

Open letter regarding alleged East Texas gang rape

The publicity surrounding the alleged gang rape of an 11 year-old East Texas child has generated concern from advocates across the State. We are troubled not only by the nature of the reports but also by the insensitive light in which the child is being portrayed. Sadly, we live in a world in which rape victims are blamed for the crime their perpetrators committed against them. We dissect what a victim did, said and wore, as if this somehow excuses the perpetrator from responsibility. Sexual assault is any unwanted, non-consensual sexual contact against any individual by another using manipulation, pressure, tricks, coercion or physical force. All of us, regardless of age, race, gender or socioeconomic status, are afforded the same right to protection under the law. No one deserves to have our basic human rights taken away from us because someone else says, "she wanted it," "she waited too long to report," or "she placed herself in that situation." We are saddened and appalled to watch as child victims are subjected to deplorable, unjustified scrutiny and blame.

A perpetrator is one hundred percent responsible for his or her actions and a victim is never to blame for what happened to her or him. Any time we stray from this reality, we perpetuate unacceptable behaviors by failing to hold perpetrators accountable and allowing victims to be judged and shamed by their community. The sad truth is that negative portrayals of rape survivors in the media prevent others from coming forward and getting help. In the interest of accurate reporting, it is important to note the facts: An estimated one in five girls and one in ten boys will be sexually victimized before age 18¹, yet only 1 in 3 will tell anyone². Approximately 80 percent of all sexual assault victims are under the age of 18³. Finally, 60 percent of all sexual assaults are never reported to police⁴.

Rape survivors fear they will not be believed and they will be forever labeled. Sexual assault is a traumatic event that causes emotional scarring that can last a lifetime. All rape survivors deserve to be spared further victimization by the media and the public. The most important things we can do for a rape survivor are believe her or him; listen without judgment; and encourage her or him to call the local rape crisis hotline. To connect with services in your area, contact the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network at 1.800.656.HOPE or online at www.online.RAINN.org.



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¹ Finkelhor, *Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse*, 1994.

² Cross, Walsh & Jones, 2001.

³ U.S. Department of Justice, 2004.

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, *National Crime Victimization Study*, 2005.