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Former World Junior Hockey players expected to face sex assault charges: Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) responds

Five former 2018 world junior hockey players have been told to surrender to police in London, Ont., to face charges in a case related to "a sexual assault investigation dating back to 2018"¹. The charges are likely connected to a high-profile sexual assault case which London police re-opened in 2022.

At that time, the public learned of a lawsuit in which a young woman, named as "E.M." in court documents, sued players, Hockey Canada and the Canadian Hockey League² after an incident in London, ON, involving a number of players. Hockey Canada – which is responsible for establishing rules and standards, promoting the sport, and international play – settled the lawsuit. When the case came to the public's attention, Hockey Canada revealed that the organization has paid over \$8 million in settlements to different sexual assault complainants since 1989, using membership fees³.

As sexual violence survivor advocates, we at Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) were appalled by Hockey Canada's response. We were also disappointed in the criminal justice response to E.M.'s experience: notably, her case was closed by London police when she first reported it, however it was re-opened in 2022—only in response to public outrage following news of the case.

Now, as charges related to this case finally come to light, what stands out to us is an incident of sexual violence that was refuted, minimized or suppressed by more than one large, well-funded institution in Canada, and has now finally gone the distance. We commend E.M., for finding the courage to speak about her experience, notwithstanding the pressure she faced to remain silent or give up.

With these realities in mind, we commend *all* survivors of sexual violence who choose to tell their stories—whether it be in a court of law, or to their close friends, family and other support people.

Finally, we recognize and commend all survivors of sexual violence who *never* share or report their experiences—in Canada, this is by far the vast majority of sexual violence survivors⁴. We wish we could say that E.M.'s experiences with systems was an isolated event; but for sexual violence survivors, we know that, unfortunately, it isn't.

Sexual violence reporting realities

Charge and conviction rates for sexual assault in Canada remain discouragingly low⁵. The realities of sexual assault reporting – and [our criminal justice system's effectiveness in holding offenders accountable](#) – deter survivors from coming forward. Sexual assault has the lowest rate of reporting to police amongst all

¹ Burke, A. for CBC News. Jan 24, 2024. *5 former World Junior Hockey players expected to face sex assault charges: report. Charges allegedly tied to 2018 group sexual assault in London, Ont., hotel room.* Online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/junior-hockey-sexual-assault-1.7093404>

² Ibid

³ Benchetrit, B. for CBC News. October 8, 2022. *What is Hockey Canada and why does it matter?* Online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/what-is-hockey-canada-explainer-1.6611373>

⁴ Using data from Statistics Canada, one researcher estimated the conviction rate for sexual assaults reported on victim surveys to be .3% to 1.6%. See The Attrition Pyramid (Sexual Assault). Online: http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-1/Issue_1-LN_Newsletter_May_2012_.pdf, page 2.

⁵ See The Attrition Pyramid (Sexual Assault). Online: http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-1/Issue_1-LN_Newsletter_May_2012_.pdf, page 2.

violent crimes, with only about 6% of incidents coming to the attention of police^{6,7}. There are many realistic reasons why people don't report. Many will say:

- They felt embarrassed
- They worried about repercussions, or that things would get worse if others found out
- They felt the incident was private or personal⁸
- They feared not being taken seriously or believed⁹
- They do not trust the police or the criminal justice system: the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls notes that “families and survivors talked frankly about their reasons for not reporting violence to the police or not reaching out to the criminal justice system – even in cases where there had been severe acts of violence perpetrated against them”¹⁰
- They were not sure if what happened to them was in fact sexual assault.

Too few survivors of sexual violence report already. When reporting systems fail, victims lose faith in them. Bias – for example, negative, feminized or sexual stereotyping of victims – impacts the successful prosecution and public understanding of sexual crimes¹¹. In the midst of this, victims often believe they performed poorly as witnesses – or worse, that they were in some way responsible for sexual violence, either by ‘inviting it in’ or not ‘resisting enough’ – when really systemic bias had a role to play¹². Notably, E.M.’s case was closed by police when she first reported it, however it was re-opened in 2022 in response to public outrage.

We wonder: what if there was public outrage about more sexual assaults? It would be a lot of public outrage¹³, and perhaps more survivors would see supportive outcomes after disclosing what happened to them.

Lost trust in systems and institutions

When large national institutions don't take a strong stand against sexual violence, or remain complicit when it happens, Canadians lose trust in *all* systems and institutions. This affects survivors' willingness to disclose what happened to them, or even to seek help. More, when people who cause harm aren't held accountable for their actions, it can lead to more victimization.

In 2022, we were deeply disappointed in Hockey Canada's response. In particular, the fund to settle sexual assault claims “points to the assumption by Hockey Canada that sexual violence is inevitable”¹⁴, cannot be prevented, or is simply a risk management problem. On the contrary, studies show that most people, including men and boys, don't believe in using violence and wish to be part of the solution in ending it¹⁵. Talking about sexual violence in sports is not about shame or blame. It is a skill—and a strength that can help players know more about their rights, maintain safety within sports, and equip sports organizations,

⁶ Statistics Canada. Released: 2021-08-25. *Criminal victimization in Canada, 2019*. Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210825/dq210825a-eng.htm>

⁷ Cotter, A., for Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics. Release date: August 25, 2021. *Criminal victimization in Canada, 2019*. Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00014-eng.htm>

⁸ Statistics Canada. Released: 2021-08-25. *Criminal victimization in Canada, 2019*. Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210825/dq210825a-eng.htm>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. 2019. *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. Online: https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf: 628.

¹¹ Marriner, S. (Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre). 2016. *VAW Advocate Case Review (VACR): 2*.

¹² For this reason, we recommend utilizing an [Advocate Case Review program \(VACR\)](#) for sexual assault cases. VACR identifies and addresses root causes in case attrition in sexual assault reports to police, and has been implemented in many communities across Ontario and Canada.

¹³ Statistics Canada found that reported sexual assault rates in 2021 were at their highest since 1996 (Smith, Marie-Danielle for The Canadian Press. August 3, 2022. *Sexual assault rate in 2021 highest since 1996, violent crimes up: Statistics Canada*. Online: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/sexual-assault-rate-in-2021-highest-since-1996-violent-crimes-up-statistics-canada-1.6010840>).

¹⁴ Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA Canada). July 22, 2022. *Statement Regarding Hockey Canada's Handling of Sexual Assault*. Online: <https://endingviolencecanada.org/statement-regarding-hockey-canadas-handing-of-sexual-assault/>

¹⁵ Flood, M. (2010) *Where Men Stand: Men's roles in ending violence against women*. Sydney: *White Ribbon Prevention Research Series, No. 2*. Online: http://www.ncdsv.org/images/WR_WhereMenStandMen'sRolesInEndingVAW_Long_2010.pdf

coaches and leaders to mentor athletes. In Ontario, [Ontario sexual assault centres](#) are working in local communities to break the silence around sexual violence, and prevent it through education.

Meanwhile, in response to the public in 2022, Hockey Canada hired a private law firm to conduct an investigation of the incident involving E.M, as well as a panel to determine next steps. As of this week, media reported that Hockey Canada says it does not have an update to share on that process or its outcomes¹⁶. At OCRCC, we find this this a tepid and inadequate response to an incident that occurred over five years ago.

Sexual violence prevention education makes a difference

An area of opportunity for sport organizations is to set an example as leaders in preventing sexual violence. Addressing sexual violence can take many forms. It can mean:

- Talking with athletes about sexual violence and about their rights
- Talking with athletes about being a good bystander and standing up for survivors of violence
- Pushing back against offensive sexualized, gendered, transphobic or racist jokes
- Making clear what is acceptable behaviour as a team member/athlete and what is not
- Withdrawing support for organizations or initiatives that are not safe for young people or athletes.

Community-based sexual assault centres have been supporting survivors of sexual violence and offering prevention education since 1977. Past groups that have received OCRCC and sexual assault centre prevention education and training include:

- Ontario Police College (OPC)
- College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE)
- Local sports organizations in communities across Ontario:
 - Gymnasts for Change
 - Hammer City Roller Derby
 - Oshawa Generals
 - London Knights
 - Sudbury Wolves
 - Saginaw Spirit
 - Sarnia Sting

By connecting athletes with information about sexual violence, we equip them with a clear understanding of their rights and their role in prevention. They also learn about where to go in the community should they ever need support.

If you are a survivor of sexual violence

If something has happened to you, we want you to know that there are people who believe and support you.

- You can talk to a trusted friend, family member or other person you trust
- You can [contact a sexual assault centre](#). All support is free and confidential. If something has happened to you and you are considering reporting, we can help you think through your [options](#)
- If you are *not* considering reporting, that's okay too. We know that sexual violence cases are not often resolved through the criminal justice system¹⁷, and that going through this system can be really tough
- Learn more about sexual assault centres in Ontario [here](#)

¹⁶ Burke, A. for CBC News. Jan 24, 2024. *5 former World Junior Hockey players expected to face sex assault charges: report. Charges allegedly tied to 2018 group sexual assault in London, Ont., hotel room.* Online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/junior-hockey-sexual-assault-1.7093404>

¹⁷ See The Attrition Pyramid (Sexual Assault). Online: http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-1/Issue_1-LN_Newsletter_May_2012_.pdf, page 2.

If you are a friend, family member or mentor, there are things you can do too

- You can be an ally to sexual violence survivors. You can listen to the person's story without judgement or expectations that they formally report. You can help them to find [safe places to get support](#) too
- If you work with athletes, you can provide access to youth-friendly prevention education about sexual violence: contact your [local sexual assault centre](#), and ask to speak to their Public Educator

Now's the time to invest in sexual violence survivors and prevention

Communities are seeking ways to help survivors and to prevent sexual violence. We recommend:

- *Federal investment in community-based sexual violence prevention.* We are doing this work, but we need to significantly grow our capacity to work with local athletes and organizations. The federal government withdrew Hockey Canada's funding, but opted to fund it again in 2023¹⁸. We wish to see further investment in community-based prevention. We also recommend a partnership between federal ministries and sexual assault centres to:
 - work with athletes and sports organizations to address sexual violence
 - support the development and growth of Male Allies Programs and community-based sports programming on violence prevention
 - listen to people who have experienced sexual violence in the context of sports, and implement their recommendations.
- *Provincial investment in community-based sexual violence supports.* More and more, survivors of violence are reaching out for support. In 2021, OCRCC member sexual assault centres reported responding to over 37,500 crisis calls (phone, text, online chat) while in 2019, this number was 23,000¹⁹. An increase in funding to provide additional frontline staff, such as a counsellor or prevention educator, would make a huge difference to survivors reaching out to us for support.
- *That police services implement an [Advocate Case Review program \(VACR\)](#).* VACR identifies and addresses root causes in case attrition in sexual assault reports to police. The VACR model has been endorsed by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police [A Canadian Framework for Collaborative Police Response in Sexual Violence](#), and has been implemented in many communities across Ontario and Canada.
- *A call to sponsors to invest in community-based sexual violence supports.* Community-based sexual assault centres, for example, are a best practice service model²⁰ and provide support to survivors through crisis intervention, counselling, advocacy and prevention education.

Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) is a network of 30+ community-based sexual assault centres in Ontario. If you or someone you know has experienced sexual violence, go to <https://sexualassaultsupport.ca/get-help/>.

Web: www.sexualassaultsupport.ca

Campaign: www.draw-the-line.ca

¹⁸ Paas-Lang, C. for CBC News. Apr 16, 2023. [Federal government says it will restore funding to Hockey Canada](#) — with conditions Funding frozen in June 2022 amid fallout over organization's handling of sexual assault allegations

¹⁹ Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC). 2022. Sexual Violence In Ontario: Trends in Survivors Seeking Support infographic. Online: <https://sexualassaultsupport.ca/sexual-violence-in-ontario-trends-in-survivors-seeking-support/>

²⁰ Community-based sexual violence support competencies include believing survivors as a foundational approach to support; trauma-informed services; applied anti-racist, anti-oppressive, intersectional approaches; and a continuum of support options. See: Ontario Ministry of the Status of Women and Shore Consulting. November 14, 2017. *FINAL REPORT: Review of Sexual Violence and Harassment Counselling Services and Helplines*.