

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

SEXUAL ASSAULTS IN GREENLAND: CHARACTERISTICS OF POLICE REPORTED RAPES AND ATTEMPTED RAPES

Pernille Mejlvang ¹, Vibeke Boujida ²

¹ Department of Surgery, Dronning Ingrid's Hospital, Nuuk, Greenland

² Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Gentofte Hospital, Gentofte, Denmark
pernillemejlvang@dadlnet.dk

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. The aim of the study was to describe characteristics of reported sexual assaults against adolescents and adults in Greenland society.

Study design. A retrospective review of police files.

Methods. Data about victims and alleged offenders were extracted from all available police files concerning reported rapes and attempted rapes in 2002 of persons 12 years and older in all of Greenland.

Results. In total, 173 rapes and attempted rapes were reported to the police. Comprehensive data about 82 cases were analysed and showed that the vast majority of assaults occurred in private homes and often in the presence of other people. The offender was closely connected to the victim in 92% of the cases. Both victim and offender were severely intoxicated by alcohol in half of the cases.

Conclusions. The incidence of police-reported sexual assaults is high compared with the incidence in other Nordic countries and the pattern of assaults differs from that in many other countries. The studied rape cases were characterized by close relationships between victims and offenders and by both being influenced by alcohol. This is explained by the structure of Greenland society, by people living in small and closed communities and by a relatively high prevalence of binge drinking. Prevention of sexual assaults demands prevention of excessive alcohol abuse. Access to medical and psychosocial counselling and support for all victims of sexual assaults is recommended. Mediation may be considered as a judicial choice in view of the prevalence of close connections between offender and victim (*Int J Circumpolar Health* 2007; 66(3) 257-263).

Keywords: rape, sexual assaults, Greenland, offender, victim, police

INTRODUCTION

Sexual assaults are seen as a widespread problem in Greenland. The 1993–1994 health interview survey in Greenland reported that 25% of women and 6% of men had been sexually assaulted (1). The number of police-reported rapes and attempted rapes in Greenland increased from 137 in 1993 to 188 in 2002. In 2005, the number decreased to 158 among a population of 57,000 inhabitants in Greenland as compared with 475 cases in Denmark among a population of 5.5 million.

Earlier studies have described some characteristics of sexual assaults in the adult Greenland population, but the pattern of police-reported cases has not been analysed. The Greenland health interview survey in 1993 included a limited number of questions about the physical and sexual violence and the offenders in such assaults, but it did not collect further information about the assaults (1). The Nordic multicentre study on sexual abuse and health (2) did not include Greenland data, and the reports from the Greenland medical health office or the police only publish the crude number of reported rapes.

In contrast to the other Nordic countries, rape crisis centres have not been established in Greenland. In most cases of police-reported rape, district medical staff examine the victim, collect forensic evidence using a standardized kit (PU-kit) and treat physical consequences of the assault, but there is no formalized psychosocial counselling or medical follow-up. The district medical services do not systematically record data about the medico-legal examinations.

Hence, the aim of the present study was to gain further knowledge about the prob-

lems of sexual assaults in Greenland society by presenting an overview of the character of police-reported rapes and attempted rapes in Greenland and to compare the pattern with that reported in other countries.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was based on a review of available police files on police-reported cases of rape and attempted rape in 2002 among persons aged 12 years and older. A total of 173 cases were reported, 5 cases were later recalled, 3 cases were initially dropped due to lack of evidence and in 83 cases the police files were not available due to ongoing legal procedures or other causes. Consequently, a total of 82 police files were examined and data about the following variables were extracted and entered into spreadsheets for analyses:

- nature of the sexual assault: rape or attempted rape
- age and sex of the victim
- relationship between the victim and the alleged offender
- age and sex of alleged offender
- use of physical violence and threats
- physical resistance by the victim
- the scene of the crime
- alcohol intoxication at the time of the assault

Self-reported data about alcohol intoxication were confirmed by witnesses in many cases. Violent behaviour was differentiated into threats of violence, restraint and mild to moderate physical violence and severe violence (cuts, stab wounds, attempted strangulation and fractures).

RESULTS

A total of 82 cases of police-reported sexual assaults against persons aged 12 years and older were analysed. Of these, 14 cases were reported in the main town of Nuuk, 55 in other locations on the west coast and 11 in locations on the east coast.

Table I presents the number of rapes and attempted rapes and the relationship between

the victim and the alleged offender in 5 different victim age groups: below 20, 20–29, 30–39, 40–49 and 50+ years of age. Most of the cases (85%) concerned rape. Young women below 20 years of age represented 44% of the victims; a few (12%) were older than 40. No age differences were observed in the distribution of rape and attempted rape. There were 4 male victims: 1 was below 20 years of age and the others were between the ages of 20 and 39.

Table I. Relationship between victim and alleged offender by age of victim and type of reported offence.

Age of victim	Relationship	Rape	Attempted rape	Total
<20 years	Ex-partner	5		5
	Family member	7		7
	Friend	10	1	11
	Acquaintance	5	3	8
	Stranger	3	1	4
	Not stated	1		1
Total		31	5	36
20–29 years	Ex-partner	4		4
	Current partner	1		1
	Family member	3		3
	Friend	6	3	9
	Acquaintance	6		6
	Stranger		1	1
Total		20	4	24
30–39 years	Family member	2		2
	Friend	6		6
	Acquaintance	1		1
	Stranger	2		2
	Not stated	1		1
Total		12		12
40–49 years	Ex-partner	1		1
	Current partner	1		1
	Friend		2	2
	Acquaintance	2		2
Total		4	2	6
50+ years	Family member		1	1
	Friend	1		1
	Acquaintance	2		2
Total		3	1	4
All total		70	12	82
%		85.4	14.6	100

All the offenders were men, and they were generally older than the victims; 11 (13%) were younger than 20 years of age and their victims were also below 20. No case included more than 1 offender, but in 2 cases, 3 different men raped the same victim independently during the same night. In all victim-age groups the reported offence was most often committed by a well-known person, most frequently by a friend (35%) or an acquaintance (23%) and only in few cases by a stranger (8%). Of the 75 offenders known to the victims before the assaults, about one-third were "drinking pals" and the offences were committed at social gatherings in private homes.

About half of the victims had been severely intoxicated by alcohol and 27% had amnesia concerning the circumstances of the reported assault (Table II). Severe alcohol intoxication was more frequent in cases where the offender was a friend or an acquaintance than in cases

where the offender was a current or former partner or a family member. A total of 52 of the offenders (63%) were alcohol intoxicated.

The assault most often took place either in the victim's home (31%), the offender's home (31%) or in another private home (22%), and only 15% occurred in a public place (Table III). In 16% of the cases, other people were present in adjoining rooms, and in 11 cases (14%) others had even been sleeping in the same room where the assault took place. There were no differences in the relationships between victim and offender in the cases committed in a public place and those committed in a private home.

In 65 of the cases (79%) the victim reported no physical resistance to the rape, either due to fear or to alcohol intoxication. Physical violence by the offender was reported in 16 of the cases (20%), and in 5 of these cases the violence included cuts, stab wounds, attempted strangulation and fractures.

Table II. Alcohol intoxication and type of relationship between victim and offender.

Alcohol	Current or ex-partner	Family member	Friend	Acquaintance	Stranger	Not stated	Total
No intoxication	2	7	2	8	3		22
Slightly	5	2	5	2			14
Moderate to severely	1		8	4	3	1	17
Alcoholic amnesia		3	12	5	1	1	22
Not stated	4	1	2				7
Total	12	13	29	19	7	2	82
%	15	16	35	23	9	2	100

Table III. Place of occurrence and relationship between victim and offender.

Place of occurrence	Current or ex-partner	Family member	Friend	Acquaintance	Stranger	Not stated	Total
Victim's home	7	7	7	3	1		25
Offender's home	2	1	14	6	2		25
Other private home		4	7	3	2	2	18
Public place	3	1	1	5	2		12
Not stated				2			2
Total	12	13	29	19	7	2	82
%	15	16	35	23	9	2	100

DISCUSSION

Population-based surveys illustrate the number and character of self-reported sexual assaults and may also describe prevalent national and regional differences. However, there exist great variances in the definitions of assaults and the interpretation of sexual experiences in different countries and between different ethnic groups (3). This has a strong impact upon the readiness to report sexual assaults and, in part, may explain the differences in the recorded prevalence of sexual assaults in Greenland as compared with other Nordic countries (1, 2, 4, 5). In order to compare data across countries it is essential to use the same research methods, including the same questionnaires, the same definitions of violence and sexual abuse and the same sampling techniques (3).

In the Greenland health interview survey (1), a total of 25% of women and 6% of men reported ever having been sexually assaulted as compared with 5% of women and 1% of men in a similar survey conducted in Denmark in 2000 (4). A total of 19% of women in Finland reported having experienced sexual violence or threats of sexual violence in the 1997 violence against women survey (5). It would have been optimal to compare our results with studies from other arctic regions as living conditions in Greenland are very different from Scandinavia, for example. The paper by Curtis et al. (1) mentions a similarly high level of physical and sexual violence against Inuit women in the north of Canada, and Peter Bjerregaard describes in his book (6) a high level of assaults and homicide in Greenland as well as in Alaska. However, it has not been

possible to find any comparable surveys from arctic areas that specifically describe rapes and attempted rapes and their characteristics.

The incidence of police-reported sexual assaults in Greenland is also very high, 300 per 100,000 inhabitants as compared with 10 per 100,000 inhabitants in Denmark. In Greenland, the number of police-reported rapes increased significantly each year until the beginning of 2000, but during the past few years has decreased from 191 per year to 158 by 2005. The increase in police-reported sexual assaults during the 1990s may be explained both by a changing approach to non-consensual sexual activities in the population and a change in the attitudes of the police and judicial authorities towards sexual assaults. It has been demonstrated that the judicial authorities may be more prepared to accept a report of a rape by a stranger than a rape committed by a person well known to the victim. Furthermore, this attitude is undergoing a change in many countries (7).

Our study showed that the majority of police-reported rapes and attempted rapes in Greenland in 2002 were committed by a person well known to the victim, in most cases a friend or an acquaintance, and that the assault most often took place in a private home, either that of the victim or of the offender; less than 15% took place in a public area. These figures differ from the police-reported cases in other countries and may well be explained by the structure of Greenland society. The population of Greenland is spread thinly over an extensive area, but most people live in small towns or settlements that are characterized by relatively close relations between the inhabitants. Contrary to the high

percentage of well-known offenders in the present study, a former study of all police-reported cases in Denmark in 1990–1992 showed that the offender in half of the cases had been unknown to the victim (8). By 2002, 2 out of 3 victims who contacted the Danish national rape crisis centre were sexually assaulted by a person well known to them, while one-third were raped by a stranger (9). In the present study a stranger was the alleged offender in less than 10% of the reported cases. The Greenland health interview survey in 1993–1994 reported that 30% of the women who had been sexually assaulted had been violated by a family member (1). In the present study, 18% of alleged offenders were family members.

Most (89%) of the reported rapes or attempted rapes occurred in private homes as compared with 51% of those reported to the Danish national rape crisis centre (9). The majority of the reported assaults in Greenland implied that both the victims and offenders had consumed a lot of alcohol, and nearly one-third of the victims reported that they had amnesia about the reported offence. This differs from the pattern seen at the national rape crisis centre in Denmark, where about 40% did not consume any alcohol before or during the reported sexual offence.

In the present study considerable information could be drawn from the police files about reported cases of rape and attempted rape, which enabled analyses of factors that characterize sexual assaults in Greenland. However, the study only comprised half of all police-reported cases of assault against adolescents and adults in 2002. The analysed cases may differ from those where the police

files were not available. The cases were not randomly selected and information could not be obtained about the missing cases. However, based on personal communication with police head officers, it is reasonable to believe that the study presents a reliable picture of police-reported sexual offences in Greenland. The study included cases from both towns and settlements in all the districts, incorporating those cases discontinued because of lack of evidence and those brought to trial.

Conclusions

The prevalence of police-reported rape in Greenland society is relatively high and the occurrence of any type of sexual assault is more prevalent than in other Nordic countries. A high proportion of the assaults occurred under the heavy influence of alcohol. Prevention of sexual assaults, therefore, is tightly linked to prevention of heavy alcohol abuse. A number of studies have pointed to the health consequences for women of sexual and physical violence and the demand for easy accessible services for victims of violence (10, 11). Hence, it is recommended that the Greenland health care system implement such services in accordance with established standards in other Nordic countries (12). This would thereby secure medical and psychosocial counselling and support for the victims of both police-reported cases and cases that are not police reported. In consideration of the very close connections that exist between most offenders and their victims, it might be advisable to implement mediation as a judicial choice instead of imprisonment.

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Pernille Mejlvang, MD
 Rughaven 9
 4000 Roskilde
 DENMARK
 Email: pernillemejlvang@dadlnet.dk