

# Gaps in services for sexual assault victims in Texas revealed

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A new University of Texas at Austin statewide study reveals significant gaps in services for sexual assault victims and calls for improvements, including additional funding.

Increasing the availability of local [sexual assault](#) services and lessening [emergency room](#) wait times will lead to stronger cases for [prosecution](#), the researchers said.

The study, funded by the Criminal Justice Division of the Office of the Governor, is the first statewide needs evaluation for adult [victims](#) of sexual assault in Texas, according to Dr. Noël Busch-Armendariz, associate professor in the School of Social Work and lead investigator.

Researchers interviewed victims, rape crisis center advocates, nurses, law enforcement officers, victim services professionals and prosecutors across Texas. They found there is a substantial need for more funding, including additional support for those who serve victims.

"Sexual assault crimes persist as a social problem in Texas and the need to propel this issue to the public's attention is pressing," said Busch-Armendariz. "Little is known about the factors that promote or hinder victims to seek services from law enforcement and or victim service organizations. And, less is known about how these gaps in services impact a victim's experience for a return to full physical, mental and emotional health.

It is critical to develop strategies so that victims can come forward."

When they did come forward, Busch-Armendariz said many victims of sexual assault told researchers that they left emergency departments when they discovered that the [wait times](#) for the forensic exam was several hours.

The researchers recommend more funding for sexual assault nurse examiners (SANE), who generally work through hospital emergency departments and are specifically trained to provide medical attention and evidence collection in a victim-centered manner.

The study estimates that Texas spends \$42.8 million annually in costs to law enforcement, rape crisis centers, SANE nurse programs, district attorneys and crime victim compensation.

"We believe that the estimates obtained are the most reliable we have in Texas to date, although they are surely an underestimate," said Busch-Armendariz.

To achieve better service, the researchers suggest:

- Make adequate and stable funding available to all the organizations whose missions are to provide direct services to sexual assault survivors and work on efforts to prevent sexual violence.
- Strategize innovative ways to enhanced collaboration and communication among organizations that assist sexual assault victims.
- Recruit and retain the most seasoned professionals in the field.
- Extend accessible and competent services to all victims of this crime.
- Initiate courageous victim-centered approaches to all stages of the process.
- Develop revolutionary educational campaigns to broaden the understanding of this crime and decrease its stigma.

The study was conducted through the university's Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (IDVSA) where Busch-Armendariz is director. Dr. Shetal Vohra-Gupta, IDVSA post doctoral fellow, was project director.

The research follows Busch-Armendariz's 2003 study, which found that 1.9 million adult Texans (20 percent of women and five percent of men) have been sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime. The 2003 study was the first accurate look at sexual assault rates in Texas, and revealed a much larger problem than previously indicated by crime reports.

"We hope the new study serves as a catalyst and direction for future efforts in addressing sexual assault in Texas," said Busch-Armendariz.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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