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The Prevalence of Sexual Assault on College Campuses

BRENNA HILL

Abstract

Sexual assault is a social problem that disproportionately affects college students. Sexual assault perpetrated by men against women is a common occurrence on college campuses. Although situations involving alcohol and drug use often play a role in sexual assault cases, the root cause of the problem is the general perception of violence against women that is perpetuated in society and is implicitly tolerated as an aspect of the status quo. The impact of sexual assault on the survivor is far-reaching. Not only does the survivor experience physical and mental suffering from the assault, the experience jeopardizes the survivor's college education. It contributes to students' decisions about whether to stay in school, where to live, and what classes to take, as well as their sense of safety and security. The experience often makes it difficult for survivors to focus on their academic studies and to perform effectively. Although many institutions are responding to the problem of sexual assault, more improvements are necessary. Student prevention programs and education regarding sexual violence, improved protocol and campus responses to assault, and additional legislation at the federal and state level are all measures that should be implemented.

Sexual assault perpetuated by men against women is a major social problem, particularly on college campuses. The World Health Organization defines sexual assault as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (2002). College women experience three times the risk of experiencing sexual assault as other women, and the United States Department of Justice reports that one in four women attending college experiences sexual violence during her four years of study (Luke 2009 and Christensen 2013). Sexual assault, particularly the victimization of college-age women, is a significant social problem that is reluctantly accepted by many as inevitable or as an unfortunate but unavoidable part of the existing social structure.

Effects on Survivors

Not only is the prevalence of sexual assault against college women high, but the negative impact on victims is extensive. In addition to the immediate physical injury of the assault, long-term effects on the victim can include sleep difficulties, depression, unwanted pregnancy, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013). In addition to health concerns, sexual assault influences the survivor’s ability to complete her education, her future career choices, and her sense of security and well-being (Russo 2001). Survivors often disengage from their course work or school activities due to fear of seeing their perpetrator on campus or in class (Christensen 2013). Many sexual assault survivors already experience self-blame, and when family members or friends also blame or do not believe the victim, the victim’s emotional suffering increases; she experiences an increased likelihood of negative outcomes such as shame, depression, and

post-traumatic stress disorder (Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith 2009; Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013).

Debunking Sexual Assault Myths

Myths concerning sexual assault perpetuate the problem and make it difficult to have a productive discussion to determine solutions. These myths are widely held yet incorrect beliefs about how and why sexual assaults occur. The media frequently depicts sexual assault as being committed by violent strangers when the reality is that most victims are assaulted by people they know. For this reason, many sexual assaults go unreported because victims do not necessarily define the act as rape or sexual assault (Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith 2009). According to system justification theory, disadvantaged individuals accept and often defend unjust circumstances because rationalizing existing social conditions tends to increase their sense of control and overall satisfaction (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013). System justification perpetuates the status quo and makes change less likely. Under system justification theory, victims of an acquaintance-perpetrated assault are less likely to label their experience as “rape” because events do not fit the description of a “stereotypical” sexual assault, such as being assaulted by a stranger (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013).

Many people believe that most rapists are “mentally ill” or “psychologically disturbed” individuals who lack the ability to control their behavior (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013; Scully and Marolla 2005). However, research has failed to discover a particular personality type or character disorder that differentiates rapists from other men (Scully and Marolla 2005). Evidence indicates that rape is not a behavior confined to a few “sick” men; instead, many men hold the attitudes and beliefs necessary to commit sexual violence. Another example of a myth regarding victims of sexual assault is that women who dress provocatively are “asking for it”

(Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013). In addition, many young men have come to believe another common myth that perpetuates date rape: that women want sex just as much as men do, but are socialized to say no, even if they mean yes (Kimmel 2008). These myths, and many others, trivialize sexual assaults, preventing society from acknowledging the severity of the problem. These myths are reinforced and violence against women is normalized through television, movies, advertising, music, and pornography (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013).

Party Culture on College Campuses

Alcohol plays a large role in the pervasiveness of sexual assault on college campuses and is a factor in approximately half of all sexual assaults (Luke 2009). Among all the categories of acquaintance rape, the most common is “party rape,” which is defined by the United States Department of Justice as a rape that “occurs at an off-campus house or campus fraternity and involves... plying a woman with alcohol or targeting an intoxicated woman” (2002). Alcohol is often used as a strategy to avoid responsibility. Alcohol may “release pent-up aggression, dull one’s perceptions, and make one more vulnerable to peer pressure” (Kimmel 2008). Many college students consider partying to be a central part of the college experience. It serves as a means to exercise independence from parents as well as a form of entertainment (Luke 2009). Especially among freshmen, college students experience a new sense of freedom being away from their parents and are eager to prove themselves to their new peers, often by experimenting with alcohol for the first time (Kimmel 2014). At universities with a large Greek culture, fraternities typically host all the parties, partly due to the fact that national sororities are not permitted to serve alcohol at their parties. In addition to party culture and binge drinking habits among college students, campus

all-male organizations also contribute to the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses (Martin and Hummer 1999).

Fraternities and Male Athletes

Many scholars have studied all-male organizations such as fraternities and athletic teams and have determined that masculinity within these groups can cause women to be viewed as passive and over-sexualized (Luke 2009). Fraternity houses often offer a place free from the scrutiny of campus administration and police officers where it is easier for members to use alcohol or to engage in other risky behaviors. "Hooking up" defines a common form of social and sexual relationship among college students, and a common way for a member of an all-male organization to prove his masculinity and feel accepted within the group is to "hook up" with as many women as possible (Kimmel 2008). Women are treated as commodities and as the spoils of competition among some fraternity members striving to appear masculine and popular. All-male organizations often provide "male peer support" by normalizing sexual aggression toward women and portraying it as a form of masculinity (Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997).

Not all all-male organizations display these patterns of behavior, and research has shown that higher-prestige fraternities and athletic programs promote a higher level of sexual entitlement (Kimmel 2008). Many college athletic programs have promoted "female hostess programs" to entice recruits to come to their institutions. In 1987, it was revealed that Southern Methodist University football boosters had paid sorority women up to \$400 a weekend to have sex with high-school football recruits (Kimmel 2008). Fraternity members and student athletes are more prone to sexual violence, not because they are fraternity members or athletes, but because participation in these groups can confer on them an elite status that is easily translated into a sense of

entitlement and because the bonds of these groups are so intense (Kimmel 2008).

Popular Culture and Pornography

Young men and women grow up looking at sexualized images of women in the mainstream media and this can lead men to feel entitled to women's bodies (Kimmel 2008). In addition to the influences of popular culture, pornography also affects gender stereotypes and expectations of sexual activity. Pornography is an expression of rape culture where women are seen as objects available for use by men (Scully and Marolla 2005). Even though pornography may not directly cause rape or violence, it does sexualize violence against women and makes it look acceptable (Kimmel 2008). In addition, self-control plays a factor in pornography consumption and other behaviors. Those with less self-control are more likely to participate in risky behaviors such as pornography consumption and alcohol and drug use, behaviors that in turn, can affect sexual assault (Franklin, Bouffard, and Pratt 2012).

Interactions Among Women

Although interactions between men and women have been viewed as the primary factor in sexual violence, few studies have focused on interactions among women. Women participate in "othering" when they judge other women or view survivors of sexual assault as being promiscuous or "asking for it" by their behavior, appearance, or past sexual experiences (Luke 2009). Women may do this to distance themselves from the dangers of sexual assault. These judgments about other women represent an "internalized technology of gender" and set the precedent for what is and what is not appropriate behavior for women (Luke 2009).

Women rely on individualized strategies in preventing sexual assault, indicating a wide-spread belief that it is the responsibility of the woman to keep herself safe. Women mostly rely on defensive strategies such as carrying pepper spray, wearing less-revealing clothing, and monitoring where they set down their drinks rather than holding men accountable for their actions or questioning the larger social culture and structure that encourages sexual assault (Luke 2009). Another common strategy among women is the “buddy system.” Women look out for each other by agreeing to leave a party or bar at the same time and helping friends who have had too much to drink. This demonstrates that women recognize that sexual assault is a shared problem, not an individual one; however, this strategy is unlikely to be successful in all instances of heavy drinking or circumstances where a woman is pursuing a particular social or sexual agenda (Luke 2009).

Existing Legislation

Specific legislation, such as Title IX, has required universities to provide women with resources to cope with sexual assault and recognize gender inequalities by adhering to certain standards of equality (Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith 2009). Title IX holds colleges accountable for responding to sexual violence that occurs on their campuses. The current policy guidelines do not, however, require universities to report sexual assaults to local police or to investigate sexual assaults in coordination with local law enforcement. Instead, the current policies allow universities to deal with sexual assaults internally and to establish their own investigations and procedures without the oversight, assistance, or involvement of law enforcement agencies (DeBold 2014). In addition, the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act requires institutions that receive public funding to publicly release crime statistics as well as campus crime procedures.

The Dear Colleague Letter (DCL), issued by the Department of Education (DOE), was released to provide more concrete guidelines on how universities are to comply with Title IX (2011). The DCL stipulates that colleges are required to adopt a notice of nondiscrimination that prohibits sexual violence, appoint a Title IX coordinator to oversee sexual assault investigations, and provide a prompt grievance procedure when a complaint is filed. Absent from the DCL's policy guidelines are established procedures for how university officials and outside law enforcement agencies should coordinate to exercise jurisdiction over sexual assault cases. Although the DOE has specifically stated that it is not the job of university personnel to take on the role of law enforcement, the DOE has not required universities to contact law enforcement when a sexual assault is reported (DeBold 2014). Because there is no federal reporting requirement, the criminal justice system will only become involved in a campus sexual assault if: the university has entered into a voluntary memorandum of understanding with a local law enforcement agency, state law mandates joint investigations, or a victim chooses to contact law enforcement at his or her own discretion (DeBold 2014). While it is true that universities may be better able to provide certain services such as counseling and educational programs, this does not mean that universities have the capability or resources to take on the role of the criminal justice system in investigating instances of sexual violence (DeBold 2014).

In addition to campus protocol for dealing with sexual assault cases, state and federal legislation is also inconsistent between states and leaves much room for improvement. Eight states still have legislation requiring victim resistance to rape and an additional sixteen states define the elements of force, consent, or specific sex offenses in terms of a victim's resistance. Most sex offense laws require the victim to vigorously assert non-consent or resist, rather than require the defendant to obtain consent before

committing a sexual act (Decker & Baroni 2011). A victim, frozen with fear, who fails to express approval by words or actions should have that decision protected by the criminal justice system. Sexual activity should be based on a freely given agreement between adults and sex should not rightly occur unless each party consents before the act takes place (Decker & Baroni 2011). Even with the implementation of several pieces of legislation and many other state mandates, sexual assault continues to remain a major problem on college campuses.

Additional Measures to be Taken

Although legislation has improved the way college campuses handle sexual assault, more measures need to be taken to minimize the number of sexual assaults, ensure a legitimate means for justice, and provide a support system for victims. Colleges need to clearly define all forms of sexual assault and specify what acts constitute assault; describe circumstances in which sexual assault most commonly occurs; discuss the prevalence of acquaintance or non-stranger sexual assault; and provide information about community and university resources for victims of sexual assault (Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith 2009). Students should also be warned of the strong connection between drugs and alcohol and sexual assault. Sexual assault myths must be exposed as non-factual so that potential perpetrators will not continue to assume that assault is acceptable at any level and potential victims will not risk being unfairly blamed for their suffering. It is also important to inform family and friends of victims, ensure that victims have a secure support system, and develop advocacy programs to assist survivors throughout the healing process.

Because a lack of clear communication and involvement of alcohol often contribute to instances of sexual assault, colleges

should maintain specific guidelines of the definition of consent and should educate students on the importance of receiving clear consent before engaging in any sexual activity. At Antioch College in Ohio, the Code of Conduct dictates that verbal consent is required for any sexual contact and states: “do not take silence as consent, it isn’t” (Kimmel 2008). Consent to sexual activity requires more than not saying no, and colleges should emphasize this to their students and clearly state this in their campus policies. The conversation about consent is an important one that needs to be considered in the discussion of sexual assault.

Prevention and education programs on college campuses need to be improved. The majority of sexual assault prevention programs currently offered to college students tend to focus on addressing relationship skill deficits and countering myths about assault with facts. In regard to skill deficits, training students on specific tasks such as clearly communicating wants and needs and drinking alcohol in moderation can be a valuable learning experience. Engaging men in a group discussion of self-identified values consistent with masculinity but inconsistent with assault behaviors can help to redefine masculinity and move away from the violent behaviors that are often associated with it (Joseph, Gray, Mayer 2013). Programs also need to encourage participants to examine the positive and negative aspects of gender stereotypes. An example would be for participants to identify moments in their own lives when adhering to gender stereotypes led to positive or negative outcomes, followed by a nonjudgmental discussion of these experiences. (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013).

Bystander intervention programs can be a positive step toward engaging students on a college campus to intervene in situations in which there is potential for sexual violence to occur (Christensen 2013). These programs teach students to be proactive and help transform the social norms that perpetuate the acceptance of sexual violence. In addition, programs incorporating the arts and

other forms of creative expression can be a valuable outlet to promote social change. For example, theatre of the oppressed uses theatre to draw attention to a particular social problem. Theatre troupe members act out a scene in which the social problem occurs, in this case sexual assault, and other community members are invited to freeze the action and propose alternative outcomes to the scene (Christensen 2013). Engaging community members in acting out possible solutions to a social problem provides the community an opportunity to visualize and discuss solutions that can be practiced in real life rather than have outside experts define issues and provide solutions (Christensen 2013).

In addition to campus programs and protocol, the federal government should seek to ensure more accountability and transparency from universities by requiring them to work with local law enforcement agencies to investigate sexual assaults on their campuses. Failing to carve out a meaningful role for the criminal justice system to be involved in investigating campus sexual assaults downplays the serious nature of sexual violence. When a college student is sexually assaulted, the assault should not be treated as an institutional matter of gender discrimination, but should be handled by the justice system.

Conclusion

Sexual assault perpetrated by males against females continues to be a problematic, yet unfortunately tolerated element of the status quo. The observed spike in sexual assault prevalence during women's late teens and early twenties places college students at the greatest risk. This phenomenon could be the result of college students living on their own for the first time, learning to make decisions without the guidance of parents, seeking social bonding, having increased access to alcohol, and enjoying longer stretches of unstructured free time (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013).

Sexual assault is a problem that cannot be resolved unless potential perpetrators are also included in prevention efforts. Programs originally designed for female-only audiences should be adapted to include male-only or mixed-gender programs (Joseph, Gray, and Mayer 2013). Only when men can confront each other, and support each other in standing up for what is right, can we develop a new model of masculinity. Being a man should mean doing the right thing, standing up to immorality, and expressing compassion. Addressing the problem of sexual assault on college campuses must be integral to the agenda of educators, administrators, activists, students, and legislators. Efforts to address sexual assault should aim to create a community of respect in which students feel safe and secure and are able to learn and grow in an environment that values each individual.

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