

JUST SEXUAL ASSAULT RESPONSE AND SUPPORTING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Introduction [00:00:05] Now this is recording, RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:18] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode one of our 2022 Sexual Assault Awareness Month mini season, Just Science sat down with Mary Weston, the Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, Supervisor of the Cold Case Unit, and Project Manager of the Sexual Assault Kit Task Force at Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office to discuss sexual assault response with vulnerable populations. Different challenges may arise when prosecuting sexual assault cases involving vulnerable populations, including cases with male victims. Listen along as Mary Weston discusses strategies for effective prosecution of cases with male victims, provides rationales for why members of vulnerable populations may be targeted for sexual assault, and presents considerations for the safety, healing, and well-being of survivors. This episode is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Tyler Raible.

Tyler Raible [00:01:23] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host Tyler Raible with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and in honor of the month, we're sitting down with various subject matter experts to discuss emerging topics in the field of sexual assault response reform. To help guide us in our conversation today, I'm joined by our guest, Mary Weston, Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, Supervisor of the Cold Case Unit at the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office, and Project Manager of the Cuyahoga County Sexual Assault Kit Task Force. Mary, it's great to see you again. Welcome back to the show.

Mary Weston [00:01:53] Thank you so much for having me.

Tyler Raible [00:01:54] So, Mary, you've been on here before and you've spoken to us about topics like crossover offending, prosecution, and the state of the sexual assault kit backlog in Cuyahoga County. So Mary, you're a prosecutor and someone who's actively addressing, and frankly, improving the response to sexual assault in your community. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what a typical day might look like for you?

Mary Weston [00:02:16] Tyler, I am first and foremost a prosecutor. I've been a prosecutor since 2006, and since 2013 I have focused on prosecuting sex offenses. Our county was one of many counties across the nation that discovered untested sexual assault kits, primarily in the city of Cleveland. So starting in 2013, our office made a concerted effort to make resources available to test those kits, investigate those kits, and prosecute the leads that came from those investigations. So I was one of the very first prosecutors assigned to the task force in 2013. There were three of us at the time. As the years went on, I was prosecuting those cases in court, and we've gotten to a point in our county where we've tested all of our untested kits, and we're just dealing with the prosecutions at this point of that initial project. And at this point, I am now the supervisor of the task force, so I'm now more overseeing the prosecutions and the investigations - it's more management.

Tyler Raible [00:03:21] Mary, that's incredible. And the work that you all are doing is just fascinating and there's so much impact behind it. Can you tell us a little bit about what sexual assault response reform looks like in Cuyahoga County? Are there any achievements that you'd like to highlight or let our audience know about?

Mary Weston [00:03:35] Absolutely. It all started when there was a serial murderer actually who was identified here in Cleveland - number of bodies were found in his yard, Anthony Sowell was his name - and in the wake of that discovery, there were women that came forward and said that he had attacked them and that they had done what we expect women to do in that situation. They had reported it, and they complained that nothing had happened in their cases. They hadn't resulted in him being prosecuted. And you can imagine there was some outrage because families lost their loved ones who were murdered by this man because he was still out there on the streets. And so in the wake of that sort of outcry, like what happened with these women's cases, thousands of rape kits were discovered that had never even been submitted to the lab. It turns out we are not the only jurisdiction with this problem. It was nice to meet folks from other cities who also were lucky enough to benefit from DOJ SAKI funding later on - you know, originally, even prior to us receiving the SAKI funding, we realized we had an issue on our hands here in Cuyahoga County, and we put together a task force to combat it. Then we were lucky enough to get SAKI funding to add investigators, to add victim advocates, to make a whole team approach to looking at these cases, following up on all the DNA leads. I mean, when you test thousands of kits, you start getting leads like crazy in terms of CODIS hits and CODIS matches - you got to follow up on those. So all those kits from the original project have been tested. It resulted in over eight hundred new indictments because in Ohio, when we started in about 2012, 2013, we were only able to go back 20 years based on Ohio's statute of limitations for rape at the time. So we went back to 1993 - over eight hundred indictments to date. Prosecutions are still ongoing. But in terms of sexual assault reform, a lot of things changed in that time frame. We changed our statute of limitations for rape - now 25 years, it was 20 at the time. You know, do I wish there was no statute of limitations? Yes, but we were able to get an additional five years. And we were able to get a provision that says, even if you're beyond that 25 years, if you get a DNA lead, you get five years. So even if it's been 26 years, you still get five years to investigate that DNA lead. And that is huge. There were cases where we weren't able to follow up on leads because we were beyond the statute of limitations. But that won't be a problem anymore if you got a DNA hit like a CODIS hit. And I would say the other big reform was in Ohio was it's now law to test all kits and that's huge - testing every single kit, even if the perpetrator is known. It was a learning curve for me and a lot of people. You know, why- why would I test a kit where there's no question who the perpetrator is? And to learn because that DNA to a known individual may hit to another kit that was a stranger and solve stranger cases - that took some time to understand and get people on board with and Ohio passed that law. So we have done some good things here in Ohio.

Tyler Raible [00:06:33] You're doing some incredible things. It's obviously a huge effort, but it's an effort worth doing and it's really highlighting some palpable results. So Mary, I really want to dive in today because I want to make sure that we capitalize on our time together. You know, when we're discussing a topic like sexual assault, we often hear this term vulnerable populations kind of tossed around willy-nilly. I was hoping we could first kind of tie that down. What does the term vulnerable populations mean? And then why is it relevant to sexual assault cases?

Mary Weston [00:06:59] Vulnerable populations, to me, mean victims of sexual assault who are more likely to be targeted or victims of sexual assault crimes that are less likely to be prioritized in terms of investigations or prosecutions. And it's important and relevant to sexual assault response because sexual predators are targeting these individuals, and they're targeting these individuals because they feel that they are more likely to get away with the sexual assault of certain populations. And it's also important as a prosecutor and an investigator to know who the vulnerable populations are because those are probably most of your sexual assaults. That's probably where most of them are. You know, most of your sexual assaults are not the sexual assault of the people in the highest status in your jurisdiction. Predators are not selecting individuals that are going to be believed and are going to be prioritized. They are selecting individuals that will hopefully never even report the crime, or if they do report the crime may not be believed or won't be prioritized as a victim. So as a prosecutor and as investigators, you need to identify those vulnerable populations in your jurisdictions, know that that's where most of the rapes are happening, and that if you want to hold offenders accountable, that's where they're most likely going to be perpetrating.

Tyler Raible [00:08:23] So if it's not the people that are kind of a higher status, what are some of examples of vulnerable populations? What makes these groups vulnerable?

Mary Weston [00:08:30] Predators select people that are vulnerable because they want to get away with their crimes number one, right? So predators are not out there committing their crimes in front of a baseball stadium or in front of an audience. They certainly want to get away with it like all criminals do. So they are going to select people who number one maybe won't report the crime at all because it's just too embarrassing. Or maybe they don't even know what happened. Or maybe they realize it's too embarrassing to report. Or maybe they- the victim feels like they won't be believed. Maybe the victim doesn't even understand what happened to them. That could be- that's a vulnerability. So examples of these kinds of populations are sex workers. Right. So sex workers historically have not been believed when they report that they have been raped. There's a common rape myth that they're asking for it because they are operating this line of work. Historically, they have not been believed and they are targeted by sex predators. Another population is drug users, the mentally ill, our LGBTQ+ communities. So these are populations that may not be believed because of rape myths, may not be taken seriously, may not be prioritized, in terms of being mentally ill or on drugs may not even really understand what happened to them. May not know it's a crime. May not know it's wrong, so therefore may not report it or truly understand the gravity of what has happened to them.

Tyler Raible [00:09:55] I'm sure there are probably scores of other vulnerable populations as well, like elderly communities would fall into this category, too, right?

Mary Weston [00:10:02] Absolutely, Tyler.

Tyler Raible [00:10:04] Okay, so Mary, do you have any cases that involved a victim from a vulnerable population that you'd like to share?

Mary Weston [00:10:09] I can think of a few that really stand out to me. There was a defendant in our community named Stacey Belle. He was not known at the time, but we got some CODIS matches, meaning same male DNA in multiple sexual assault kits. As the task force investigated those cases, it was a similar M.O. in each of those cases. It was- it was always a female victim, and it was a victim who was looking to trade sex for drugs on the street and willing to do that with a stranger, right. So in each of these cases, the

woman was looking for crack cocaine. In each case, she was approached by a short black male with a bald head who offered to take her to a place where he knew he could get crack cocaine for them and that they would, you know, have sex in exchange for him obtaining the crack for them. When the victim agreed, he would take her to another location, which was usually an abandoned building - in one case, it was the basement of an abandoned building - and there was no crack to be had - at least he wasn't going to give our victim any - and then a forcible rape ensued. So all three of those cases were very, very similar, and they all came back to this guy, Stacey Belle. So he wanted a trial. I think he banked on the fact that these victims would not be believed. One of our victims was so unable to cope with what had happened to her, and because she was addicted to crack cocaine, after the rape and before going to the hospital, she had traded sex for drugs with another individual that did not assault her but that used a condom. So we were able to prevail at trial by trying all the cases together to show, really, this was Stacey Belle's M.O., right? This is what he does. His DNA was on all the cases, and that- since the DNA was so important, to show that it was his DNA and not, for instance, the male that one of our victims had been with sexually after the rape. And we were also, I think, able to prevail in that case because we had a narcotics detective that testified in that case to talk about his experience working closely with sex workers and drug addicts on the street. So he testified that in his experience, for instance, prostitutes or drug addicts are not interested in taking a couple of hours off the street to go to the hospital to submit to a sexual assault kit examination. They are, in his experience, they're even more behind than ever. They now just wasted an hour with somebody who they thought was going to get them drugs. Their top priority is to go get those drugs that they were originally looking for, or to make up the money that they thought they were going to get paid and didn't get paid. So that was important testimony to our trier of fact in that case, I believe, and it was also important that that narcotics detective was able to dispel myths about how drug users are able to perceive the world. So, for instance, there was some defense arguments or suggestion that hey, if these women are on crack cocaine, how can we believe anything they say, you know, they probably don't even know what's going on right in front of them. And this narcotics detective was able to testify to how savvy and street-smart drug addicts are, particularly crack addicts. So they're out there making their way through life and making it in the world, and they are perfectly able to tell him what's going on right in front of their very eyes. So that was important testimony, too. And that's just- that's just one case I can highlight that was very powerful, really, and as a prosecutor, I was proud to put that case on to say we are standing up for these kinds of victims. This guy totally thought he was going to get away with this. He thought those girls would never be believed. And instead, he's doing a life sentence now because he was found guilty of those crimes. The trier of fact was able to see what was going on, that this was his pattern. The focus was on him, whereas I believe, you know, he probably would have preferred the focus to be on the victims and their vulnerabilities, as we're saying, and their lifestyles.

Tyler Raible [00:13:55] It's great that you're able to put him away, but this sounds like it's a, I mean it's a really specific M.O. Part of the prosecution's job then, was kind of twofold, right? So it's- it's uncovering a pattern, and then also trying to overcome some of these maybe internal biases towards these vulnerable populations - is that fair to say or am I misreading that?

Mary Weston [00:14:15] No, I think that's absolutely fair to say - to educate your trier of fact, usually your juries, right - unless it's a judge deciding the case - but educating your trier of fact about these kinds of populations, the fact that they're being targeted and dispelling rape myths or just- or myths in general, like I just said the myth that drug users don't know what's going on in front of their faces. Well, that's a myth, right? So it's

something that most people don't know. Your jury may not understand that. So it's important to get somebody on the stand who does see that day to day, who's out there on the street talking to drug users, you know, arresting them, using them as informants. Cops are using drug users as informants because they can be trusted to obtain important information for them. So these kinds of people are important for gathering information and in assisting investigations, but they can also be victims of these crimes. In fact, they're more likely to be victims of these crimes for that very reason because they are out there on the street and accessible - I guess that's the best word - they are accessible to predators.

Tyler Raible [00:15:16] Yeah, I think accessibility is probably the driving factor there, huh?

Mary Weston [00:15:20] Absolutely.

Tyler Raible [00:15:21] Mary, you kind of hinted at this. Can you tell me a little bit about the role of educating in this capacity? Because it seems like that is a huge part of it, and you've kind of mentioned a couple of times, you know, with the value of having the narcotics officer come in and give a description and then trying to kind of dismantle these myths. So how does educating your audience really play into this?

Mary Weston [00:15:40] As a prosecutor, it starts with your jury selection. So as a prosecutor, you get a chance to usually talk to your jury during jury selection. You can ask them what they think are the typical sexual assault myths, you know, and juries know that someone will raise their hand and say, "Oh, if she was wearing a short skirt, she was asking for it." So this is a really old school myth, but that's what you're going to get with your juries. But you can turn that into a conversation about other kinds of myths, and you could have a conversation with your jury about the fact that predators want to get away with their crimes. So I usually will start by asking "Can we all agree that, you know, sexual predators or criminals are not likely to commit their crimes in front of an audience," and they'll all agree. But then you get into a conversation about why that is, you know, why are they not targeting, you know, the cream of the crop in terms of our populations? Why is that, and juries just sit- sitting there and talking about it will understand this all really comes down to predators wanting to get away with it. So who are they going to select? Who's the most accessible to them? Who's the most vulnerable? Who's the least likely to be believed? By the end of this kind of discussion, your jury is not expecting, you know, Mother Teresa to be up on the stand testifying that she was sexually assaulted. They understand that you probably don't have that kind of victim in this case, and that that's not likely anyway, right? That those aren't the kind of people that are really being targeted by predators. So your education with your fact finder starts at the beginning, but it doesn't end there. With the example I used earlier where I had that narcotics detective testify, it's a corroborating witness, so I knew in that case my vulnerability was the drug use of my victims. And why would they want to make it up? What do they get out of going to the hospital and getting a sexual assault kit if they weren't raped when they're trying to make money? Another way that you can educate the jury is by pulling in more information about your defendant. So one thing I like to do, especially with vulnerable populations like we're talking about, is to move the focus from the victim to the defendant. So like in the case of Stacey Belle, focus on who he selects, what's he doing out there? What are his behaviors? What's he looking for? What's he doing day to day? Pulling in other crimes or of your defendant showing his behavior, showing none of this would have happened without the defendant - the defendant's actions brings your audience, which is your jury, around to saying, "Oh yeah, we're here because he did something wrong, not because the victim did something wrong," you know, not because we're going to sit here and blame the victim for being out too late or, you know, walking alone down the street or all these things we think

victims shouldn't be doing. It doesn't matter that they were doing those things. It's the actions of the defendant that brings us here to the courtroom today.

Tyler Raible [00:18:14] That makes perfect sense. This is a little bit of a shift here, but I've been reading some research that indicates that male and transgender individuals are disproportionately likely to be assaulted.

Mary Weston [00:18:25] I am not surprised by that. I have read similar research that males and transgender victims are less likely to get sexual assault kits when they are assaulted. That research, I do believe it makes sense to me in terms of just like any vulnerable population, a population that is less likely to report the rape and less likely to be believed if they do report the rape. That makes sense to me, that tracks.

Tyler Raible [00:18:49] So why do you think that male and transgender victims are less likely to report?

Mary Weston [00:18:54] Well, in terms of males in particular, I guess I can say what I have learned through prosecuting these kinds of cases or investigating these kinds of cases with male victims, I notice a lot of self-doubt and a lot of self-blame based on gender stereotypes. Men believe that they should have been able to get out of the situation. They should have been able to fight their way out, that men don't submit. They're less likely to be comforted by someone telling them, "Well, of course you submitted because you could have been killed." They're less likely to - I mean, nobody likes the role of victim, but my impression in my experience is that men, more than anybody, don't want to be called a victim, right? So they worry that they also won't be taken seriously for those very same things. Right. They worry that juries are not going to think that they couldn't fight an attacker off. I think that causes men to not even want to report that to begin with and it would be the same reasons for a transgender victim as well, concerned that they won't be believed. A concern that they won't be taken seriously and maybe won't be prioritized, maybe would be made fun of - all of these I believe contribute to not reporting or underreporting and not getting the sexual assault kits.

Tyler Raible [00:20:04] And I'm sure that there's some myths associated with like the- the anatomical response, right? Isn't there an argument to be made that, well, if you weren't interested, you couldn't have gotten an erection - like that kind of conversation, right?

Mary Weston [00:20:16] Yes, I have seen that in cases where a man could be a victim of a sexual assault, and I've had defense attorneys say to me, "if he didn't want to do it, how could he have had an erection? How could he have ejaculated?" And you talked to medical personnel, and medical personnel will tell you that biologically, just because the victim, you know, had an erection or even ejaculated, it's a biological response - that does not mean this person enjoyed what was happening. Sometimes the body, it fails you, and it does things that don't make sense. And you can imagine the shame or confusion a man would feel if he is submitting to nonconsensual sex acts and his body is reacting in a certain way that the world believes signifies pleasure. And it causes even more embarrassment, confusion, and these kinds of cases are not prosecuted regularly. They still aren't - the culture around sexual assault, it's drastically better than it used to be. There's still room for improvement.

Tyler Raible [00:21:16] If you're in the situation where you- where you have to prosecute a case with a male or trans victim - how would you approach that?

Mary Weston [00:21:23] My focus would be on making a safe space for your victim. And that means a lot, though, it means making sure that your case is solid so that your victim will be part of it. So what I would do is corroborate everything I could with that case. I would find disclosure witnesses. I would find any other kind of witnesses that would corroborate all the little things that add up in a case. So recently, I had a case where a victim was robbed and raped. One of the things the robbers stole was the person's driver's license. So I went and got the DMV records showing the person got a new driver's license the following week. You know what I mean? It's just like the little things show to the jury like if the person made it up, where's the driver's license? It obviously is gone because they had to get a new one. These might be tiny things, but they corroborate things because you don't want your victim to have to come into- these are- they're already in a vulnerable position, right? They're already worried they're not going to be believed, they're already worried that it's going to be hell to testify and be subjected to cross-examination. So corroborate every little thing you can with other witnesses and other evidence. I would also prepare that victim really well for trial and meet several times and prior to any sort of testimony, ask them questions like how they felt about reporting the crime, how they felt about going to the hospital, who in that process made them feel safe, who made them not feel safe? And I will bring that out in testimony. I think juries are not going to understand this unless it's told to them how these kinds of victims are treated from the get-go in a case like this. Who treated them well, who didn't treat them well? All the obstacles this victim had to overcome just to get where we are in front of a jury. What you're not saying is why would they do that if they were just making it up? You know what I mean? Like, this is quite a journey. They've had to tell how many different people about what happened to them. The police officer, the hospital personnel, maybe the EMS driver, maybe the sex crimes detective, maybe somebody from the Rape Crisis Center, maybe the prosecutor. By the time they're in front of the jury, I mean, how many other times have they had to say what happened to them, I would really kind of highlight that. I would also take testimony from people that are sympathetic to your victim. Friends and family members are good people to testify about how a crime affected a victim, what kind of changes they saw in the victim? You know, they've known your victim for 20 years, let's say, and they've never noticed the kinds of behaviors they started noticing after the assault. That was not the sister or brother that they know. Again, if somebody is making something up, they don't generally stop going outside at night after an assault or stop dating after an assault or quit their job because that's where the assault happened. And juries are more likely to believe victims that other people believe, too. When the victim's loved ones believe them, the people that know them the best, I think that that's good testimony to get in front of a jury and have them be able to assess and consider.

Tyler Raible [00:24:16] From what you described, especially the survivor's journey dealing with all these different people, having to retell their story, how do you think that this affects their, their willingness to stay engaged through the whole process?

Mary Weston [00:24:27] At least for my experience, you have people that are like this close - and I'm holding up my finger and my thumb - this close to falling off all the time. By the time we get a case as prosecutors, they've already had to tell so many people what happened to them. Right when the rape happens, that victim is hearing from a lot of people, and they're getting sometimes some support at that time. You know, they're getting the police officers following up with them. They're getting the hospital who's collecting evidence from them and treating them and maybe giving them some medication - like all that kind of stuff happens right at the beginning, and then sometimes victims don't hear anything for a while. You know, maybe the detective will follow up and say, I'm forwarding the case to the prosecutor, and then maybe they don't hear anything for a

while. By the time I get a case as a prosecutor, sometimes you're- you're fighting to get a victim reengaged, really. So we try as prosecutors and most prosecutors do this, try to get victims invested. I like to get them in, meet with them, and even just to get to know them maybe for the first meeting or two. It's really kind of the comfort level of the victim. I want them to trust me and to know that I'm fighting hard on their case, that I believe them, that I know these things happen. And you know, my job is to hold the people that did- do these things accountable. It can be really hard. And in fact, one thing that you'll see as prosecutors and victim advocates, investigators is the closer you get to trial, victims may fall off because it is becoming real for them that soon there may be a need to testify. So one of the things that was a learning curve for me is that that is trauma. So I would think, "Oh, you know, these victims are not answering my phone calls. All of a sudden she's just falling off. She must not care anymore." Well, it's not because the victim doesn't care anymore. It's trauma. Trauma is rearing its ugly head and causing victims to have difficulty coping with what's going on. Right. Trial is coming up, that means testimony. That means telling people what happened to them, and the fear of the verdict, right? The fear of the verdict being maybe they won't believe me. Maybe this will all come to nothing. And the defendant's going to be in court. You know, the defendant has a right to confront witnesses. He has a right to be in the courtroom. You know, that could be extremely hard for a victim. So it's hard. But all prosecutors can do is try to make their victims know and understand that the prosecutor is working every day on their case. I think it's important to keep victims involved in scheduling and keeping them updated, and that has been particularly hard with COVID. For instance, we had to kind of change tactics, and I started having the prosecutors here update victims about every single delay that the court put into place - if they were delaying jury trials, call your victims. Let them know we understand it's completely frustrating. You know, we brought this up after so many years, and now we're making them wait again, and try to find out what resources might help them with this further delay. What can we do? That has been hard. But it is- it is a challenge keeping victims engaged, Tyler. It is a challenge.

Tyler Raible [00:27:23] I can only imagine. I mean, you have people put in this horrific situation, and it's exacerbated by all of these other external factors. So Mary, is there anything coming up you're excited about? What's next for you?

Mary Weston [00:27:34] Well, we are doing some genealogy on some of our cases now. So like I said, we had over 800 indictments, but almost 200 of those were indictments where we knew the DNA profile on the evidence was the perpetrator's DNA, but we didn't have a hit to anybody, so we didn't have a known offender. So we indicted those as John Doe's to stop the statute of limitations because as I said earlier, we had a 20-year statute of limitations at the time and there- at that time, there was no extension of that statute of limitations with a DNA hit. So we were indicting John Doe indictments, and to be honest, we still do sometimes if we don't want something to fall off the radar, even though we now have that five-year extra period of time to investigate John Doe's if we get a hit, even if it's beyond the 25 years. So of those 180 now John Doe's, you have to imagine if we haven't gotten a hit, we're probably never going to get a hit. You know, it's probably somebody who's not going to, you know, they're hiding in plain sight. They're not going to be arrested. They're not going to have their DNA put into the database. Or, you know, maybe they're dead, frankly. So we were lucky enough to get some BJA SAKI funding starting in 2019 that we started using those funds to do genealogy research on those DNA profiles. And so we had sent 20 sexual assault cases to a genealogist, and we've solved five of them so far. But actually, it solved more than - I'm going to do the math now - it solves more than five sexual assaults because like one of them solved three - it was one DNA profile. He was linked to three crimes. Unfortunately, he was dead, but we were able to tell the victims

of the crimes, we know who did this to you. He's not out there on the street anymore. You're never going to see this guy again. So that was gratifying and valuable. Another guy was linked to two separate stranger rapes. He's in pretrial right now. Another guy was linked to one, another guy was linked to one. Another guy was linked to one. So it's five DNA profiles. But it solved eight cases so far, and we just sent nine more cases to our genealogy vendor. So we're hopeful to get some more solves. And by the way, we're also going to use some of this funding to do the same thing with homicide cases. We're looking through our homicide cases right now just to try to identify some where genealogy might be able to provide some leads. That's really exciting. It's something new, something our county has never done before, you know, use genealogy to try to solve crimes. We've used familial DNA in a few cases. This is our first time doing straight up genealogy, and it's very exciting.

Tyler Raible [00:29:57] It's incredibly exciting. So- and many of the guests that we've had on the show talk about how we're all collectively trying to do better, right - the situation was dire. It's always improving. Do you have any thoughts as to what could be done to encourage people to report to get the medical help they need, or maybe even engage with the criminal justice system?

Mary Weston [00:30:16] I mean, my message to individuals who have been sexually assaulted is to definitely report your crime and definitely go to the hospital. You know, people are more and more in a position to investigate these cases and take them seriously and do the kind of work that is needed for these kinds of cases. There has been such, such a swing in terms of our culture and how we interact and believe rape victims. We know more than ever how prevalent it is. We didn't- in ways that we never really knew or understood or believed or wanted to think about before. So my message to victims is, you know, we believe you. Prosecutors know this is happening. We believe it's happening to you and we want to hold offenders accountable. So no matter what happened to you, no matter what kind of act occurred or what kind of circumstances the sexual assault happened in, prosecutors and investigators are more trained than ever before to respond to these kinds of acts, to investigate them really well, and to prosecute to the fullest.

Tyler Raible [00:31:19] That's a great way to wrap up today. So I want to thank you, Mary, for sitting down with Just Science to discuss vulnerable populations and just, just for being here and the work that you do. So thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to sit down and talk to me.

Mary Weston [00:31:33] Tyler, it is always a pleasure. Thank you.

Tyler Raible [00:31:35] And for those of you listening at home, in the car, wherever you enjoy your podcasts, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensic field, visit ForensicCOE.org. I'm Tyler Raible, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:31:54] Next week, Just Science sits down with Dr. Julie Valentine to discuss her recent research on sexual assault cases associated with dating apps and the prevalence of strangulation in sexual assault cases. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.