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College men nearly as likely as women to report they are victims of unwanted sexual coercion

The stereotypical picture of men as the perpetrators and women as the victims of acquaintance rape and other forms of unwanted sexual contact appears to be slightly out of focus.

Men are almost as likely as women to report unwanted sexual contact and coercion, according to a new study of college students conducted by researchers from the University of Washington's Addictive Behaviors Research Center. The study, involving nearly 300 students, appears in the current issue of the journal *Sex Roles*.

Overall, 34 men (21 percent of the male participants) and 36 women (28 percent) reported being recipients of one or more of five types of unwanted sexual contact listed on a gender-neutral questionnaire used by the researchers. The study also showed that men who experienced unwanted sexual contact reported more symptoms of depression than the other males in the study, although none met the criteria for clinical depression. There was no difference in the level of depression symptoms for women who said they were sexually coerced and those who weren't. Women, however, were more likely to be the victims of having physical force used against them.

The research, funded by the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, grew out of a larger study looking at alcohol abuse prevention among fraternity and sorority members. One of the surveys used in the larger study by the UW researchers was a standardized sexual experiences questionnaire that solely pictured women as the recipients of coercion and men as the perpetrators.

"Our participants told us we were missing the boat when it came to sexual coercion," said Mary Larimer, research assistant professor of psychology and principal investigator on the new study, "so we revised the questionnaire to make it gender neutral."

The revised survey asked the students - 165 men and 131 women - about their sexual experiences over the previous year. The students were primarily freshmen and sophomores and were largely white (82 percent) or Asian (13 percent).

Men were more likely than women to report that they had unwanted sex or were pressured into having sex. The survey defined unwanted sex as a situation in which an individual's partner became so sexually aroused that the individual felt it was useless to stop even though he or she did not want to have intercourse. Fourteen percent of the men and 8 percent of the women said they had unwanted sex. Being pressured into having sex was described as having intercourse with someone even though you really

didn't want to because the other person pressured you with continual arguments. Eight percent of the men and 6 percent of the women said they had been pressured into having sex.

Physical force was used infrequently. Just 5 percent of the women and less than 1 percent of the men said some sort of physical force, such as having an arm twisted or being held down, was used on them when they didn't want to have sex, whether or not intercourse actually occurred.

Alcohol and drugs played a significant role in sexual victimization. Seventeen percent of the women and 9 percent of the men said someone had attempted to have intercourse with them when they didn't want to after giving them alcohol or drugs. And 6 percent of the women and 4 percent of the men said they had sex when they didn't want to after being given alcohol and drugs.

Overall, nearly half of the students - 48 percent of the women and 47 percent of the men - reported that drinking had gotten them into sexual situations that they later regretted. In addition, both men and women who reported being sexually coerced in some way listed higher alcohol use and more alcohol related problems than did students who were not coerced.

"Alcohol is clearly a major factor, but not the only one," said Larimer. "Alcohol not only impairs the awareness of warning signals about a sexual situation but it also impairs a person's ability to resist an unwanted sexual advance. Both men and women reported intentionally using alcohol and drugs to obtain sex."

She added that the male participants (and observing researchers) described attending parties and seeing women waiting around until "guys became drunk and then hitting on them when they were unable to make rational decisions about having sex.

"All of this activity is unacceptable behavior and it is clearly not consensual sex," Larimer said. "Both men and women are experiencing unwanted sexual advances and our preliminary indications are that men are suffering from those experiences just as women are. I was surprised at how guilty and ashamed some of the men were and that we, as researchers, were buying into a cultural myth and didn't think such experiences were the same for men as for women."

Co-authors of the study are Britt Anderson and Aaron Turner, UW psychology doctoral students, and Amy Lydum, research coordinator.

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