False Allegations of Adult Crimes
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At 7:30 a.m., an unknown male abducted Pamela at knifepoint while she fueled her car at a convenience store. The offender then forced her to drive to a bridge, where they crossed into a neighboring state. During the long ride, he choked her with a bicycle security chain and slashed her with a knife.

Next, the assailant ordered Pamela to park the vehicle in a secluded rural area and led her into the woods. He bound her to a tree, placing the bicycle chain around her neck. The subject then assaulted her vaginally with a box cutter and lacerated her breasts and right nipple.

Then, he ordered Pamela back into her car and had her drive them to a nearby ferry. The subject exited the vehicle and disappeared while heading toward the ferry at about 3 p.m. Pamela drove herself to the nearest hospital for treatment, and staff members notified the police. After receiving medical attention, she was released.

State and local police investigators conducted the initial interview of Pamela at the hospital. Although initially cooperative, she stopped answering questions. Pamela agreed to meet investigators at a later date at the state police barracks.
to discuss the abduction and sexual assault, but she never arrived.

A review of hospital medical records showed that Pamela received treatment for superficial lacerations to her right hand, left breast, right breast and nipple, and neck. She also had several superficial abrasions in her pubic region. The doctor described her as tired but in no acute discomfort.

Officers found no forensic evidence from Pamela or her vehicle. They contacted the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) for assistance in developing an interview strategy. Investigators determined that Pamela suffered from depression and anxiety and had a prescription for an antidepressant. Working with NCAVC, officers developed a successful interview strategy, and Pamela finally admitted that she fabricated the abduction and sexual assault.

Her false allegation tied up the resources of several state and local police departments, as well as the area FBI office. Significant media attention focused on the case prior to her confession. An artist’s sketch of the imaginary offender circulated. The media quoted a spokesperson for a local women’s rape crisis center as saying, “What I see is a community that is scared…."

**Background**

A false allegation crime involves persons reporting a fabricated offense that has occurred against them to a law enforcement agency. Both men and women commit these crimes; however, women perpetrate the majority of them. A limited number of studies have focused on false allegation adult crimes, with the majority of research addressing cases of rape and to a lesser degree stalking.¹

These offenses occur throughout America every year. Unfortunately, they waste substantial investigative resources—needed for legitimate cases involving real victims—before authorities can identify them as false allegations. And, as noted in the quote from the crisis center worker, these false allegations can severely affect communities and the people who live and work there. Worse, they can make it harder for law enforcement agencies and citizens to take real victims of crime seriously.

**Offender Motivations**

Perpetrators of false allegation crimes have various underlying motivations that fall into one or more categories. Investigators may encounter cases involving more than one motivation.²

- Mental illness/depression
- Attention/sympathy
- Financial/profit
- Alibi
- Revenge
A significant life problem (e.g., marital, financial, employment) that the offender does not have the skills to resolve drives the motivation. Many perpetrators have multiple life difficulties. Rather than seeking appropriate assistance from family members, coworkers, clergy members, or mental health professionals, offenders develop a self-victimization plan. These individuals may realize temporary relief from their life problems due to immediate attention and support from family, neighbors, and coworkers. And, more often than not, false allegation offenders do not consider the serious, long-term law enforcement investigation or significant media coverage that reveals the truth. In the long run, offenders are worse off than before the false allegation crime report and even may face prosecution.

Typically, female offenders want to gain attention and sympathy and will falsely allege offenses, such as interpersonal violence (e.g., sexual assault), more likely to achieve that result. While the desire for attention and sympathy also can motivate males, they tend to opt for nonsexual offenses, such as physical assault or attempted murder.° Offenders who falsely allege more impersonal crimes, like theft or vandalism, more likely will have financial or profit motives. And, in cases where the perpetrator has no motive or incentive, mental health issues may prove significant.

**Investigations**

Law enforcement officers may find false allegation crimes complex and difficult to unravel. Further, investigators working closely with offenders may become so emotionally invested in the case that they have a hard time believing that the individual could be deceptive.

A suspected false allegation requires a two-pronged approach—covert and overt.

The covert investigation focuses on establishing whether the case involves a false allegation crime. Keeping this prong covert helps to avoid prematurely accusing a legitimate victim of a false allegation, prevent derailing the overt investigation, and preserve valuable information for the subject interview. Officers must gather all possible details concerning offenders. Because false allegation perpetrators have serious life problems motivating them, the covert investigation quietly must identify which issues trouble the individual. This type of information proves crucial during the interview process. Investigators need to examine offenders’ personal relationships, employment situation, finances, past criminal history, and other areas of their life to identify any indication of abnormal stress.

Additionally, the covert investigation determines if the offender has made other false allegations or crime reports. Officers also should check with local emergency rescue departments or hospital emergency rooms to discover any false injury or illness reports made by the individual. As the covert investigation progresses, the lead investigator responsible for the overall coordination of the case should receive all information.

The experience of NCAVC and research related to this phenomenon have shown that false
allegation adult crimes usually involve only one offender. In most cases, the individual conducts preplanning, preparation, or staging of the crime scene. Fewer incidents of false allegation adult crime arise from spur-of-the-moment decisions. Many cases have involved more than one offense reported simultaneously to law enforcement (e.g., carjacking/extortion, abduction/rape). Investigators need to carefully scrutinize forensic evidence and injuries for inconsistencies.

For example, while working the night shift, Charles, an experienced patrol officer for a medium-sized city police department, stopped a vehicle in a deserted area outside of town. Shortly thereafter, he reported that the driver produced a .22 caliber handgun and shot him in the torso at close range. Responding officers could not locate a vehicle or suspect in the area. Further, the bullet hit Charles in an ideal place on his ballistic vest and was deflected, causing him no injury.

Investigators quickly determined that he could not describe his shooter or the vehicle he pulled over. As the investigation progressed, Charles would not give a detailed statement about the incident and declined a polygraph test. The covert investigation in the case uncovered that he faced extreme personal stress due to a problematic marriage and several extramarital affairs.

Investigators eventually gained a confession from Charles and determined that he got the idea from an incident in a neighboring county the night before wherein a deputy sheriff was shot and killed during a traffic stop. Charles staged his own
shooting to gain attention and sympathy.

**Interview Strategies**

When allegations prove false, often no forensic evidence exists. Most testimony by eyewitnesses tends to offer exclusively postoffense details and include only information provided by the offender. As a result, the ability of investigators to gain an admission or confession from the perpetrator can become crucial in resolving the case.

Officers face the challenge of determining which life problems have caused the offender to present a false report to law enforcement. Generally, the most effective interviews involve an empathetic approach toward the subject. Directly challenging offenders with inconsistencies in their account or the lack of hard evidence likely will make them shut down or stubbornly insist on the accuracy of their story. After establishing rapport, interviewers need to address the person’s life problems. However, empathetic does not mean sympathetic. Authorities can express an understanding of difficulties that caused the situation without condoning the behavior. By addressing the offender’s underlying issues, interviewers eliminate the need to argue over the allegation’s contradictions or the lack of evidence and more likely will gain a confession.

Katrina was an undergraduate student at a large state university. At the end of a weekend, her roommate returned to their dorm room to find Katrina gone. Her wallet, keys, purse, mobile phone, and laptop all remained in the room. There were no signs of a struggle or forced entry.

**Most testimony by eyewitnesses tends to offer exclusively postoffense details and include only information provided by the offender.**

The roommate notified local police who began an intensive abduction investigation. However, investigators immediately suspected a false allegation abduction case. They contacted NCAVC for a crime analysis. NCAVC personnel concurred that the case was a false allegation and provided an interview strategy to use when Katrina reappeared.

After a few days, Katrina returned. Interviewers gained a confession from her by using an empathetic approach in an hour-long interview. Beforehand, investigators determined that Katrina felt that her relationship with her boyfriend was at risk and that she desired his attention and sympathy. Further, authorities discovered that she previously made a false report of an assault that proved unfounded (lacking sufficient evidence).

Unfortunately, Katrina’s case gained national media attention and caused a major upheaval in and around the university. And, the investigating police department depleted its annual overtime budget searching for her.

**Possible Clues**

Several indicators can help investigators identify a false allegation case. While none of these signs by themselves indicate a false allegation case, investigators should strongly consider a two-prong investigation with the corroboration of two or more. The offender may—
- continue to make inconsistent statements conflicting prior claims by the individual or information provided by witnesses;
- offer descriptions or circumstances of the reported offense that do not seem plausible or realistic;
- show deception on a polygraph or refuse to take one;
- have a history of mental and emotional problems or false allegations;
Staff members also conduct research in the area of violent crime from a law enforcement perspective to gain insight into criminal thought processes, motivations, and behaviors. NCAVC shares its findings with the law enforcement community through publications, training, and application to the investigative and operational functions of the center.

Source of Assistance

The FBI’s NCAVC provides advice and assistance in the general areas of crimes against adults, counterterrorism and threat assessment, and crimes against children. Typical cases received for assessment at NCAVC include serial murder, kidnapping, serial sexual assault, stalking, threat assessment, domestic and international terrorism, and false allegation crimes. NCAVC staff members handle requests for assistance from both domestic and international law enforcement agencies.

NCAVC reviews specific crimes from behavioral, forensic, and investigative perspectives. This analytical process serves as a tool for client law enforcement agencies by providing them with an evaluation of the offense, as well as an understanding of the criminal motivations and behavioral characteristics of the offender.

Personnel typically consult on cases, such as false allegation crimes, when requested by the investigating agency. NCAVC will assist by providing behavioral analysis and investigative and interview strategies. Only law enforcement agencies and prosecutor’s offices can receive services from NCAVC.

Conclusion

Although false allegation adult crimes tend to be the exception, rather than the rule, these cases present serious concerns to law enforcement. Investigators find them difficult and frustrating. Officers risk being accused of not treating crime victims properly by prematurely labeling their allegations as false or by being unable to resolve the case. Further, a tremendous amount of department resources (which could be applied to real victims of real crimes), such as overtime, forensic budgets, and work hours, can be wasted on them.

Realizing how to identify false allegation crimes by using the two-prong investigation and developing the appropriate interview strategy based on the offender’s true motivations/life problems allows investigators to more easily and quickly resolve these cases. This will save significant department resources and put the community at ease.

Endnotes