



End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI)

# Addressing False Reporting Beliefs: Misconceptions about False Reporting and Addressing the Persistent Challenge

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## Authors

Dr. Kimberly A. Lonsway has served as the Director of Research for EVAWI since 2004. Her research focuses on sexual violence and the criminal justice and community response system. She has written over 60 published articles, book chapters, technical reports, government reports, and commissioned documents – in addition to numerous training modules, bulletins, and other resources. She has volunteered for over fifteen years as a victim advocate and in 2012, she was awarded the first – ever Volunteer of the Decade Award from the Sexual Assault Recovery and Prevention (SARP) Center in San Luis Obispo, CA. She earned her PhD in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois, Urbana – Champaign.



Sgt. Joanne Archambault (Retired, San Diego Police Department) is the Chief Executive Officer for EVAWI. In 2003 prior to founding EVAWI, Sgt. Archambault worked for the San Diego Police Department for almost 23 years, in a wide variety of assignments. During the last 10 years of her service, she supervised the Sex Crimes Unit, which had 13 detectives and was responsible for investigating approximately 1,000 felony sexual assaults each year. Sgt. Archambault has provided training for tens of thousands of practitioners, policymakers and others – both across the country and around the world. She has been instrumental in creating system – level change through individual contacts, as well as policy initiatives and recommendations for best practice.



When someone is sexually assaulted, one of the most daunting challenges can be the fear of not being believed – by family members, friends, intimate partners – even by responding professionals. Sadly, this fear is all too often realized, which perpetrators know and take advantage of. This theme was highlighted in the recent case involving former [Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw](#):

*Prosecutors argued that he systematically targeted black women with prior criminal records and substance abuse problems because he thought they wouldn't be believed if they reported the assaults.<sup>1</sup>*

Addressing this challenge is therefore one of the most important aspects of our work.

### **An Unbelievable Story of Rape**

EVAWI offers a number of resources to help address the misconceptions of false reporting. However, a recent article illustrated the issues so powerfully, it is destined to become a timeless example for educating both professionals and others.

["An Unbelievable Story of Rape"](#) was written by T. Christian Miller of Pro Publica and Ken Armstrong with The Marshall Project. In it, the authors recount events involving a young woman who was sexually assaulted in Lynwood, Washington. She had grown up in foster care, with a lifetime of “adult caregivers and professionals coming in and then out of her life, some distressing or abusive experiences, and a general lack of permanency.” When she disclosed the assault to the two women who loved and cared about her the most – two former foster mothers – both questioned her story. One contacted the police to let them know she believed it was a false allegation. The story follows the devastating impact of this sequence of events on the young woman.

At the same time, the article follows the hunt for a serial rapist who attacked several women in Colorado. He was eventually identified as the same man who raped the young woman in Lynwood. Marc O’Leary was ultimately sentenced to 327 1/2 years for numerous counts of sexual assault.

This story provides a stark contrast between the failure to respond appropriately to one woman – while diligently searching to identify the serial rapist of several others. Ultimately, the difference in response came down to a question of belief. One was not believed, while the others were, and as a result, the cases took radically different paths.

The story also highlights the fact that disbelief is not just an issue for law enforcement. The initial report from the young woman in Lynwood was originally questioned by the victim's own foster mother, who called the police to let them know she thought the report was dubious. Once this happened, the case took a disastrous turn.

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<sup>1</sup> [Oklahoma Ex– Cop Convicted of Rape](#), *Huffington Post*, December 10, 2015.

## What Can We Do?

Anyone who works in this field has faced the barrier of misconceptions about false reporting. So, what can we do to challenge them? A good place to start addressing this issue is to introduce both community members and professionals to the **Start by Believing campaign**. On the [Start by Believing website](#), you will find a number of helpful ideas and strategies for overcoming the initial response of doubt and blame.

- In particular, you may want to visit pages introducing [The Message](#) and addressing the question, [Can I Really Say That?](#)
- On the [Campaign Resources](#) page, there are also a number of Communication Tools, including [Talking Points](#) and [Responses to Help Address Common Concerns](#).

EVAWI also offers several **evidence-based resources** on the topic of false reporting, which you can find on our [website](#).

- In the article entitled, [False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute Non-Stranger Sexual Assault](#), Dr. Kim Lonsway, Sgt. Joanne Archambault (Ret.), and Dr. David Lisak explore the prevalence of false reports of sexual assault, and then discuss the underlying societal beliefs and attitudes associated with false reporting.
- The OnLine Training Institute (OLTI) module entitled, [False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Effectively Investigate Sexual Assault](#) is designed to directly confront the issue of false reporting by showing that the “red flags” that typically raise suspicion are often the realistic dynamics of sexual assault. Research on false reports is reviewed, and the implications are explored for effective criminal justice and community responses.
- The Training Bulletin entitled: [Prosecution for Filing a False Report of Sexual Assault](#) examines the often hotly contested question of whether or not it is appropriate to prosecute someone for filing a false report.

## Preparing to Respond

Knowing how to respond to these issues is critical, not only for victims, but also for those who may doubt or blame them – and thus add to their victimization. We hope these resources are helpful as we seek to address the damaging effect of these misconceptions.