



Administrator Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT PERPETRATION

### What is sexual assault?

- Sexual assault occurs when a person has sexual contact with another person who could not consent or did not want the contact. Contact can range from touching to penetration.
- Perpetrators use tactics such as manipulation, verbal coercion, force, or threats of force to overcome a person's will, or to take advantage of a person who cannot consent.
- Researchers ask men to report how frequently they have used specific tactics to obtain any form of sexual contact, but do not use labels such as "rape" or "sexual assault" in their surveys.
- Researchers report results as the percentage of men who reported *any* form of non-consensual sexual contact, and the percentage of men who commit specific forms of sexual contact using *specific tactics*.
  - As a result, researchers can determine estimates of rape that fit criminal codes, and can also estimate other forms of sexual assault that fit the Title IX and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention definitions.

### How common is campus sexual assault?

- Sexual assault is much more common than many people imagine.
- About 25-30% of college men acknowledge committing *some form of sexual assault since age 14*. This estimate has been remarkably consistent over time, beginning with a nationally representative survey of college students in 1980's (Koss, et al., 1987) to the present (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015).
  - About 7-11% of college men report *acts of rape* since age 14.
  - An additional 14-18% disclose behaviors that are sexually assaultive but do not constitute rape (Nyguen & Parkhill, 2014; White & Smith, 2009).
- Approximately 10-15% of male college students report that they have perpetrated sexual assault during the past year (Abbey et al. 2014; Thompson, et al., 2013).
- The problem is not isolated to college settings – similar rates exist in community samples of young men (Abbey, et al., 2011).

### Is the problem of campus sexual assault mainly a problem of serial rapists?

- Data collected from the same men over time (longitudinal design) challenge the assumption that a small group of serial rapists commit most campus rapes.
  - Some men perpetrate rape in high school but not college, others perpetrate in college but not high school, and some perpetrate during both time periods (Swartout, et al., 2015a).
  - Of men who commit rape during college, approximately 73% perpetrate during only one academic year (Swartout, et al., 2015a); a finding not explained by college drop-out.
  - Likewise, when considering all forms of sexual assault together, similar patterns of offending across time are found (Swartout, et al., 2015b; Thompson et al., 2013).

- To test the assumption that a few men who rape repeatedly during college account for most campus sexual assaults, the same men must be surveyed across their entire college career in order to examine patterns of perpetration.
- Most studies have surveyed men at one time point only and ask men to recall perpetration history going back to 14 years old (cross-sectional design) without asking when the assaults occurred and if there were different victims on different occasions.
- Documentation that a serial crime has occurred requires evidence of reoccurrence across time with multiple victims.
- Popular belief in serial predation rests on a single, limited study (Lisak & Miller, 2002) with results that have not been replicated by other research teams. More recent studies using improved research designs and interpretations, such as those referenced above, do not support the serial rapist assumption.
- An exclusive emphasis on serial predation to guide risk identification, judicial response, and rape-prevention programs is misguided.

### Are most men who acknowledge committing sexual assault mentally ill?

- No. Perpetrators often show low empathy and high narcissism, but fall within what is considered the normal range for these traits (Abbey et al., 2011; DeGue & DiLillo, 2004; Zawacki et al., 2003).
- Risk factors for perpetrating sexual assault include childhood victimization, exposure to domestic violence, delinquency in adolescence, heavy drinking, hostile attitudes towards women, questionable motives for sex (such as just wanting to “score” or vent anger and hostility) and peer group values supportive of violence against women (Knight & Sims-Knight, 2011).
- In spite of common risk factors, it is impossible to predict which particular man may become sexually aggressive, when, or how often (Swartout, et al., 2015b; Thompson, et al., 2013).

### What roles do alcohol use, peer norms, and membership on athletic teams or in fraternities play?

- Current alcohol use, expectations about how alcohol affects behavior, associating with peers who reinforce viewing women mainly as sex objects and encourage casual sex, and anger at women predict sexual offending by male college students, whereas early childhood experiences may be less important (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Swartout, et al., 2015b; Thompson, et al., 2013).
- Alcohol use in isolation does not cause sexual assault. Intoxication can increase the likelihood that someone already predisposed to sexual aggression acts on this proclivity; however, intoxication does not mitigate perpetrators’ responsibility for their actions. Alcohol should not be used to blame the victim or excuse the perpetrator (Abbey, 2011; Abbey et al., 2014).
- Teten Tharp, et al.’s (2012) review found that eight of 11 studies documented a relation between fraternity membership and increased risk of sexual violence perpetration. Additionally, a relation between sports participation and increased risk of sexual violence was found in eight of 12 studies. However, this association is due to peer culture, not membership per se (Kingree & Thompson, 2013; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000).

### Approaches to Prevention

- Prevention efforts must begin early (i.e., primary prevention). Approaches should focus on changing behaviors of potential perpetrators (Paul & Gray, 2011). But given sexual assault patterns and motivations vary, different prevention approaches may be more or less effective across subgroups of men.

- Men who do not see themselves as rapists, but who might be tempted to use manipulation or force to have sex with women, *may* benefit from such an approach.
- Men motivated by negative, hostile affect toward women *may not* (Edwards, et al, 2014). However, this possibility has not been tested.
- Many higher education institutions have implemented promising, but not empirically well supported, large-group, norm-based prevention efforts based on principles of bystander intervention (Cares, et al., 2015).
- Bystander intervention programs focus on training individuals to interrupt situations that have a risk of sexual violence and to support victims after an assault.
- Another emerging approach calls for redirecting focus from preventing negative behaviors to environmental and policy approaches that support curricula that promote health, particularly when they reduce alcohol use, negative peer attitudes and norms, harassment, assault, and physical aggression (DeGue et al., 2012; Lippy & DeGue, 2014).
- Empirical research and theory should guide innovative and effective prevention strategies.

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