

Sexual Assault Response: A Pillar of Law Enforcement Agencies' Violent Crime Reduction Strategy

In 2015, the Bureau of Justice Assistance introduced the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI), a national program designed to support state and local jurisdictions in addressing unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs). **Inventorying and testing all previously unsubmitted SAKs, investigating and prosecuting these cases effectively, and supporting victims of violent crime are all core to SAKI's mission.** With expanded SAK testing, crucial information about offenders and the threat they pose to communities is emerging. The following research demonstrates why law enforcement agencies should incorporate a strong, evidence-based approach to sexual assault as part of their plans to (1) reduce and prevent violent crime and (2) support and engage victims in their communities.

- ◆ **Most offenders commit a wide variety of crimes, including violent offenses¹**—A comprehensive approach to sexual assault cases can help prevent a range of future criminal acts.
- ◆ **Some offenders cross-over in committing crimes against stranger and non-stranger victims²**—Testing all SAKs and aggressively pursuing non-stranger sexual assault cases can connect previously unlinked cases, strengthen the likelihood of prosecution, and prevent violent crime.
- ◆ **Serial sexual offending* is widespread in some communities²⁻⁴**—Testing unsubmitted SAKs can reveal undetected patterns of serial offending within and across jurisdictions and is a powerful tool for preventing crime patterns before they escalate.

What We Have Learned: Three Case Studies with SAKI Grantees and Partners

The following table highlights three SAKI sites' findings about serial offenders in their communities. For more information about how SAKI recommends investigating serial sexual offenders, read the [Identifying Serial Sexual Offenders Through Cold Cases](#) article.

<p>Wayne County, Michigan, tested approximately 12,000 previously unsubmitted SAKs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ About 4 in 10 offenders (39%) were identified as serial offenders.³ ◆ Both stranger and non-stranger SAKs are valuable to test (17% of non-stranger SAKs hit to serial offenders).⁵ ◆ SAKs past the statute of limitations are valuable to test.⁶ ◆ Serial offenders are not specialized in their offending.³ 	<p>Cuyahoga County, Ohio, tested approximately 8,000 previously unsubmitted SAKs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ About 4 in 10 offenders (38%) were identified as serial offenders.² ◆ Serial offenders averaged 9.5 arrests, which included a variety of violent and non-violent crimes.² ◆ Over one-third of crimes committed by serial offenders occurred after the sexual assault for which a SAK was collected and shelved.² 	<p>Kansas Bureau of Investigation tested approximately 2,200 previously unsubmitted SAKs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ SAK testing revealed over 900 named offenders who committed over 7,000 crimes.⁴ ◆ As many as 37% of offenders identified to be serial offenders.⁴ ◆ The serial offenders in this study committed a total of 3,486 offenses—including murder, robbery, and arson (in addition to rape and sexual assault).⁴
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Important Implications for Law Enforcement

Police can prevent violent crime in their communities by directing more efforts—including resources and tools—toward sexual assault investigations and sex crimes units. Additionally, police can prioritize sexual assault investigations, including through the submission and testing of SAKs, to help identify perpetrators with high rates of criminal offending. These crimes include homicide, arson, burglary, aggravated assault, and serial sexual offending. The bottom line is that tackling the issue of sexual assault can directly prevent future violent crime and ensure community safety.

*Notably, communities may have different thresholds for what qualifies as serial perpetration.

Key Questions for Law Enforcement to Assess Their Sexual Assault Response

- ◆ Do I have a dedicated sexual assault unit or trained investigators qualified to properly handle these cases and support victims?
- ◆ Does my sexual assault unit have appropriate investigator and unit staffing?
- ◆ Are sexual assault investigator caseloads within acceptable standards?
- ◆ Do we provide support staff (including victim advocates, criminalists, and analysts) to assist in investigating cases and supporting victims?
- ◆ Do we have effective internal and external partnerships to ensure a coordinated response to sexual assault?
- ◆ Are we providing ongoing and professional training to investigators and patrol officers?
- ◆ Have we adopted and institutionalized victim-centered practices through strong policy, training, and supervisor oversight?

Key Next Steps for Law Enforcement to Prevent Crime Through Their Sexual Assault Response

- ◆ Create policies and procedures for incorporating sexual assault response into the agency's official crime reduction strategy.
- ◆ Make sexual assault an agency priority by endorsing increased specialized training, assuring suitable caseloads, designing a robust personnel selection process, and embedding a crime analyst as a member of the sexual assault unit.
- ◆ Support community collaboration by leading or participating in a sexual assault response team.
- ◆ Create an offender-focused process by ensuring known offenders and unknown suspects are identified and assessed for community safety.
- ◆ Facilitate regular meetings with area law enforcement agencies to exchange critical intelligence relating to known offenders, linked cases, offense trends, and crime patterns.

Research has indicated that addressing sexual assault in a comprehensive, victim-centered manner—including testing SAKs and other evidence—will enable law enforcement agencies to most effectively prevent future violent crime.

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