

SEXUAL PREDATORS IN VERMONT

Rebecca Coffey  
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Joseph Stalin once said, "A single death is a tragedy. 'A million deaths' is a statistic." A horrible man, but a great quote about statistics.

Vermont District Court Judge Edward Cashman and the 60-day sentence that he initially gave child rapist Mark Hulett has me thinking about sexual assault statistics in Vermont. 2004 is the last year for which data are available. Sexual assaults were up. Still, at a total of 368, we're not talking about the "millions" that Stalin said render a number emotionally meaningless.

Stalin's quote, though, suggests that the real story is apparent only when the numbers are very small. So here are some tiny numbers that speak volumes about a local tragedy. One forcible rape was reported in 2004 for a child older than 1 week but younger than 1 year.

Here is a bigger number, from the National Institutes of Health. 117: It's the number of times that the average child molester sexually abuses children over his lifetime.

As most people following the Judge Cashman and Mark Hulett story know, Hulett confessed to repeatedly raping his victim, beginning when she was 6 and continuing until she was 10, even at one point inviting a friend to join him. Concerned that no treatment would be available to Hulett in prison, Judge Cashman originally sentenced Hulett to only 60 days. That's about what you'd get in Vermont for growing a marijuana plant—

hardly the moral equivalent of repeatedly penetrating a preschooler. Judge Cashman explained the light sentence: He no longer believes in punishment alone. "[A]nger doesn't solve anything," he said. "It just corrodes your soul."

So does sexual abuse, especially if you're a child, and especially if it's repeated.

Under enormous pressure, and with a once-absent assurance from the Corrections Department that Hulett would get treatment in prison, Judge Cashman upped Hulett's sentence to 3-10 years. Actually, my kudos to him for insisting on treatment for Hulett. My kudos, even, for taking a stance that got the Corrections Department to promise the treatment Hulett clearly needs. But, in my opinion, even the longer punishment is not enough. If Mark Hulett is about average for child molesters (treated and untreated), he is slouching toward a lifetime achievement of 117 assaults on children—and may have lots of rapes left in him.

But he might not, and therein lies the danger of drawing inferences about individuals from statistics about groups. You can find the tragedy in the numbers but you can't make predictions about a person.

Mark Hulett may emerge from three years of prison a changed man. But because he and others like him may not, I will watch our legislature closely. Will it recognize the tragedies in the Hulett story, the Vermont crime statistics, and the national recidivism numbers? Will it acknowledge that rape corrodes a child's soul far more than anger corrodes the soul of adults? Will it devise sentencing guidelines that protect children from rapists long term?

I hope we can count on them.

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