

LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT MEDIA COVERAGE OF HIGH PROFILE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ALLEGATIONS

Allegations of child sexual abuse involving coaches at Penn State and Syracuse Universities have permeated the news in recent months. Much of the media coverage and public discourse about these cases has focused not on a call for the proliferation of additional sex offender laws and restrictions, but rather on illuminating several basic, key facts about sex offenders and the young victims of child sexual abuse. The media coverage of these cases has provided an important opportunity to educate the public, and some of the key lessons that have emerged bear repeating.

Most victims of child sexual abuse know, or are related to, the person who commits the offense.

This is a fact that CSOM, and many of our other colleague national entities and organizations, have continued to emphasize to stakeholders and the public in recent decades. It is clear that public education efforts in this regard have had at least some impact on citizen awareness; findings from a recent CSOM public opinion poll indicate that 84% of the respondents polled recognize that in the majority of cases, offenders know their victims.

Sex offenders come from all walks of life.

In some ways, the coverage surrounding the allegations at these universities offers an illustration to the public that individuals who commit sex offenses can be successful and high achieving individuals in the community, not just violent, socially isolated repeat sex offenders released from prison. It is critically important that the public and others understand the diversity of the sex offender population.

Sexual abuse is under-detected and under-reported.

These cases underscore that children who experience victimization may not come forward for a number of reasons, including shame, guilt, the fact that they may have a relationship with or familial ties to the offender, and, unfortunately, inadequate system responses that sometimes exist when disclosures and reports are made. These incidents illustrate to the public the complex dynamics of cases involving child sexual abuse and some of the impacts that coming forward can have on victims.

Mandated reporting laws are an important mechanism that can support the prevention of sexual abuse.

Provided that the public and other professionals are aware of and take responsibility for utilizing this tool, mandatory reporting requirements offer a vital opportunity for intervention. While mandated reporting laws have been in place in every state for decades, these laws vary in terms of who is required to report – and the potential penalties for failing to report – suspected abuse. Perhaps an additional outcome of the current cases, of which there has been some discussion already, is a greater awareness of mandatory reporting laws, and enhancement or broadening of these laws to expand responsibility beyond the current mandatory reporters (i.e., those in the medical, mental health, or education fields).

Primary prevention efforts are a critical part of the solution.

Perhaps the most important and promising message that has emerged from the coverage of these cases is the significant role the community plays in primary prevention: that the criminal justice system is not the sole, or even most effective, place to attempt to address the problem of preventing sexual victimization. Indeed, recent media coverage has highlighted repeatedly that a number of early interventions can mitigate the potential for sexual abuse, and that all citizens must play a role if we are to truly prevent sexual violence. **We need to make available materials for parents and families about how to talk to their children about sexual abuse; tools that identify potential warning signs and cues of sexual abuse; and what to do and where to turn if individuals have questions, concerns, or suspicions that sexual abuse has occurred. In addition, materials exist not only for those individuals closest to the persons of concern, but also for individuals outside of the close circle of friends and family members.**

Without question, there is much to be done in the area of prevention. Perhaps the coverage that has been generated will provide a catalyst for further support of sexual violence prevention efforts at federal, state, and local levels; and will serve as a reminder to all of us that even one person can help to prevent sexual victimization in our communities.