

# An epidemic exposed

By Jennifer Tramm | Published 06/26/07 9:00pm

Two years ago, molecular and cellular biosciences student Natasha Bhuyan, then a junior, was studying on the fourth floor of the Main Library when she ""heard this squishy sound.""

Turning to her left, she said she saw a man through a partially filled bookcase, his face covered by books, but most of the rest of him visible, including his genitals.

He had his jeans down to his knees, and he was masturbating, Bhuyan said.

At first, she said she wasn't sure the man had seen her and didn't move for a moment, but then decided to confront him. The man quickly pulled up his pants and fled.

For the past two years the numbers of individuals cited for indecent exposure or masturbating in public has been increasing around the university area, according to police records.

Since 2005, incidents of ""sexual offenses - exposure"" have increased by more than 300 percent, according to daily activity reports found on the University of Arizona Police Department Web site.

So far this year, there have been 10 cases of indecent exposure. Two of those involved a man or several men masturbating in public within the last month. By this time last year, there were only six such cases reported and by the end of June 2005, there were only three.

""Sexual offenses - exposure"" includes exposure of genitalia and masturbation in public, as well as ""mooning,"" or exposing one's buttocks to others in public.

The Tucson Police Department shows a similar increase, according to its online crime statistics.

By June 2005, TPD recorded two exposure incidents in the Midtown sector's ""Beat 3,"" bordered by East Grant and North Country Club roads, East Broadway Boulevard and North Euclid Avenue.

By the same time in 2006, the number had risen to 15 exposure cases. So far this year, there have been 28.

This issue is one that the campus faces every year, said Andrew Valenzuela, an officer in the UAPD crime prevention office, though the draw to the campus remains a mystery.

In fact, exposure incidents in the Main Library date back to at least the 1960s, according to the Wildcat's ""Police Beat"" archives.

There is pathology to these activities, Valenzuela said. It is believed that a person can start as a voyeur, advance to exposure and possibly escalate to other crimes, he said.

Getting away with it breeds a big ego, he added.

""They think they won't get caught,"" he said.

Though the UA does not employ a universal camera surveillance system, some individual organizations, colleges and residence halls have their own cameras, Valenzuela said.

Several things can be done to combat this and other types of crime, including having the community on the lookout and encouraging early reporting when a crime does occur, he added.

""The time to report is not 'the sooner, the better,' but right now,"" he said.

Another battle in fighting these crimes is that sometimes victims do not want to have to go to court, and so they don't press charges, he said.

Often, if the victim does not participate, the suspects don't get a record or go to jail if they do it again.

Breaking down the act

Some of the suspects described in police reports sound similar. The two most recent cases, which occurred May 31 and June 5, describe a thin man in his 40s masturbating in front of a lone woman. One incident occurred in a parking lot on East Sixth Street and the other in the library.

The Main Library has had many incidents of indecent exposure and masturbation over the years.

In the 1970s, a man nicknamed ""Tinkle-Bell"" signaled his activity to female students by ringing a bell from the opposite end of an aisle of bookshelves, according to the ""Police Beat"" archives.

Alyson Hill, a junior majoring in history, German studies and classics, said she once witnessed a man taking photos of women beneath a table in the information commons section of the Main Library.

""I was sitting at a table with another woman, and this man sitting across from us kept slumping lower and lower into his chair,"" she said.

When she noticed that he was taking photos beneath the table with his cell phone, she left to tell a library attendant, who could not find the man.

Although Hill did not call the police, Bhuyan, a former Wildcat news editor, did.

Together, Bhuyan and another woman who had also witnessed the man's exposure went to the librarian, who called the police.

The police came and took statements, then went up to where the incident took place, she said. They found a rare piece of evidence: semen on some books, the floor and the bookshelf.

The police told Bhuyan that they would be in contact if they found a DNA match, but so far she has heard nothing.

Prior to the incidence, Bhuyan said she had heard stories about men masturbating in the library, but had dismissed the accounts as exaggerated.

""I actually didn't go to the library on the fourth floor for a couple of months after that,"" she said.

Bhuyan said she was surprised that it happened around 1 p.m. But, according to police crime data, most of the exposure cases occur during the daytime.

Accounting senior Michelle Lewis was unaware of the reputation of the library and other areas around campus for having indecent-exposure incidents but said, ""We have a lot of creepers.""

Her sister, Jennifer Lewis, an incoming freshman, said, ""I think it's kind of bizarre and pointless.""

Despite that assessment, she said that with the recent sexual assaults in Manzanita-Mohave

Residence Hall, she is concerned that sex crimes are ""maybe becoming a popular thing.""

Reporting incidents crucial, police say

Michelle said that she thinks the best thing to help the police prevent these crimes is for people to know what is happening.

""Just knowing about it, I'll be able to watch out for it,"" she said.

She also expressed concern that some victims may not know what the process is when they report a crime, and thus may not take that step.

The process of reporting a crime starts with ensuring that the victim is safe and feels supported, said Frank Romero, another UAPD crime prevention officer.

Once the police have secured that safe environment, they begin the investigation, he said. They ask the victim the details of the crime, including what happened and what the suspect looks like.

A copy of the ""Victim's Rights"" is given, which includes a right to be treated fairly, respectfully and with dignity.

They then ask the victim whether he or she is willing to go to court and testify, he said. If the victim says ""no,"" the county attorney may still have enough evidence to proceed.

Even if the suspect is not convicted, a record of the incident goes in his or her file, Romero said.

That there are more incidents being reported does not necessarily mean that there are more incidents, Romero cautioned. More people may be reporting, which is what the police need.

""It's good when people get involved,"" he said, adding that it helps the police do their jobs better.

When appropriate, the police have given the telephone number of the Oasis program on the UA campus to victims.

Campus offers option for help

The Oasis program provides a wide range of services to UA students, staff and faculty who have been affected by sex offenses, relationship violence and other issues. The program deals with a few cases of exposure each year, said Zachary Nicolazzo, an Oasis violence-prevention specialist.

""The reactions vary widely,"" he said. ""Some people aren't bothered and some are very traumatized.""

Some victims do not report such incidents.

Potential reasons for not reporting exposure cases include a feeling that they will not be taken seriously, Nicolazzo said. Some may also think that nothing will come of reporting.

Other people may not think that it is ""that big a deal,"" he said, but some are afraid of a perceived stigma.

One of the services Oasis provides is counseling with a licensed psychologist.

""It's completely free and confidential,"" Nicolazzo said. ""A student can feel more than welcome to make an appointment.""

With cases like these, he said, ""I think that there is a perception that the campus is less safe.""

The Oasis program also works on prevention of sexual crime by educating the campus community, Nicolazzo said.

""When it comes down to it,"" he said, ""we all play a part in it.""

Like  **Tweet** 