

THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK

by
Fran Henry, STOP IT NOW!

Opening Plenary Speech

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs

Second National Summit:
Promoting Public Safety through Sexual Assault Prevention and Sex Offender Management
Washington, D.C.
December 17-19, 2000

In my small New England hometown of less than a thousand people I attend a tiny church tucked away in the woods. Our minister told a story there earlier this year about a gathering of earnest people, earnest in the way we perhaps feel today, brought here so close in time to the holidays.

The story is by someone like myself who leans out over the heads of his audience and reflects how much each of us long to live in peace with our neighbors, but how challenging it is.

He said, "Would any of us here say we have spent our time on this planet without having enemies? I bet there is not a single one of us who could say that."

With that assumption stated he didn't expect anyone to raise a hand. But an old man did. Our speaker smiled and said, "Please tell us, sir, how in all these years have you managed to avoid having enemies?"

The old fellow stood up and shouted out, "Why, I outlived the bastards!"

Well, I hope in these next two days we can do more than outlive each other's points of view. I hope we can discover quite a few things to expand our understanding of sexual abuse and sexual abusers. In fact, I know it has already started because of the great care taken to put together our meeting. I hope I can add appreciably to our common agenda.

First, I acknowledge our collective presence here and our willingness to work on and care about this issue. I wonder if I could ask you to take a moment and simply say hello, smile or shake the hand of the person nearest to you? Even if it feels awkward, let's just take a moment to do that now.

Second, I myself am so aware of the shoulders I stand upon. I am aware what other victims have gone through and spoken about that permit me to speak today. Sexual assault is sobering business. Let's take a moment to remember cases or situations where victims fell through cracks or even chasms in the system—perhaps victims you have known. Let's take a moment of silence to allow for thoughtfulness—remembering that some silences deny, but this kind of silence is a building block for deeper thinking.

Let's take just a moment now to do that.

Thank you. I have the need to start in this way because sexual abuse ruptures human relationship and I find that things go better if I begin with a feeling of connection to you.

I feel very privileged to be speaking to you this afternoon. I want to thank the Justice Department for sponsoring this meeting and to thank the staff at Center for Sex Offender Management for making it happen. I am so aware as I look out on your shining faces how many different sides to this issue we represent. And I want to invite you, no matter your role in this work, to relax it and to join with me in an exchange of ideas.

We are here because sexual abuse is quite a problem. We all know this. But how fully do we understand the nature of the problem?

I'd like to tell you two other stories—this time true stories from my recent past. About a month ago, I was walking very early down the main street of my town and I came upon three roughly eight-year-old girls giggling their way to school. As I always do when I come up behind someone, I said, "Passing on your left." But I also added, "Isn't it a lovely day?" One of them smiled that kind of smile that only little girls do and said, "Oh yes, it is a beautiful day—but it will be even a better day at school!" She started to launch into a description but another girl said, "Be quiet. You know we can't talk to strangers." I looked at all of them and they looked back at me very sheepishly, and I said, "Oh so sorry!" And I was sorry because I have not been able to have children and these few community interactions are most of what I get with kids.

Then, just two weeks ago, I was in a taxi going to a friend's house on the first day of my vacation in North Yorkshire in England. The driver, with lots of animation, told me about the Yorkshire Dales and about his entirely idyllic childhood in the rather remote moors that surrounded us. He described how happy he had been roaming the countryside. He went on to say he had three children, but that, of course, they do not have the same freedom he had. He can't let them roam as he had roamed even though we were driving through protected land which looked as his must have four decades ago. "We can't now," he said, "because of child molesters."

I bit my tongue. I bet you do this, too, when you are on vacation and do not want to make every interaction a teaching moment for some poor unsuspecting soul. I did not say a word. After a few pensive moments he went on to say, "Of course, child molesters who abduct are very, very rare and we have not had one in these parts, but I couldn't take the chance, now could I? Not with my children. I am sad though—they watch too much of the telly instead."

My god, I thought. How much have we held ourselves hostage to our fears about sexual offending and sexual offenders? Are the children better off being afraid of the world outside and of dangerous and of safe strangers? Are they better off watching the television? Who exactly is in prison here? Who is being managed and controlled? Most important, what freedoms have we lost? Is there a sensible way to get them back?

I believe we can if we commit ourselves to look deeply into the heart of sexual abusing, know its nature, and devise solutions that grasp it as the essentially human problem it is.

I have been asked to speak to you about the impact of sexual abuse on victims. I am so aware as I speak that my experience, both of being victimized and its aftermath, are my story. I ask you to accept it as a truth, but please know I do not view it as the only truth. I also want you to know that I speak publicly as a survivor but I rarely go into detail about how it affected me. Today I will share more because I want you to understand about the cases that you do not hear about, that are never reported. For three decades I have thought about what causes offending and for the past eight years at STOP IT NOW! I have received literally hundreds of letters from people trying to recover from sexual offending—I ask every one of them what could have prevented it. I ask you to be open to what they have to say as expressed through STOP IT NOW!, the program I founded to reach abusers and those who know them. We ask adults to take responsibility to confront abusing behaviors.

What I have come to know is that the range of sexual offending and the range of sexual offenders is broad. Yes, there is crossover between behaviors and some offenders move from one behavior to another. But exhibitionists struggle with different issues than rapists. People who have a diagnosable medical disorder of pedophilia or a paraphilia are probably behaving differently than people who do not assault compulsively, but only in certain circumstances and primarily out of their extreme selfishness and ignorance. I can't imagine anyone in this room lumping all sexual offenders together, but how good a job have we done of learning about them and distinguishing them from one another so that we take the time to teach others? I believe it was in conversation with Rob Freeman-Longo that he and I likened citizens' knowledge of sexual offending to where we were many decades ago with cancer—any cancer was considered the kiss of death and people were ashamed to talk about it. Now if a friend tells me she has cancer I know to ask—what kind—what stage—what kind of treatment—and the like. I know how to offer different kinds of advice and support.

The range of sexual victims is broad too, with boys and girls, adult women and men, and the elderly all victims of sexual assault. How many victims are there? We know there continues to be controversy about the numbers because of the way data is collected and because so often sexual assault is not reported. One in 3 to 5 girls and one in 7 to 10 boys molested by the time they turn 19. 683,000 completed rapes estimated in the past year, according to Dr. Dean Kilpatrick in the National Women's Study from the early 1990's.

The impact of sexual assault on victims will vary with their experiences and their own histories and constitutions. Some people experience sexual assault without dire consequences. That said, we know that sexual abuse victims do suffer, as a group, with outrageously higher risks for all the social disorders. Let me review them for you very briefly.

Many sexual abuse survivors suffer from damage to their minds and emotional lives. They face a fourfold risk of a major depressive episode in their lives. They face a five times greater risk of suicide. They are five times more likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. They suffer with self-injury. (I have to stop here and ask how many more generations of girls do I have to witness putting lit cigarettes out on their arms?)

A study showed 54 percent of females in a psychiatric hospital have a history of sexual abuse. This list goes on and on. It includes physical ailments of all sorts, alterations in brain chemistry, social distress evidenced in higher risks for teen pregnancy, HIV infection, runaway behavior, substance abuse, eating disorders, and vulnerability to yet more sexual victimization, domestic violence and prostitution. I know you know that if we cleaned up sexual abuse we would see an extraordinary decrease in our worst social ills.

Let me now tell you about my own story.

I was sexually abused by my father from the age of 12 to 16—four interminably long years. I do not know how many times—the experiences blur together and I can't distinguish them one from another. If I had to, I could do a better job describing the different locations I was abused in: in my grandmother's home, in a home my father was a caretaker of, in the basement of my home, in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in my bed and worse in my parent's bed.

When I was going through these experiences I remember telling myself very clearly that if I could simply live through them I would be okay. The fact that I remember feeling that way is the closest I can get to knowing how completely terrified I must have been. I was facing emotional death. Also, I understand now, after my own therapy, that my father's assaults against me occurred against a backdrop of much earlier physical abuse by my mother.

No one would have described her as a child abuser—she had been raised in a home that condoned hitting as discipline. Many homes still do. She never hit us as we got older, just when she was overwhelmed and isolated with four very small children. Still I have vivid memories of her breaking a wooden spoon on my brother and me taking many hard smacks as a toddler for no reason I could decipher—enough to instill a deep fear of harm from someone I depended upon.

So though my father's abuse occurred years later I thought if I did not die I would be okay because living through it was all that mattered. I must have assumed that my father, who had never hit me and in fact was the source of warmth and understanding in my early years compared to my mother, could not be harming me as much as my mother had. Also, I had no way to value what I already has lost in his abuse—my sexual integrity and human dignity.

Soon after I turned 16 I confronted my father and told him he could never touch me again. Before being 16 I had said no and had shown him my confusion and fear and disgust of what he did, but he had dismissed my protests. I could finally say no with certainty because at 16 I reasoned I could leave home and get a job and survive somewhere—somehow running away before that was unthinkable. My father never abused me after that confrontation and I did not run away.

Despite my belief that I would be okay if I lived through those assaults what has been the harm I have suffered as a result of my father's abuse? I have had some of the problems I mentioned earlier—but I actually have found that I took a tremendous amount of the fear and anxiety and channeled it straight into developing myself as a person—making myself as productive as I could. And how did I manage that in the midst of the abuse? It is no mystery. I modeled myself after the parent I identified with—the one who was fantastic at projects, at deadlines and discipline, at tackling impossible challenges, my father.

Complex, isn't it? It is complex and that is why we have not solved this problem, bad as it is, common as it might be. When the people who have harmed are the same ones we depend upon and model ourselves after, then we have to take time to craft a solution which stops the behavior and holds people accountable, but also holds the whole situation in a caring, community-centered embrace.

The most important harm I have wrestled with, though, is one that does not lend itself to a researcher's regression analysis. It is one that complicates how we solve the problem of sexual abuse and how we prevent it. It is the problem of a broken heart. Sexual abuse breaks human hearts. Even for those who are assaulted by strangers where no relationship existed, sexual assault tears at the fabric inside us that allows us to risk human relationship.

My ability to love one, intimate other, has been thwarted, even mangled, by the abuse I suffered. The closer I have gotten to another person, the more I have to deal with the fear that that person will harm me. This tendency is a debilitating problem. I have been close with people and I have run away. It has cost me a few relationships. It has cost me the chance to have children and a family life. And the older I get and witness the joy that family life brings to people I know, the more I realize what a terrible price I have paid for this injury in my childhood.

I realize I have ventured into murky territory—it's the land of talk show topics and sordid story. Lots and lots of people have a hard time connecting to others, otherwise the divorce rate would not be so high. But I want to discuss the difficulty I have had in loving another because loving others is how we stay healthy, happy and have a feeling of living lives worth living. If abuse victims could love and be loved they would suffer much less, so for me it is the most important thing I have lost.

I wish that was all I could say to you, but I want to say a bit more. Ten years ago, after lots of work that taught me how to be open and not run away, I met and married a very lovely man. What I did not understand is that it takes two people to have done that healing work and it was not enough for me to be able to make a commitment. A few years into our marriage he was swept into a despair he could not shake. He would tell me, and apparently, me only, that he thought he might have been sexually abused when he was very young. He had exhibited what we now would call "abuse-reactive behaviors" with his friends at age seven or so. But he could not remember what had happened; he only had waves and waves of shame to live with. He certainly did not accuse anyone of anything. Nor did or do I. In an extreme act of tragedy, he killed himself four years ago.

Suicide is a very terrible thing to witness. I remain forever humbled by living through this particular hell, humbled by knowing that some children are harmed in a way they cannot

know or put words to, or if they have words they are too terrified to speak them. Since I have always remembered and had words for my father's harm, I did not understand before Don's suicide how important it is to realize that some people are so harmed they can only use behavior to express their pain.

In these years of working on prevention I have heard too many stories of suicide—suicide of victims who could not heal, suicide of perpetrators who could not face their shame. There is far too much suicide connected to this issue and we must find a way to stop it. We must.

Now I want to turn to the crux of the problem as I see it. You already know it. It is the issue of disclosure and reporting. I did not disclose what my father did. In fact, one of the hardest things I still grapple with is my reluctance to put my father at risk for punishment and my family at risk for break-up. I know I protect children from being alone with him, but I have not been willing to go further than that.

How many offenses that go on out there do people in the criminal justice system know about? Dr. Dean Kilpatrick reported in the National Women's Study in the early 1990's that 84 percent of rapes were not reported to authorities. STOP IT NOW! has conducted a survey on the Internet and in a paper questionnaire soliciting information from survivors of child sexual abuse who told us about the people who abused them. Dr. Pam McMahon and Robin Puett analyzed the data. Ninety-one percent of these survivors had not disclosed the abuse when it was happening. When we looked into just the last decade of the nineties that number improved to 73 percent who had not disclosed when it was happening. But even if we were able to interview every child and adolescent who is being abused currently and that number of those who did not disclose is lower still—we have a significant number of children struggling with undisclosed abuse. How many people in our study were convicted of a sexual offense? Only 98 of the 1,032 abusers described.

The people we know about are the tip of the iceberg, but what does the iceberg look like? Again, of the 1,032 abusers, 11 were strangers. Every other person who abused, except 7 who were not defined, was known to the child by blood, by marriage, or being a family friend, neighbor, teacher, religious leader. In fact, the closer the blood relationship, the less likely would the abuse have been disclosed to a statistically significant degree. Of the 1,032 abusers 217, by the way, were fathers, the highest percentage of all relationships—that did not include step-fathers or father-figures in the home.

As we find ways to manage the known offenders in the community, both the dangerous ones and the less dangerous, we are attempting to manage them in a country of citizens many of whom, perhaps twenty percent of whom have histories of sexual abuse themselves, most of it undisclosed. Do we adequately understand how volatile this mix is?

Let's just think about this issue of disclosure for a moment. How hard do you think it would be to talk about this publicly if it had happened to you? If I asked each person in this room to raise your hand if you had been victimized by sexual abuse could you do it—even though you are in the company of colleagues who respect you? Suppose you had some offending behavior in your past, could you admit to it?

Yet, as a society, we wait for a boy or girl to tell us that “daddy is touching me” or “the coach puts his hand down my pants.” Why do we expect children to be able to tell the difference between good touch and bad touch when so much of this teaching in the schools is woefully inadequate or non-existent, when so much of the abuse is perpetrated by family members or friends of the family? Why aren’t we learning about and paying attention to the behavior of people who sexually abuse or who are at risk to abuse and helping them to stop or not to start?

We have a problem getting to the truth because although we know that strangers are only a small part of the problem, we have a hard time convincing people how close to home the problem is. Have you thought why?

It is because the political constituency to address sexual abuse has been too damaged to organize against it. As impressive as the gains of sexual assault organizations have been—and they are impressive—they have had to spend precious organizational capital on defining the issue and being taken seriously.

We will not easily have a Million Mom March or a Mothers Against Drunk Driving on this issue of sexual abuse against children because the people who could act have not been able to. How many mothers can brook the shame of this occurring in their family to organize politically? We have seen the power of Patty Wetterling and Maureen Kanka and Mark Klaas—profound and powerful acts of courage out of tragedy. Please bear in mind that their work is possible because their children were abducted or killed by strangers. Who will organize in the streets for the completely ordinary but flawed family like mine? My family can’t or won’t because they cannot take outrage into the streets—they would take shame instead. And so they don’t.

(I recall when I went home to tell my parents in 1992 that I had founded STOP IT NOW! and why. I did not want them to hear about it from anyone else. After I had finished my mother said, “Dearie, do you have to do this?”

“Yes, Mom, “ I said.

She came back, “Well, if you have to do it, couldn’t you say you are doing it because of someone else’s family?”

“No, Mom.”

It will be awhile before we have a Million Mom March.)

That is why those of us in this room are so important to the solution. The fact that we care about sexual assault and that we are in a position to help other people care makes all the difference.

And what is the solution? I believe it lies in three things. First, in the wise use of the child protection and criminal justice systems. Second, in what Jim Mercy and the folks at CDC have called a “full court press” on prevention and third in our collective willingness to instill a cultural value of sexual integrity for ourselves and for our children.

First, those of us inside the system need to think beyond the cases that come through our doors. We could hold a national conversation about sexual abuse, sexual assault, and its prevention. So far, CDC and Dr. Rodney Hammond's Division of Violence Prevention have led the way here. This meeting takes us further. But these efforts could use our vocal support. We could talk intelligently about what the range of sex offenses are. We could be better at labeling behaviors, but not people. We could understand much more than we do about the impossibly chronic offenders who needed intervention earlier in their lives so that their dangerous behavior had no soil to take root. But we also need to recognize that children and adolescents who abuse are not little adult offenders. They and their families need help, not labels for life. We will be hearing from some of the pioneers of this work— Drs. Becker and Hunter and Gail Ryan. We need to support good quality specialized sex offender assessment and treatment so that every person who has sexually offended has the opportunity to change and make those changes stick.

It is time for folks in the criminal justice systems to say, "Enough! We are not social service systems. We can't solve this problem. We need society to own it –we need other systems to help, including the entertainment media, faith communities, the educational system and especially the health care and public health systems."

All of us recognize we are a nation ruled by law. We give the boundaries of law terrific weight—haven't we witnessed this in the last weeks with the election? But the legal boundaries on an issue are not the moral boundaries. The successes of the criminal justice system still are the failures of our society to develop healthy people.

Sexual assault is a crime. I don't want to see us make it a medical problem and erase the crime, but when we use prison because we do not have other solutions we steam-roll over the chance to reach undisclosed assaults. Having no sanctions between the polarities of denial and prison is the recipe for abuse to continue.

I have thought long and hard about this dilemma as I watch how offenders are treated in the community. They have become the pariahs of our time. Not in your communities, perhaps, because you are working hard on this issue and making a difference. But how many stories do we have to hear or read about victims outed unintentionally, about offenders who cannot find a place to live, a job, a life?

I feel dismay when I realize that when I started STOP IT NOW! in 1992 and did some early media work it brought recovering sex offenders coming through our doors in a steady trickle—they came to help—wanting to be visible on this issue. STOP IT NOW! VERMONT launched its media campaign in September 1995 and 65% of the callers in the first six months were from abusers asking for help. Megan's Law was passed in the Spring of 1996. Both abuser calls and recovering abuser visits dropped off at precisely that point. At STOP IT NOW! we speculate that the media attention to that law and subsequent state legislation on civil commitment, castration, and three strikes have resulted in a chilling effect for people who are staying in hiding instead of getting help.

It is in our hands—those of us committed to the issue—who can say what fair is—fair assessment, fair sentencing, fair parole and probation policies. It is for those of us in the

room to argue for a serious and sustained investment in demonstration programs that are well evaluated, in policy analysis, in research and a solid flow of sound information.

It is our responsibility to strike the right balance between not taking this issue seriously and letting people off with no accountability and the other, equally dangerous extreme, that the punishments and sanctions get so severe that people will not admit their crimes.

A mother in our STOP IT NOW! Vermont program told us that when she found out her son had molested another child she was terrified to tell people. She said it would have been easier to tell people he was a murderer than a molester. Something has gone wrong here.

So how the criminal justice system helps children or adults disclose makes all the difference—how we question them and their families, how we investigate, how we treat the intentions and wishes of victims.

Now let me focus on prevention. It's not enough to wait for a victim to disclose. It's actually outrageous to wait at all—how can we tolerate it? What could we do instead? We could learn about risk factors for perpetration and victimization and be intelligent about using them—not as checklists to harass people but as a guide to ask questions and learn about troubling circumstances. We could find a way for the medical system to screen for sexual behavior problems. We could support employer programs that help people with sexual behavior problems the way people get help for drug abusing or for quitting smoking.

I don't pretend these things are simple—we can't say stop it now the way we tried with drugs to Just Say No—but it doesn't have to be impossibly complex either. I had an example of how easy it could be last year when I housed a young man for a month who was from another country. He looked for a summer placement to exchange work for room and board and I arranged it with some of my friends. I didn't know this young man or his family—so I called them up and asked all of them—do you have a problem with drinking or drugs? Then I asked “Do you have problem with sexual behaviors? It was an awkward moment because I had never asked anyone this so directly before. We stumbled around a bit and I made it clear I was not asking if he had ever had sexual activity with anyone. I explained that my friends had a child in their home whom I was feeling protective of. Then the young man answered quite simply and both his parents and my friends were glad I had asked. Of course, I am aware that if this young man had had a problem, he might have denied it. But asking questions is the beginning of changing behaviors and so many more of us could do this. In fact when the young man came to stay with me we talked long and intelligently about what people his age could do to help prevent sexual abuse. He said he was grateful for the chance to talk.

So prevention is about paying attention to what we want to have happen to instill and sustain healthy behavior.

Let me take a few moments before I wrap up to explore the third avenue I believe we have to take in order for us deal squarely with sexual abuse in our society. I believe each of us needs to cultivate a value of sexual integrity. I use this term “sexual integrity” to define sexual activity that is vital and life-giving and causes no harm. We can't cultivate it if we can't discuss sex openly. Because we have not been willing to discuss the range of

wholesome sexual expression in humans from birth to old age, we have banished sexual life to places that are not afraid to use it—the business world and entertainment media. They have brilliantly capitalized on our silence to put sex into everything and everywhere, but in its role as sales merchant, not as carrier of healthy human expression. We are prey to what the businesses want to project upon us—even worse, our children are prey to this kind of exploitation. We need instead to build our strength and resilience around damaging projection and myths by telling the truth about our own vibrant and healthy sexuality.

You might wonder what kind of weird tangent I have gone off to here, but bear with me. I believe because we do not speak openly, kindly, generously about sex we have so much more difficulty breaking silence about sexual abuse that is conducted in homes and in the privacy of intimate family life. If we don't, we risk developing a culture that talks openly about sex only when we talk of deviance.

As we talk more openly about sexual feeling we could find our way to living healthy lives. We could openly support social norms that help us to do the right thing. We could remember that healthy, expressed values are stronger than any control system that any one could ever devise.

We also would be freer to accept and welcome children's sexual expression as healthy—and know the difference between healthy behaviors that should be private and unhealthy behavior that is kept secret. Perhaps if we had a value of sexual integrity we could understand that sex, when it is used to manipulate is not acceptable in adults or children of either gender. Perhaps with a more openly expressed understanding of sexual feeling we could also recognize that we may have sexual feelings in the presence of children or in response to children and that they may have such feelings in response to us as adults, feelings that are fleeting, not worrisome, and do not translate into acts.

What is it going to take to do accomplish these three steps I have outlined: the wise use of criminal justice and child protection, putting an emphasis on prevention before abuse happens, and the integration of a norm of sexual integrity?

It will take bringing everyone to the table: victims, families, people who have offended. These voices are too easily left out as we build professionalism into the field. What do victims have to say? What do families need? What do abusers have to teach us, for we have a lot to learn from them. They hold tremendous insight into how they need to be managed, how we can help them to prevent abuse, and how to intervene appropriately.

May I say one more thing about both being a victim and talking about being a survivor of such personal harm? We are a culture that likes winners and it is quite hard to be placed in a victim role. I am so aware how few times people can say to me after I have told them of my work, "I truly see the harm that happened to you. I am sorry that it happened." Each one of us could go a long way to building resilience in victims of all ages if we could bear witness to what some of us have gone through and say that.

Sometimes I despair at where we are on this issue. I only have to look at the two file drawers of letters from recovering sex offenders who write to me mostly when they have no hopes of getting treatment and want help to find it. I read the helpline stories that come

into our prevention phone line everyday—story after story about abuse going on right now. Too many stories about systems that have no jurisdiction, offenders in denial, and victims who do not speak again after a first disclosure.

But I have learned from my own victimization and from people who are in recovery from offending that what we need and what they need is that special and rare combination of good information, courage and especially hope. Hope that what has gone on for millennia in a new millennium can change. Hope that such ruptures in human relationship can be repaired. Hope that like other malleable behaviors, people can and will change sexually assaultive behavior.

I leave you with some questions and a quote from a very favorite book of mine: Dante Aligheri's *Divine Comedy*. Written seven hundred years ago at the dawn of the Renaissance, it tells of Dante's journey through Hell to Paradise. He took Virgil, the poet, on the journey to help him when he grew faint with fear. In one such exchange Dante says of Virgil, "His question threaded so the needle's eye of my desire that just the hope alone of knowing left my thirst more satisfied."

Here are the questions I ask.

Have I created a vital sexual life for myself?
Has my sexuality been victimized?
Have I been a manipulator of sexuality?
Have I been a bystander when I knew something was wrong?
How can stopping sexual abuse start with me?

Can I hold an open heart—open to new solutions?

Thank you.

©Fran Henry
fhenry@stopitnow.com