

Changes in the Backyard – Therapeutic Elements and Police Work, through the Lens of Sexual Assault Cases

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Since the latter part of the 20th century, feminist advocacy and support groups have led a call for the respectful, sensitive and attentive treatment of victims of sexual assault who take part in the criminal process. There have been significant and wide-ranging reforms in the field, implemented through guidance, statutory instruments and primary legislation. However, research that focuses on the impact of these reforms, which concern improving the interaction between representatives of the criminal justice system and the victims, has been scarce. Existing scholarship tends to be critical, emphasizing examples of humiliation and inconsiderate and distasteful treatment of victims within the criminal justice system.

This study is interested in the behavior of actors and agents who engage in interpersonal interaction. It relies on concepts and insights from the field of therapeutic jurisprudence, on that basis identifying, presenting and sorting into ‘therapeutic’ categories context-specific behaviors by state representatives. The focus here is on the work of police officers, since their work constitutes the majority of the interactions with the victims.

The article argues that to facilitate true and meaningful change, any reform must include changes to interpersonal behavior. It also suggests that the changes that have taken place are, to a large extent, the result of continuous and painstaking work by support and advocacy groups with police representatives, behind the scenes. The article shows how the ideas that these groups have advocated for have been incorporated into the system and become the anchor for future guidance and legislation pertaining to interpersonal interaction with victims.

Towards this end, interviews were held with all 30 coordinators of the Israeli Sexual Assault Centers that worked with the police from 2008 to 2010. Their stories offer an extremely wide array of examples of positive change, which amounts to a critical mass and offers guidance to the potential of future changes.