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Domestic violence up in weeks following quake

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STAFF WRITER 11-8-89

People who deal with victims of violent crimes are attributing an above-normal incidence of reported rapes in Santa Cruz County to post-earthquake stress and are predicting more violence.

The politeness and helpfulness seen in the general populace immediately following the Oct. 17 quake was a reaction to shock, said Judy Osborn, director of the county's Victim-Witness Center. Now people are getting more aggressive and their sense of powerlessness and frustration, exacerbated by the continuing aftershocks, is causing more violent

reactions.

"Sexual assaults and assaults-and-batteries have gone up to the point that we just can't miss it, but I predict domestic violence over the next two months is going to be abominable," Osborn said.

Lt. Bruce Simpson, of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, said he's already seeing an increase in domestic violence.

"Yes, we've had an abnormally large number of assaults reported lately," he said. "Not just rapes, but domestic violence."

Sarah Lively, executive director of Women's Crisis Support, agreed that the incidence of domestic vio-

lence would probably rise and said the increase in rapes is only the first manifestation of the violence to come. Her agency has already had an increase in the number of women requesting temporary restraining orders, a legal document ordering someone to keep his distance and often an indication of a violent situation, Lively said.

"One of the major hallmarks of post-traumatic stress disorder is irritability and anger," she said, "and the consequence of that, at least for some people, is violence."

Lively and Osborn said rape is not a sexual crime, but a crime of violence that is all about power and control — "an invasion of a

woman's body," as Lively put it.

Many rapists do not complete a normal sexual act, which is proof that the crime is violent rather than sexual, Osborn said, and most rapes are "acquaintance rapes," meaning the woman knows her attacker. The county averages six rapes a month, she said, but 14 have been reported in the three weeks since the earthquake.

"Those are just reported rapes," she said. "The national statistic is one reported rape for every 10 (that actually occur), which is scary."

Osborn said an increase in rapes after a disaster as a result

of a heightened sense of powerlessness is not altogether unexpected, but she is "flabbergasted" at the size of the increase locally.

The county is seeing an increase in child-abuse cases, as well, said Janet Reed, manager of the county's Child Welfare Program, an umbrella agency for several programs, including Child Protective Services.

Parents who had a hard time coping with their children before the quake are having a particularly difficult time now, Reed said. At the same time, children are also traumatized and tend to be more clinging, which makes it difficult for parents to get the

breathing space they need to avoid child abuse, she said.

"It's starting to increase," Reed said of abuse. "We're definitely seeing a great deal of stress associated with the earthquake."

Her agency is seeking additional funds from the state Department of Education for people needing child care, Reed said, and should be able to tell parents how to apply within a few days. Social workers are also encouraging people to seek counseling, either through the Parent's Center, county Mental Health Services or privately, she said. Even people

See VIOLENCE page 9 ▶

VIOLENCE

► From page 1

who do not feel they need counseling should realize it's important to discuss their feelings with someone, she said.

Several agencies, including the Victim-Witness Center and Women's Crisis Support, are meeting tomorrow to discuss the increase in violence and strategies for dealing with it, Osborn said.

Osborn said her agency, which is state-funded out of criminal justice fees, could use another full-time staff member just to handle the extra caseload the increase in rapes has caused. Members of the agency's two-year-old Victims Emergency Response Team, who are on call from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily to help crime victims, have been kept busy in recent days. Sunday night alone, three sexual assaults were reported, Osborn said, and another assault was reported Monday night.

Follow-ups on those cases, which can take months and even years, are done by the agency's case program," established in 1981 as part of the District Attorney's office. Staff and volunteers of the base program help crime victims through the court system and assist them in filing claims for a

Register-Pajaronian Wednesday, November 8, 1989 — 9

portion of state funds aimed at helping crime victims recoup some of their losses.

"Long after the crime, we're still working with people," said Osborn, adding that many victims of crimes who were recovering from their experiences backslid after the earthquake because it increased their already strong sense of powerlessness.

"This has really terrified them, it's really set them back," she said.

Emotional problems as a result of the earthquake are not going to go away overnight and could last several months to a year, Osborn said. Besides counseling, she suggested that people feeling the post-quake jitters find some healthy outlet, such as jogging or just having a shouting match with a good friend, to get it out of their systems.

"My belief is that people need to acknowledge that their immortality has just been thrown in their faces," she said, "and it's human nature to try to gain control."

Osborn also cautioned that people should avoid unnecessary confrontations.

"It's not a time to be inciting anger, because people will over-respond," she said, "just like your nerves are responding to every shake."