

Researcher encouraged by results of new research on sexual assault kit processing

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Since 2011, BYU nursing professor Julie Valentine has been researching the issues surrounding sexual assault kit processing and has been working with law enforcement agencies to improve the process.

Nearly one year ago, in a press conference at BYU, Valentine spoke to a room full of media about the results of her groundbreaking study, looking at the processing of 1,874 sexual assault kits, commonly called rape kits, in seven Utah counties between 2010 and 2013. This was the most comprehensive study ever conducted on sexual assault kits in the United States.

Valentine has worked to build upon her initial research and recently released a study that includes another year of data; the results now span from 2010—2014 and include 2,317 fully collected sexual assault kits.

She found some encouraging results from the 2014 numbers.

"We are seeing a significant increase in kit submission rates throughout the state," Valentine said. "Law enforcement agencies are to be commended for this substantial improvement."

The big finding from the new study is that in 2014, 75 percent of sexual assault kits in Utah were submitted by [law enforcement](#) to the state crime laboratory for analysis. From 2010 to 2013, only 38 percent of kits were submitted.

Washington County saw the most significant improvement. The submission rate of kits there increased to 93 percent in 2014 from only 18 percent in 2010 to 2013.

Considerable variability still exists among jurisdictions on kit submission rates, and length of time between assault and submission date remains an issue. Submission rates of kits submitted to a crime lab within a month of the assault ranges from 2 percent in Washington County to 21 percent in Salt Lake County.

In a review of 525 sexual assault kits submitted to the Utah Bureau of Forensic Services from Salt Lake County, Valentine discovered nine kits did not include the DNA of the suspect. Of the other 516 some of the kits did not have enough DNA to complete the analysis, some had DNA that matched the suspect, and some had DNA of an unknown assailant which has been entered into CODIS.

"Generally, people tend to think of kit submissions as only benefitting victims," Valentine said. "This is important, but only part of the story. Testing kits benefits both victims and suspects. It helps to establish the truth."

This most recent study of Valentine's is currently published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

Valentine's role in helping improve sexual assault kit processing is not just in crunching the numbers and sharing her research. She has been on the front lines. Last year she worked extensively with West Valley City's police department, where she helped train the department on the impact that trauma has on sexual assault victims. That led to implementing new protocols, meant to ensure compassionate treatment and support for sexual assault victims.

The results of Valentine's work with West Valley City showed that sexual assault prosecution jumped from 6 percent to 24 percent.

Valentine's work is currently front-and-center in the Utah legislature. House Bill 200 (HB200) mandates the submission and testing of all rape kits, development of trauma informed training for law enforcement and development of a tracking system allowing victims to track their own rape kits through the process. The bill is getting a substantial amount of media attention in Utah and is being watched throughout the US.

"The passage of HB200 will be a victory for [sexual assault](#) victims, but also a victory in applying the scientific advancements of DNA analysis in establishing truth and justice in these cases," Valentine said. "The end result will be improved identification of serial perpetrators, thereby making Utah a safer state. A safer state is a healthier state."

More information: Julie L. Valentine et al. Justice Denied, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0886260516681881](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516681881)

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