A fabricated sexual assault could lead to a culture of fear, said Staff Sgt. Rick Waugh.

"In this case, first of all, it's a waste of police resources. That's the secondary reason you shouldn't do it. The primary reason is the fear it creates in the community and the impact it creates," he said of a sexual assault complaint that turned out to be false.

On Wednesday, the Greater Sudbury Police Service responded to a sexual assault complaint in Minnow Lake. According to the police's initial press release, a female was walking on Second Avenue when she was grabbed from behind by a male with a knife. The release added that the male reached under the victim's shirt, ripping it in the process before the victim got away.

"When we arrived at the complainant's house, we obviously dealt with (her) needs, as we do in all cases like this," Waugh said, adding the woman was given medical care because a knife was involved, although she only had several minor scratches. Police also used a canine unit to track the suspect, who was described as 25 to 35 years old with a tattoo on his left hand.

"It wasn't until the next day, when we were following up with the initial complaint, that we had revisited the scene and revisited with the alleged victim," Waugh said. "The allegation wasn't adding up. The investigators determined that the story wasn't accurate."

The victim eventually admitted that the assault was fabricated.

"We're still investigating the reasons why. There was a reason, but it shouldn't have ever happened," Waugh said.

A case like this often becomes a balancing act. While the woman could be charged with public mischief, police must also work to avoid re-victimizing a victim.

"Sometimes people come forward and we may not get the total truth, but they're still victimized. You want to be careful when laying a charge like pubic mischief. You want to be careful we're not re-victimizing the victim," Waugh said.

"By no means does this police service, and I'll speak for the Crown (prosecutors) as well, by no means do we want to deter anybody from coming forward. If people have been truly victimized, we definitely want to hear about it."

Jennifer Johnson, Laurentian University's women studies chair, hasn't seen many fabricated cases of abuse.
"One of the things we know is that stories are often not fabricated, and I would say that this is a case (that's) uncommon and there's obviously something particular to this person's case that the public doesn't know about," she said.

"When we look at sexual assault ... we want to take people seriously when they're talking about it. In Canada, one in four women in their lifetimes experience some type of abuse."

Johnson acknowledged sexual assault and rape is an under-reported crime.

"There's still some shame associated with this. It's often difficult for people to leave abusive situations due to poverty or finances or manipulations of their abuser."

According to Waugh, a case like this could affect entire communities.

"When you hear something like that, it has a profound effect on some people, especially people who live in the area who have children walking to school, or who jog. When that's put out there, it's troubling. There's an element of fear."

John Lindsay, president of the Minnow Lake CAN, hasn't noticed any concern in his community.

"I haven't heard a thing ... Based on our seniors, I don't think that overall the population is really overly concerned," he said, adding that false claims could lead to a boy-who-cried-wolf situation.

"It's not good to have people yell fire, because eventually you don't pay attention," he said.

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