Rash of false police reports in West Michigan not so unusual

By The Grand Rapids Press
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For those who make up tall tales for the police, having their pants catch on fire is the least of their worries.

While there have been a handful of people in the news lately charged with making up crime stories, they represent just a fraction of the false reports made to area law enforcement each year.

Take the 31-year-old Grand Rapids woman who told police she was abducted and sexually assaulted by four men on Grand Rapids' Southeast Side.

Police say she later told them she had taken her mom's car without permission and made up the story to stay out of trouble. She pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of attempted false report of a felony -- a high court misdemeanor that could net her two years behind bars.

Last month, Julie Kathleen Rau told police a worker came to her Hidden Valley Town Homes apartment in Plainfield Township, claiming he was there to install drywall but instead sexually assaulted her.

A day later, Rau admitted she fabricated the story, Kent County sheriff's officials said. She was arrested and is scheduled for a probable cause hearing on the felony charge Monday in Rockford District Court.

BY THE NUMBERS

It's the truth

Of the 29 false reports of a felony handled by the Kent County Sheriff's Department since January 2008, these were the most frequently reported crimes:

- Criminal sexual assault: 7
- Civil/domestic situation: 7
- Larceny: 3
- Assault: 2

Last week, a Georgetown Township man found with a cut to his head and a drywall screw in his chest allegedly told police he had been assaulted. Ottawa County Sheriff's deputies now say the man inflicted his own injuries. It is unclear whether he will be charged.

Since January 2008, the Kent County Sheriff's Department has handled 29 false reports.

The Ottawa County Sheriff's Department had 24 reports during that same period.

Regardless of the reasons people falsely report a crime, the aftermath can be a major headache for the authorities.

"When we get the report, we're all in and, if it's a major case, we'll assign six, seven, eight investigators onto it," said Kent County sheriff's Lt. Kevin Kelly.

"We don't have the luxury of not looking into it because we think it doesn't sound right."

Kelly said while false reports have been getting more media attention lately, they have not increased in number in recent years.

Prove it

Not everyone who makes a false report is charged with the crime.
Under Michigan law, a false report of a felony can result in a maximum of four years in prison while a false report of a misdemeanor has a maximum of 93 days in jail.

Sometimes, charging a person with a false report can be tricky, especially when it comes to allegations of criminal sexual conduct. Holland Police Detective Lisa Bancuk said.

While a case may sound fishy, knowing it’s false and proving it can be two different things, Bancuk said.

"Legally, you can’t offer up a polygraph test (to someone making a CSC complaint)," Bancuk said. "It's so difficult because, if it did happen, you want to be sensitive."

But false reports of rape are rare, police say. Among the most frequent cases in which people lie to police involve drunken driving.

For example, a driver will crash a car into a tree, pole or parked car, then stumble home. He or she will call police after sobering up, claiming the car was stolen, said Joshua Kuiper, Assistant Kent County Prosecutor.

**A lot of perjury**

He said prosecutors see a lot of perjury, when people lie about their behavior or make up a story to protect someone else.

Kuiper said prosecutors will file charges whenever they have enough evidence to make a case.

Kuiper said people who think they can get out of a scrape may lie or people looking to get revenge during a divorce or other domestic dispute.

Kelly said sometimes people trying to scam their insurance company will falsely report their golf clubs or other property stolen to collect on a claim.

Kuiper said children are very unlikely to falsely report abuse, whether physical or sexual.

In fact, they tend to be reluctant to say anything because they fear removal from their home or angering an authority figure.

He said prosecutors take into account whether someone might be lying because they were threatened or because they have a mental illness.

"We always try to do what's fair," Kuiper said. "(But) a false report makes a lot of work for everyone."

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