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Exposing Evil Deeds: The Debbie Smith Act

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Image Credit: Pixabay

For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (John 3:20, NKJV)

When DNA technology began to be used to identify criminals in the 1980s evidence collection in rape cases followed suit with the development of the rape kit. “A rape kit, or sexual assault kit (SAK), contains biological evidence collected from the victim’s body after the assault (e.g., blood, semen, saliva)

that can be analyzed for DNA, which can be instrumental in solving crimes and preventing future attacks” (Campbell et al., 2015, p. 152). Bodily fluids are collected from the victim, sealed in the kit and sent for DNA results. The kits began to be processed using the new DNA technology, but there was a problem almost from the beginning. There is a cost involved in processing each kit, also, there were not very many specialists who could process them in the early years of the new DNA technology. Processing of the kits began to back up not long after they began to be used to identify rapists—as early as the 1990s. “The current estimate of untested rape kits in the United States is upwards of 200,000, meaning that there are that many rape victims awaiting justice, while the key to unlocking the identity of their perpetrator collects dust on a shelf in storage. This nationwide tragedy has come to be known as the rape kit backlog” (Lion, 2018, p. 2).

However, the initial action to address the accumulation of untested kits did not happen until November 2004, when President George W. Bush signed the Debbie Smith Act or Justice for All Act (H.R. 1046) (Telsavaara & Arrigo, 2006). In an attempt to identify rapists, this Act made funding available to test more kits and to enter the data in the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), which is a national crime database that is managed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The Story of Debbie Smith

Debbie Smith was at her home in Williamsburg, Virginia on March 3, 1989, when she was attacked. A man wearing a ski mask entered her home around noon while she was in her kitchen and while her husband was on another floor of their home taking a nap. The intruder made it known that he had a gun, and Debbie, afraid to call attention to her husband, followed the intruder’s commands and was taken by the attacker into the woods

behind her house. While in the woods, the attacker raped Debbie repeatedly over an hour time frame. The attacker left, but not without threatening to return and kill her if she told anyone. When her attacker left, Debbie woke her husband and they went to the hospital to submit evidence for a rape kit. Debbie’s husband was a lieutenant at the local police department and knew about the DNA technology used with the rape kits.

Initially there was no DNA match found with the evidence taken from Debbie Smith. At that point the evidence was stored, along with many other rape kits. In 1994 Debbie Smith’s rape kit was sent for testing once again, after several sexual assaults occurred in the Williamsburg area (Telsavaara & Arrigo, 2006). Again, there was no match, but now the DNA evidence for Debbie Smith’s case was entered into CODIS, instead of a search only. Shortly after, in 1995, a match was found in CODIS in Debbie Smith’s case. Her attacker’s name was Normal Jimmerson. The case was prosecuted and Normal Jimmerson was given 161 years for the rape of Debbie Smith.

The Problem-A Backlog of Rape Kits Nationwide

There are many women who may never know the names of their attackers because of the backlog of untested rape kits. The backlog of untested kits continues to grow even though it was the success of Debbie Smith’s case that led to legislative actions. The primary causes for the backlogs according to Campbell et al. (2015) are:

Testing a rape kit requires resources—time and effort from the police to investigate the case and submit the kit for forensic testing; time and effort from the police crime lab staff to analyze the specimens for DNA; and time and money to outsource the testing to a private laboratory if the police department lab cannot keep

pace with the demand for forensic testing of crime scene evidence. (p. 152)

Another issue related to the problem of the backlog is caused by the extremely long wait time. After a long period of time victims try to move on from their attack. The long wait causes the victim to have to relive the attack again later if there is a change in the case, after the victim as worked hard to get past the attack. Victims are re-traumatized. Another issue is that not using the evidence from rape kits can result in wrong convictions. These may be overturned later after testing reveals the correct perpetrator, however the wrong person has served time for a crime that they did not commit. These instances could be avoided completely if the evidence is analyzed sooner. Yet another problem relates to the organizations which process the kits for testing. “Over time it became nearly crushing, as one team member noted, because the older cases almost always took more time because of the extra effort required to re-locate victims, suspects, witnesses, and crime scene evidence years after the crime occurred and was reported” (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2019, p. 167).

Initial Steps Taken to Address the Backlog

Hansen (2011) wrote:

The DNA Analysis Backlog Elimination Act of 2000 authorized a total of \$125 million in appropriations for fiscal years 2001-2004 for states to carry out DNA analysis of samples from crime scenes and increase the capacities of their public crime laboratories. In 2004 Congress amended that Act, re-titling it the Debbie Smith Act of 2004 and authorizing \$151 million in appropriations for each fiscal year between 2005 and 2009. (p. 950)

The Act was re-authorized again in 2014 and very recently in 2019. In 2004, the

Debbie Smith/Justice for All Act amended the federal criminal code, the Rules of Criminal Procedure, and the DNA Analysis Backlog Elimination Act of 2000 (ABE) (Telsavaara & Arrigo, 2006). The focus was to create changes that would ensure rape kit testing was done swiftly, and primarily through attorney generals’ offices, and also provide the additional funding for activities to accomplish the additional testing. Another portion of the Act addresses the crime technicians in laboratories on the state and local level, calling for them begin testing the unanalyzed rape kits as soon as funding is made available. “However, more specifically, the act reforms the SANE program along with other medical assistance programs for victims of rape” (Telsavaara & Arrigo, 2006). SANE is an acronym for Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner. Through this program nurses are trained specifically on how to properly gather evidence in sexual assault cases. This helps to ensure more effective investigations and also more effective prosecutions.

One example of how far reaching, comprehensive, and effective this Act can be is in the application of the Act in regard to the Court system:

Perhaps the most significant implication the Justice for All Act is likely to have on the court system is the accumulation of cases that will be prosecuted based on compelling DNA evidence. Thus, prosecutors will no longer need the confession of rapists to guarantee conviction; rather the DNA analysis will accomplish this end. (Telsavaara & Arrigo, 2006, p. 499)

In these cases, guilt is determined by science. Also, “it is worth noting that the Justice for All Act represents a fact- and evidence-based policy. This means that it does not seek to advocate for one ideology over another” (Telsavaara & Arrigo, 2006, p. 500). The Act also reaches into other areas such as Law

Enforcement policy, forensics, corrections, and juvenile justice. “It dispenses with conjecture, especially with respect to factual and legal guilt, and it has the potential to exonerate those falsely accused. In sum, the act represents powerful legislation that, in many ways, is long overdue” (Telsavaara & Arrigo, 2006, p. 502).

Criminological Theory Underlying the Debbie Smith Act

There are criminological theories which underlie or underpin each criminal policy that is created. For the Debbie Smith Act there could be several theories combined that apply to the legislation, as is the case with much policy. The theories that may apply to this policy are Learning theory, Marxist theory, and Labeling theory. Each of these theories will be described and discussed in relation to the Debbie Smith Act.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory is the perspective on crime that suggests when a person is labeled deviant or a delinquent by social groups associated with them, the subject will adjust thinking and behavior to match the label that has been attached to them (Bernard et al., 2016). Initially it may be adults which label a youth as having good behavior overall, but the youth is observed participating in some bad behavior. Over time if the behavior which is thought to be bad continues, the youth eventually becomes defined, or labeled, as a bad youth (Bernard et al., 2016). The individual eventually understands that there is a negative label attached to them when they notice negative reactions from others as a result of their behavior. If the behavior does not stop, the subject’s thinking about him/herself (self-image) and behavior begins to change, at which point the subject is being affected by the label of deviant that was attached to them (Bernard et al., 2016). Additionally, at some point the subject’s self-

image itself is the means for generating of the deviant behavior, instead of some other or the original factor (labeling) being the cause (Bernard et al., 2016).

In regard to Labeling theory, any person who commits rape will be considered deviant by social groups that they are associated with-if others learn about the behavior. If the subject is not willing or not able to stop the behavior, they may consider themselves a rapist, or they may not. However, the subject likely will understand that established law is being broken when they commit rape and that what they are doing harms the victim.

Because the Debbie Smith Act is a policy that is meant to address the backlog of rape kits that sit untested in almost every jurisdiction across the United States, from a social or community safety perspective, and interests and actions (change efforts) of communities to address rape, “community partners can be thought of as valuable limited resources, so it is important to determine whether there are other community change efforts underway that may be tapping into and depleting this valuable resource” (Shaw et al., 2016, p. 1495).

Learning Theory

Learning theory, in general, is the perspective that criminal behavior is learned behavior, mainly through interactions with others (Bernard et al., 2016). This theory reflects truth from the Bible found at 1 Corinthians 15:33, “Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits” (New King James Version). For application to the Debbie Smith Act, it is the cultural or subcultural branches of Learning theory, which are related, that may be relevant. Even though the Learning theory was developed in the 1930s, the theory remains unchanged and is relevant still today. The theory includes nine basic points and includes the principle of differential association (Bernard et al., 2016).

The basic premise of differential association is that there are legal codes that people can view as violating either favorably or unfavorably, and, when a person is surrounded by influences that allow them to view violating legal codes favorably, then the person can become delinquent in their behavior (Bernard et al., 2016).

Cultural Learning Theory

Cultural Learning theory is a theory which explains gang criminal behavior (Bernard et al., 2016). What is notable in this theory is the premise that there is a different set of values and interests for lower-class groups compared with middle-class groups (Bernard et al., 2016). Those in middle-class groups may value achievement, intelligence, and success, and those in lower-class groups may instead value street-smarts, excitement, or masculinity. The different sets of values or interests of the lower-class group may lead to deviant behavior because of the direction of focus or thinking, compared with the differing values or interests of middle-class groups.

Gang violence is a problem in many jurisdictions across the U.S. When youths of lower-class groups are able to spend a lot of time together and socializing without a lot of restrictions, there is ample time to learn bad behavior from other members of the group. When these youths increase their learning of the ways of the streets, or the street code, they not only learn aggression and violence as a method of dealing with others, but also they will need to learn how to counter the aggression and violence of others who have learned the same methods. “In the code of the street, the point is to subtly communicate a predisposition to violence, a willingness and an ability to create total chaos and mayhem, in order to deter potential aggression” (Bernard et al., 2016, p. 196).

One of the types of crimes that gangs have been found to be involved in is rape. The Debbie Smith Act is a policy that can

address gang related rape, since some of those who commit rape will also be members of violent gangs. These types of criminals obviously need to be caught so that their behavior can be stopped.

The failure of government, at all levels, allows dangerous individuals to pose a threat to communities while leaving survivors of sexual assault with the message that their attack, their rape, their violation of bodily integrity does not warrant protection or validation from those whom are charged with doing so. (Fucci, 2015, p. 195)

Subculture of Violence Theory

A Subculture of Violence theory was developed by Wolfgang and Ferracuti in the late 1960s. This theory describes conflicting values that underlie the dominant culture and others that underlie the violent subculture, which creates tension between the cultures (Bernard et al., 2016). For example, in the violent subculture, masculinity, violence, and honor may be held in higher regard when compared with the dominant culture values. What is valued in the violent subculture can be considered the rules of that subculture, and there are rewards for adherence to the rules, and also criticism or even punishment for those who do not conform to the rules. Regardless of the reasons for any negative responses from those in the group, responses will typically involve violence because the use of violence is the primary mode of resolving issues for those who have learned that this is acceptable, or even a good thing to do.

Since rape is an act of violence, it is easy to understand that those who have learned that violent behavior is acceptable would use such behavior in domestic disputes and also with strangers. “Some researchers and practitioners have suggested prioritizing rape kit testing by victim–offender relationship because in stranger rape cases, the

perpetrator is not known, so DNA testing and a possible CODIS hit may be the best chance of solving the case” (Campbell et al., 2016, p. 557).

Similarly, related to Learning theory, is the concept of symbolic interactionism. The concept, developed by George H. Mead (1863-1931), theorizes that how people act toward something is based on what that thing means to them (Bernard et al., 2016). Further, the meanings of things result from interactions with others that a person is close to or influenced by (Bernard et al., 2016). Therefore, the meanings of criminal actions, “arises primarily from the meanings given to these acts by other people with whom the individual associates in intimate personal groups” (Bernard et al., 2016, p. 190). From this, the result of adopting or accepting delinquent behavior of others could result in harm to others through violence.

The understanding of this theory of criminal behavior in regard to rape should lead policymakers to also understand that there needs be a strong policy in place that helps to identify those in communities who are committing rape and also holds them accountable for their actions. “Every two and a half minutes, someone is sexually assaulted in the United States” (Hansen, 2011, p. 943). With the Debbie Smith Act we have that needed policy for accountability, but very importantly, science identifies who should be held accountable. The Debbie Smith Act is a policy which helps to facilitate that process.

Marxist Criminal Theory

Another theory that is potentially applicable to the Debbie Smith Act is Marxist criminal theory, based on the social and economic ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883). Karl Marx was not a criminologist, but Marx’s theories were applied to criminology later by others to explain that different aspects of society and the economy may have cascading effects related to crime. Willem Bongers was a

Marxist criminal theorist who thought that “the capitalist economic system encouraged all people to be greedy and selfish and to pursue their own benefits without regard for the welfare of their fellows” (Bernard et al., 2016, p. 271). This theory, presented in 1916, is based on the ideas of Marx related to capitalist economies and further expands on these to describe other effects of a capitalist economic system in other areas of society.

In regard to the use of DNA to identify criminals, and related to what Bongers theorized, “The premise behind, and the rise of, databanks can be largely understood through the sociological phenomenon that violent offenders will continue to commit crimes until caught” (Gregor, 2018, p. 958). The Debbie Smith Act is a policy which affirms that the public must be protected from those who are unconcerned for the welfare of others and are willing to do harm to others. This Act attempts to ensure rapists are identified as quickly as possible by providing resources to those who analyze the evidence collected from victims. When there is no identification of rapists there are multiple related issues for the community and society as a whole. “Untested kits also allow rapists to remain unprosecuted and at large, thereby endangering public safety” (Hansen, 2011, p. 946).

Perpetrators of rape fall within the theory of Bongers’s described above. With rape, the perpetrator’s behavior reflects that they are willing to do what they want without regard to the harm inflicted upon victims by their actions. Policymakers understand that strong policies are needed to address the liberties that people will take in our society, without regard to the harm inflicted upon others. For example, in Detroit a study was conducted regarding their backlog of rape kits where 1600 kits submitted for testing resulted in 455 matches in CODIS. For this sample alone, “in 127 of the 455 CODIS hits, the DNA match was to another sexual assault

case, meaning that the offender was a serial rapist who had raped multiple victims” (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2017, p. 480).

Of course, this pertains to all crime where there is a victim, but is especially critical in regard to crimes where violence is involved. Primarily because of the violent nature of the crime, but also because the person committing the act is often unknown. “Now admissible in nearly every federal and state court, DNA evidence has been particularly effective in rape and criminal sexual assault cases to identify or confirm the identity of alleged assailants” (Hansen, 2011, p. 948). However, the Debbie Smith Act is a policy that, thus far, is only effective to a certain degree.

More Work Needs to Be Done: *The Backlog Persists*

There are some issues which are potentially hindering progress in reducing the backlog of untested rape kits. These lingering issues are within jurisdictions, however collectively, this is how the backlog persists on a national level. “The untested kits were a tangible symbol of a systemic breakdown in the criminal justice system’s response to sexual assault” (Campbell et al., 2017, p. 464). One issue is that different stakeholders have different goals, “and these organizations (police, prosecution, forensic laboratories, and victim advocacy programs) tend not to share power and resources” (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2019, p. 161). More recently however, the focus has been on better collaboration between organizations through partnerships and organized teams called Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs) (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2019). “SARTs seek to improve the quality and coordination of services for survivors, reduce re-traumatization, and increase arrest and conviction rates” (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2019, p. 161).

However, probably the primary and most widespread problem is the issue of funding, with each kit costing anywhere from \$500.00 to \$2,000.00 to test (Fulton, 2018). Fulton (2018) found in one state, Pennsylvania:

An eight-month review was conducted into the causes of the backlog, whether it can be cleared within the mandated three years, and how to put an end to future backlogs. After the review, the state found three major areas of concern, which provide crucial information to other states looking into the same problems. The first problem concerns funding. (p. 61)

Interestingly, in Pennsylvania, legislation was passed to mandate testing the kits, but without any added funding for the health department to collect the evidence for the kit, or for the lab to run their analysis (Fulton, 2018).

Status of the Debbie Smith Act and Other Legislation

In 2013 the Debbie Smith Act was expanded upon by the Sexual Assault Forensic Reporting (SAFER) Act (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2019). The SAFER Act provides funding to jurisdictions for audits of the status of untested kits and for developing plans to get more kits processed. The Debbie Smith Act originally was passed in 2004, reauthorized in 2008, 2014, and again in 2019. The latest version of the Act includes updated dates related to activity and funding under the Act, but it also includes added requirements and measures for tracking progress. For example, in regard to workloads at laboratories that test for DNA:

Not later than 180 days after the end of the third fiscal year beginning after the date of enactment of the Debbie Smith Act of 2019, and once every 3 fiscal years thereafter through fiscal year 2025, the Comptroller General of the United States shall issue a report on

the DNA analysis workloads at laboratories that participate in the Combined DNA Index System using data available from the DNA Capacity Enhancement and Backlog Reduction Grant Program or other sources. (S. 820)

The Difference Made to Date

In 2014 in Ohio the Sexual Assault Kit Testing Initiative was initiated and supports sexual assault kit testing by requesting that within one year of enactment law enforcement agencies ship untested kits to the State Bureau of Criminal Investigations and new kits within 30 days of being collected (Fulton, 2018). A few other states have also added their names to the growing list of states passing stronger legislation. In 2015 Connecticut began requiring that within ten days all rape kits must be sent to the state crime lab (Fulton, 2018). In Michigan after 2014, rape kits in hospitals must be collected by law enforcement within fourteen days, sent for testing within the next fourteen days, and analyzed within ninety days, if there are sufficient resources to do so (Fulton, 2018). In Kentucky, law enforcement agencies must collect rape kits within five days, within thirty days submit them to a lab, and the kits must be analyzed there within ninety days (Fulton, 2018). Kentucky cleared their backlog entirely by 2017 (Fulton, 2018).

Further Recommendations

Very importantly, the primary recommendation and guidance according to Fulton (2018) are six pillars of ending the rape kit backlog: 1. audits or inventories, 2. testing of all untested/backlogged rape kits, 3. testing of all newly collected rape kits, 4. victims' rights to notice and to be informed, 5. tracking, and 6. funding. This will take added resource to address, and this is precisely what the Debbie Smith Act helps local agencies with. "The police have been through years

(decades, really) of hell, trying to do their jobs with continually depleting resources" (Campbell, 2017, p. 321).

There are some other, practical recommendations for the teams that are assigned to tackle the backlog. When a jurisdiction has large numbers of untested kits, "First, addressing the problem of untested rape kits requires a community champion or multiple champions of the cause" (Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2020, p. 164). There were several additional recommendations made in the study by Campbell and Fehler-Cabral (2020), one being to designate a senior executive for project oversight and management, another is development of a staffing plan to balance workloads.

The Christian Worldview

Interestingly, legislation that addresses the backlog of untested rape kits shines a light on the crime of rape, the criminals, and the plight of victims. It exposes all three rather than allowing them to continue to be hidden. Ephesians 5:11, primarily the second part of the verse, is applicable here. "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (New King James Version). A lot of effort should continue to be applied to expose violent offenders who commit rape, as there are several benefits to communities and to society as a whole in the efforts to do so. "I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor" (Psalm 140:12, NKJV).

Those who commit rape commit a multitude of sins, which consist essentially of the entire list found at Mark 7:20-22. As with other types of crime, rapists who have not yet been identified hide what they have done, hoping no one will ever discover their crime. The Book of John speaks to this, "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:20, NKJV). More

truth that is found in Psalm 64 is very relative to this area of criminal behavior, especially when considering the criminological theories discussed. Psalm 64:5-6, "They encourage themselves in an evil matter; they talk of laying snares secretly; they say, 'Who will see them?' They devise iniquities: 'We have perfected a shrewd scheme.' Both the inward thought and the heart of man are deep" (NKJV).

There is much in the Bible about violence and foolish, or unwise, behavior. Primarily the Bible focuses on how harmful violence can be, as with all sin. "The bloodthirsty hate the blameless, but the upright seek his wellbeing. A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back" (Proverbs 29:10-11, NKJV). Also, further in the chapter, "An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression" (Proverbs 29:22, NKJV). Importantly, there is a way for man to deal with the violence, anger and sin nature within him, which is only through Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

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Death on Hold: A Prisoner's Desperate Prayer and the Unlikely Family Who Became God's Answer

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The January 24, 1983 issue of *Time Magazine* featured Kurt Andersen's cover worthy article, *The Death Penalty: An Eye for an Eye*. In the article, among others, Andersen interviewed twenty-three-year-old, Alabama death row inmate, Mitch Rutledge. Shortly after its publication, Burt Folsom (2015) read that article and was astonished by the story and interview with Mitch Rutledge. While the article focused on Rutledge's confessed crime, it also highlighted the young man's inability to read and write, and his reported IQ of 84. But it was not Rutledge's apparent lack of education and intellect, or even the 1981 murder for which Mitch Rutledge had been convicted that moved Burt Folsom to action. No, what struck Folsom about the Mitch