

SEXUAL ASSAULT OF THE ELDERLY  
**HAPPENS**  
AND IS DAMAGING

*Let's be vigilant*

# WHAT IS A SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Whether you are a victim, the loved one of a victim, or a resource person, understanding the issue of sexual assault is essential. Below is important information to help you.

## ***A definition***

“Sexual assault is an act that is sexual in nature, with or without physical contact, committed by an individual without the consent of the victim or in some cases through emotional manipulation or blackmail, especially when children are involved. It is an act that subjects another person to the perpetrator’s desires through an abuse of power and/or the use of force or coercion, accompanied by implied or explicit threats. Sexual assault is an attack on one’s basic rights, including the right to physical integrity and physical and psychological safety.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Les orientations gouvernementales en matière d’agression sexuelle*, Government of Québec, 2001.

# SIGNIFICANT STATISTICS

In 2008, Québec police statistics on sexual assault revealed that:

- ♦ **5,341** sexual offenses were registered by law enforcement
- ♦ **83%** of sexual assault victims were female
- ♦ **98%** of alleged offenders were male<sup>2</sup>

Sexual assault is still a crime with a very low reporting rate to police. It remains underreported in every age group. However, reported sexual assaults of adults 55 and over has increased since 2001, rising from 54 to 109 victims in 2008 (94 women and 15 men). Most of these crimes were reported to the police shortly after being committed. The rise in reported sexual assaults of adults 55 and over may reflect a real increase in this type of crime or an increase in reporting to police.

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<sup>2</sup> 2008 Statistics on Sexual Assault in Québec, Ministère de la Sécurité publique, December 2009.

# ELDER ABUSE, A REALITY

“Abuse occurs when a single or repetitive action occurs or there is a lack of appropriate action in a trust relationship, which harms or causes distress to an elderly person.”<sup>3</sup>

The elderly are often victims of more than one form of abuse. The elderly are subjected to physical, psychological, emotional, material, financial, and sexual abuse, as well as abuse involving negligence or a violation of human rights.

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<sup>3</sup> Draft Government Action Plan to where Elder Abuse, Ministère de la Famille et des Aînés, March 2010.



## ELDER SEXUAL ASSAULT, A TABOO

Anyone can be a victim of sexual assault at any stage of life. Sexual assault is the same regardless of the victim's age, and the elderly can be victims of any of the following forms of sexual violence: threat of sexual assault, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fondling and/or oral, vaginal, or anal penetration, etc.

Sexual assault can occur when there is a relationship of trust with the perpetrator or the perpetrator is or seems to be in a position of power or authority. It can take place at home, a shelter, a healthcare facility, or a place visited daily by the elderly, including grocery stores, parks, social clubs, lounges, buses, the subway, and neighbors' homes.<sup>4</sup> Sexual assault is a form of abuse that should be reported.

## MYTHS

### AND DEEP-ROOTED PREJUDICES

Stereotypical views about the behavior of women and sexual assault are still prevalent in society. Prejudices against the elderly include the following:

- ♦ They cannot be sexually assaulted in a conjugal context.
- ♦ They cannot be sexually assaulted because of their age.
- ♦ They are not sexually active.
- ♦ They cannot be sexually assaulted by those who are committed to caring for them.

<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the guide *Violence sexuelle subie par les aînées : Briser le tabou pour mieux soutenir les femmes* (Sexual Abuse of Seniors: Breaking the Taboo to Better Assist Women), 2008, produced by Regroupement québécois des CALACS.

# SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES<sup>5</sup>

The consequences of sexual assault on the life of a senior are manifold, affecting the victim's health and well-being. An elderly victim of sexual assault may display the following reactions:

- ♦ Feelings of **CONFUSION**
- ♦ Worry, ambivalence, mistrust, self-doubt, anger
- ♦ Anxiety, loss of appetite
- ♦ Low self-esteem
- ♦ Difficulty trusting others
- ♦ Withdrawal, feeling of **LONELINESS**, fear of rejection
- ♦ Isolation, fear of going out, change in recreational or social activities
- ♦ Flashbacks, nightmares, sleep disorders
- ♦ Memory loss, difficulty concentrating
- ♦ Consumption of **MEDICATION**, alcohol, or drugs
- ♦ Mental health problems, post-traumatic syndrome, depressed mood, loss of enjoyment of life, thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts, **SUICIDE**
- ♦ Physical health problems such as urinary incontinence, hypertension, or blood-borne and sexually transmitted infections
- ♦ Financial problems: cost of medication, hospitalization, moving, or job loss
- ♦ Spiritual problems: crisis of personal values or faith, loss of moral sense
- ♦ Behavioral problems

# COMING TO THE AID OF VICTIMS<sup>6</sup>

The support of family and friends plays an important role in the healing process of sexual assault victims. Below is the recommended approach to dealing with people who have been sexually assaulted:

## *Listen*

Listen to what victims have to say without passing judgment. Let them express themselves in their own words, in their own way, at their own pace.

## *Believe*

Believe what victims tell you. It's what they perceive happened to them. You should focus on what they say and experience.

## *Acknowledge*

Acknowledge what victims say without minimizing or exaggerating the facts, emotions, or consequences.

## *Encourage their strength*

Back up victims' positive steps forward by focusing on their strength and courage to talk about it.

## *Alleviate the guilt*

Make victims understand that the sexual assault was in no way their fault. The perpetrators are entirely responsible for their actions.

## *Help them reclaim their autonomy*

Help victims take back control of their life while you remain in the picture. Give them space to breathe and get back to their usual routine.

## *Validate their emotions*

Help victims express what they feel by reassuring them that their reactions, emotions, and feelings of anger, resentment, guilt, and low self-esteem are normal. Everyone is entitled to respect for their integrity; sexual assault is unacceptable and criminal.

## *Aid and guide them*

Let victims know you are available to talk to or guide them. It is important to tell them that there are also resources available to help them. Refer them to these resources, or get assistance yourself from these resources.

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by the guide *Violence sexuelle subie par les aînées : Briser le tabou pour mieux soutenir les femmes* (Sexual Abuse of Seniors: Breaking the Taboo to Better Assist Women), 2008, produced by Regroupement québécois des CALACS.

<sup>6</sup> *Information Guide for Sexual Assault Victims*, Table de concertation sur les agressions sexuelles de Montréal (a Montréal coordinating group on sexual assault), 2008.

# HELP, INFORMATION, AND REFERRALS

Whatever your age, condition, or gender and whether you are a victim of sexual assault, a loved one, or a resource person, you can obtain help and information at any time. A number of professionals in public, parapublic, and community networks are specially trained to provide you with support.

## **HELP, INFORMATION, REFERRALS**

Referrals to all assistance and protection resources.  
Toll free, available 24 hours a day,  
seven days a week, anywhere in Quebec.

## **POLICE** for immediate assistance

## **HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES CENTER (CSSS)**

A CSSS consists of one or more CLSCs, residential and long term care centers (CHSLDs) and, in most cases, a hospital center. For contact information for the CSSS in your area, visit the website.

## **QUÉBEC GROUP OF SEXUAL ASSAULT SUPPORT CENTERS (RQCALACS)**

RQCALACS is a coalition of CALACS that rallies individuals and groups to end sexual assault and fosters social and political change.

## **CRIME VICTIMS ASSISTANCE CENTER (CAVAC)**

CAVAC provides free and confidential assistance and guidance services to anyone who has been the victim of a crime committed in Québec, their loved ones, and witnesses of a criminal act.

## **ELDER ABUSE HELPLINE**

The Info-Abuse Hotline for the elderly is a bilingual, confidential telephone service providing support, information, and referrals for elderly persons who are victims of psychological, financial, or physical abuse.

## **WEBSITE**

## **MINISTÈRE DE LA SANTÉ ET DES SERVICES SOCIAUX**

[www.scf.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.scf.gouv.qc.ca)

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