving girls and women who have reported a rape to law enforcement, are contrary to any national studies on sexual assault false allegations; and may unintentionally deter anyone who is raped in Bingham County from reporting the crime to law enforcement.

Girls and women are disproportionately victims of rape. The Centers for Disease Control reports that nearly one in five women and one in 59 men have been raped in their lifetime. More than 75 percent of female victims of rape were first raped before their 25th birthday; 29.9 percent experienced their first completed rape before the age of 18. And the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that six in 10 rape victims said that they were assaulted by an intimate partner, relative, friend or acquaintance.

The Bingham County sheriff characterization of the majority of reported rapes as consensual sex is a form of discrimination known as gender bias in policing. Gender bias in policing may result in law enforcement agencies providing less protection to certain victims on the basis of gender, failing to respond to crimes that disproportionately harm people of a particular gender or offering reduced services due to a reliance on gender stereotypes.

According to a recent report by the U.S. Department of Justice “gender bias, whether explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, may include police officers misclassifying or underreporting sexual assault ... or inappropriately concluding that sexual assault cases are unfounded.” Attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that devalue girls and women and their experiences of crime need to be addressed. We have a responsibility to overcome these barriers and foster a justice system where anyone impacted by sexual assault is heard, believed, and validated.

Similarly, Sheriff Rowland’s statement is contrary to any national studies or FBI data regarding false allegations. A recent study of 136 cases of sexual assault reported over the 10-year period found 5.9 percent were coded as unfounded or false allegations. These results, taken in the context of an examination of previous research, indicate that the prevalence of false allegations is between 2 and 10 percent, the same percentage as for other felony allegations.

Finally, Sheriff Rowland’s characterization of the majority of rapes reported to law enforcement as consensual sex may deter many individuals from reporting a rape to law enforcement. Rape is already

one of the most underreported crimes. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that only 15.8 to 36 percent of individuals who are sexual assaulted report the crime to law enforcement.

By taking such a public stance and framing the majority of reported rapes as consensual sex, Sheriff Rowland sends a clear message — he does not believe the girls and women who report their rape victimization (not consensual sex) to law enforcement. Rape is not sex, it is an act of violence, and if there is no consent, it is rape.

Sheriff Rowland's statement highlights that we still have much work to do to change the societal norms that allow for statements that devalue girls and women who have reported a rape to law enforcement.

What we do and say about crimes of sexual violence matters. The citizens of Bingham County deserve better, and when victimized they deserve unbiased justice.

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