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Ritual abuse/torture

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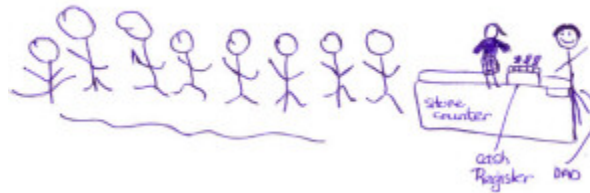
Vol. 67, Issue 1 2005

Identifying a crime of horror

Ritual abuse/torture is not defined in the Criminal Code of Canada. And to date, no national statistics on this crime are collected. But the crimes are very real. Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald, two registered nurses and educators from Nova Scotia, have listened to several hundred accounts from those who have survived this form of organized family/group violence. In this article, they define ritual abuse/torture and provide information that could help police better identify the victims of these horrific crimes.

By Jeanne Sarson RN, BScN, MEd
and Linda MacDonald RN, BN, MEd

The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women was the first to report that ritual abuse and torture was occurring in every region of Canada. The panel's 1993 report, *Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence, Achieving Equality*, noted that the *Criminal Code of Canada* did not address the crime of ritual abuse/torture. Statistical data about ritual abuse/torture is not collected in Canada. And as such, it remains an unrecognized crime.



In this drawing, the victim depicts offstreet trafficking. As a toddler, her father sat her on the counter in his store and "rented" her to male and female pedophiles.

The same year that report was released, Sara—not her real name—first contacted us for help. She explained that she had been born into a ritual abuse/torture family and remained a captive adult who wanted “to get out.” Unable to find safe and knowledgeable support or protection for Sara, we began our journey of study, research, writing and activism. This article shares some of what we have learned so that others—service providers and victimized persons—might benefit.

Definition

Ritual abuse/torture is defined as a crime of intent, of organized inter-generational families or like-minded groups who commit dehumanizing acts of torture that cause severe pain and suffering, and disintegration to the integrity of the personality of the victimized person for the following purposes:

- maintaining totalitarian power and control over the victimized person—from infancy and into adulthood—using threats and intimidation, torture and organized family/group violence;

- exploiting, transporting and trafficking in persons for the pleasure and entertainment of the family/group;
- exploiting, transporting and trafficking in persons for the pleasure and entertainment of outside users;
- obtaining, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

There is a consistent three-tiered pattern of how ritual abuse/torture families or groups organize their interactions.

Thousands of hours of conversations with victims reveal that the families have separate and unique interactions with the “outsider” community, with their immediate families and with an “insider” circle of other ritual abusers/torturers. In the following story, which is similar to so many others described by survivors around the world, “Carrie” describes the horrors she endured.



This drawing by “Shelly” depicts the electric shock torture she endured and another tool - the cage - used by the ritual abuse-torturers. Her out-of-body and dissociative response was intimate to her survival.

Carrie’s story

My father had a reputation for being a very sociable and entertaining man. Everyone loved him. But what a grand performance it was, playing the role of a kind and gentle man in the community.

My family life was filled with my father’s alcoholic rages. At age six, when my mother went away leaving me in my father’s care, he stuffed pyjamas, with little black and white dogs printed on them, into my mouth . . . he raped me.

The “insider circle” reality of rituals and ceremonies involved my father and about 12 of his friends—men and women, young and old, a mixture of social classes. [They were] doctors, a lawyer, nurse and teacher. Sometimes only one parent was involved; some brought their children.

Their routine was to force me to get very drunk then humiliate me with their laughter. Another little girl and I were tied down on wooden planks and smeared with blood and given enemas. So much pain, horror, torture and terror. I was about 13 when the ritualized torture stopped. There were about 14 of us—infants, toddlers and children—girls and boys.

The violent acts that are consistently committed by ritual abuse/torturers can be grouped into the following check list:

Child abuses: Daily assaults are inflicted on the child living within ritual abuse/torture families. Abuses can also be situational, occurring in a child-care facility such as an orphanage or foster home.

Terrorization: Violent threats and actions are used to keep victimized persons silenced and enslaved. For instance, a child forced to drown her pet cat is threatened she will be drowned if she tells.

Cruel animal-human relationships: These acts include bestiality or necrophilic bestiality with dogs or other animals.

Physical, sexual and mind-spirit tortures: These acts are used for power and control and for pleasure and entertainment. Victims may be hung by a limb, burned by cigarettes or hot electric light bulbs, physically beaten, nearly drowned, caged, denied nourishment, raped by the family or group or threatened with death.

Pedophilia: This can take place at any time in the home, at the homes of like-minded others, or any place that is convenient for the perpetrators. Pedophilic and necrosadistic violence is a central theme of the torture perpetrated at organized family/group gatherings.

Necrophilia and necrophilic-like acts: These are perpetrated when the victimized child or adult is rendered immobile or unconscious by drugging, choking, beating, near-drowning or suffocation.

Horrification: The victimized person is forced to witness or inflict dehumanizing violence onto another victim.

Organized violent family/group gatherings: These gatherings, commonly called rituals and ceremonies, distinguish these families/groups from other organized criminal groups. They serve to bond its members together and to distort adult-parent-child relationships by normalizing the torturous behaviour.

Self-harming acts: These acts are forcibly taught to the victimized child or adult to do to themselves whenever they try to tell on their perpetrators.

Exploitation and trafficking: The off-street and on-street sexualized exploitation trade includes forced involvement in the manufacture of pedophilic and adult pornography. When no longer marketable to pedophiles, some victimized persons report being forced to work on the street.

Identifying the signs

Victimized persons frequently use dissociative language. They may refer to themselves as “you” instead of “me” or “I.” Also, “my body” may become “the body.”

Coded language is rampant and can vary with each family or group. Examples include the following: the temple = the victim’s body; the chosen one = the “special” victim; and Kool Aid and sugar = drugs.

A victim’s physical injuries include bruises, strangulation marks, cuts, burns, inflamed fingernail and toenail beds resulting from needle-puncture tortures, difficult and painful walking related to beatings to the soles of the feet, or hearing loss that can result from having both ears whacked at the same time.

Hypervigilance, an impaired sense of time or space, memory loss, confusion, chaotic thinking, expressions and behaviours of being trapped or on the run from the unknown could be a few indicators suggesting a state of captivity.

Frequent pet losses can suggest violence in the home because in violent homes, pets seldom reach two years of age.

The prime intervention is to understand ritual abuse/torture as an emerging organized criminal co-culture involving extensive acts of human evil inflicted on the vulnerable. That begins with listening and learning from adults who tell of their childhood ordeals, and naming and addressing the crime. It also means sharing knowledge, providing ongoing education and caring about children.

For more information, you can visit Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald’s educational website at www.ritualabusetorture.org