

Campus Sexual Assault Series

Series Editor: Cortney A. Franklin, Ph.D.

Crime Victims' Institute

College of Criminal Justice | Sam Houston State University



Athletics and Violence Against Women

Amanda Goodson, M.A.
Cortney A. Franklin, Ph.D.

College women are disproportionately affected by sexual victimization (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). As many as 20 to 25% will experience sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact, sexual assault, attempted, or completed rape while in higher education (Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2016). Scholars have identified the important role of athletic team membership on sexually aggressive behaviors. The current issue of the Campus Sexual Assault Series focuses on athletics and campus sexual assault. Results from a recent study that examined the effect of athletics on antisocial attitudes and sexual aggression targeting women are discussed. This report concludes with policy implications derived from the findings of the study.

Participation in Athletics

Studies on perpetrators of sexual assault have identified participation in organized athletics as a predictor of sexual aggression (McCray, 2015). Fritner and Rubinson (1993), for example, surveyed 940 college women from a large Midwestern university about victimization experiences and discovered that 27% of participants experienced sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, or sexual abuse. While student athletes only represented 2% of the campus population, they comprised 22.6% of sexual assault perpetrators, 13.7% of attempted sexual assault perpetrators, and 13.6% of sexual abuse perpetrators. Forbes and colleagues (2006) surveyed 147 college men from a small, private, Midwestern university about dating aggression. Findings suggested that men who participated in aggressive high school sports (i.e., football, basketball, wrestling, and soccer) engaged in higher levels of psychological and physical aggression and sexual coercion compared to counterparts. Finally, McCray's (2015) review concluded that student athletes disproportionately represented perpetrators of sexual assault. Given the relation between athletics and sexual assault, scholars have examined the contribution that male peers may have on sexually predatory behavior.

Male Peer Support

Male peer support has played a critical role in understanding the sexual victimization of women. Multiple iterations of a theoretical model that identified the contributions of all male peer groups on woman abuse culminated with Schwartz and DeKeseredy's (1997) Male Peer Support Model. They argued that all-male groups have provided an environment conducive to the sexual objectification and exploitation of women through

behavioral reinforcement and encouragement from similarly-minded peers who harbor adverse attitudes toward women. On college campuses, these all-male groups have included fraternities, athletic teams, male dormitory groups, or other informal social networks made up of like-minded men who seek advice and assurances from one another, manifested as hostility toward women (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Male peer support has argued that society is patriarchal and this has influenced gendered expectations of how men and women interact within relationships (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). When men encounter difficulty in heterosexual relationships, they may seek guidance, support, and advice from fellow group members. This encouragement may foster sexually aggressive behavior due to the dynamics and culture inherent within the group that has emphasized hypermasculinity, group secrecy, conformity to group norms, excessive alcohol consumption, and the sexual objectification and degradation of women (Franklin, Bouffard, & Pratt, 2012).

Athletes and Violence Against Women

Similar to other all-male groups, athletes are exposed to messages about how masculinity is defined (Franklin, 2001). For example, members may reiterate stringent gender roles about what defines a "real man" by suggesting men cannot be controlled by women; masculinity is defined as sexual conquest; and emotional connection during intimacy represents weakness (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). Is it not uncommon for members to have an increased number of sexual partners and engage in high levels of sexual activity as a result of the hypersexualized dynamic of male peer groups (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). Heavy alcohol consumption has also been used to decrease sexual inhibitions both among perpetrators and the women they target as victims (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). Members may be encouraged to use alcohol as a sexual access strategy targeting women who may otherwise say no, interrupting their ability to confidently assert themselves, enhancing sexual miscommunication, and muddying details that might make it difficult for them to report victimization to authorities (Franklin, 2013; Lisak & Miller, 2002).

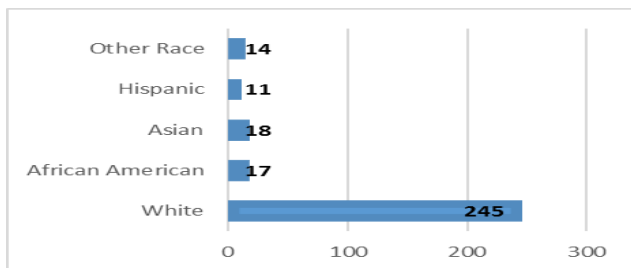
DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013) also suggested that all-male groups have not been deterred by authorities in perpetrating violence against women.

Athletes may experience leniency from school administrators to protect the elite status that athletics hold or the resources that sports teams bring to a university. Collectively, these dynamics have fostered attitudes supportive of sexual assault predation (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). Empirical studies have demonstrated that student athletes were more accepting of violence (Forbes et al., 2006), held more sexist and hostile attitudes toward women (Forbes et al., 2006), and reported increased rape myth adherence (McMahon, 2015; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007) compared to independents. This cluster of attitudes has produced a culture of male power and exacerbated the sexual objectification of women (Murnen, 2000). In turn, men have viewed women as objects, which has had negative implications such as the legitimization violence against women (Murnen, 2000).

Methods

A sample of 305 men enrolled at a large, public Northwestern university were surveyed during the 2007 academic year. Figure 1 presents the racial breakdown of participants.

Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Demographics

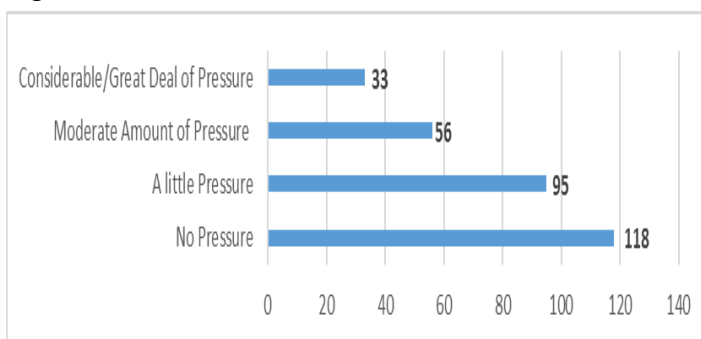


On average, participants were 21 years of age. Less than half were in an exclusive dating relationship. Participants reported an average of four sexual partners, and the majority experienced at least “a little pressure” from friends to have sex (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Age and Number of Sexual Partners

Variables	Mean	SD	Range
Age of Participants	21.02	2.02	18-41
Number of Sexual Partners	4.97	5.82	0-36

Figure 2. Pressure from Friends to have Sex



Variables

Self-Reported Perpetration of Sexual Assault. Seven items from the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) captured behavioral descriptions of sexual assault and included intoxicated sexual assault and threats or force that resulted in attempted or

completed rape (Koss & Oros, 1982). Eleven percent of the sample reported perpetrating sexual assault.

Rape Myth Adherence. Nineteen items captured stereotypical beliefs about sexual assault that deny the seriousness, blame the victim, and excuse the perpetrator (Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale-Short Form; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

Hostility Toward Women. Ten items measured hostility toward women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) and included statements that portrayed women as sexually deceptive, manipulative, or bothersome.

Sexual Entitlement. Five items captured expectations regarding sex in a relationship (Hurlbert et al., 1994) and included statements such as, “in a close relationship, you should expect to get sex,” and “in a relationship where I commit myself, sex is a right.”

Table 2. Adverse Attitudes

Variables	Mean	SD	Range
Rape Myth Adherence	2.11	0.52	1.05-3.95
Hostility Toward Women	2.63	0.54	1.20-4.40
Sexual Entitlement	2.74	0.70	1.40-4.80

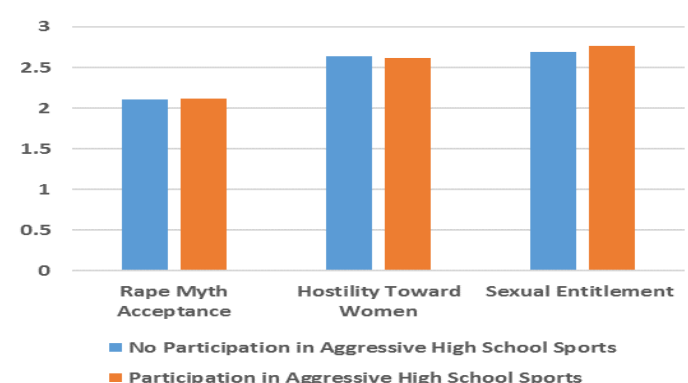
Participation in High School Athletics. Developmental research has suggested that attitudes associated with violence against women have been solidified before early adulthood, and participation in athletics during college may reinforce these attitudes (Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003). High school aggressive sports participation was captured through one binary measure [aggressive high school sports participation (defined as football, basketball, and baseball) = 1 (64%; Non-members = 0 (36%)].

Dating and Sexual Experiences. Two items captured experiences in intimate relationships. Number of sexual partners was measured as a continuous variable. One item captured the amount of pressure participants experienced from male friends to have sex.

Results

Independent samples *t*-tests were estimated to identify significant differences in mean scores on rape myth adherence, hostility toward women, and sexual entitlement between participants involved in aggressive high school sports and counterparts. Bivariate results revealed no significant differences between the two groups of men.

Figure 6. Differences in Attitudes Toward Women



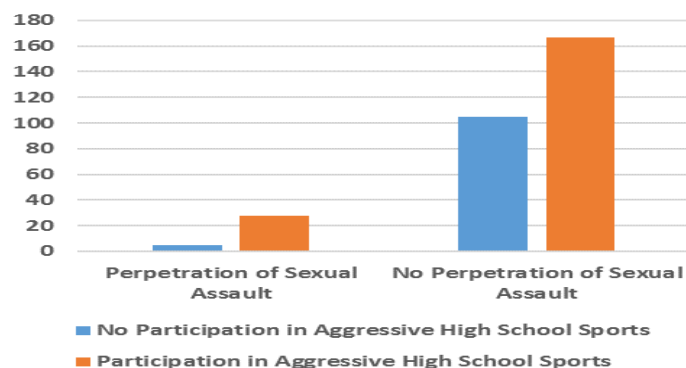
Predictors of Rape Perpetration

A multivariate binary logistic regression model was estimated. Three variables were significant predictors of sexual assault: number of sexual partners, aggressive high school sports participation, and peer pressure from friends to have sex. Increased sexual partners significantly increased the likelihood of sexual assault perpetration. Additionally, men who participated in aggressive high school sports were about three times more likely to perpetrate sexual assault compared to counterparts (See Figure 7). Finally, peer pressure to have sex was the strongest predictor of sexual assault perpetration. Respondents who reported experiencing “moderate levels” of pressure were almost eight times more likely to report perpetrating sexual assault than those who reported “no pressure,” and respondents who reported a “considerable/great amount” of pressure were over six times more likely to report perpetrating sexual assault compared to those who reported “no pressure” to have sex.

Table 3. Predictors of Rape Perpetration

Variables	B	OR
Number of Sexual Partners	0.11	1.12**
Pressure by Male Friends to Have Sex		
A Little	0.90	2.45
Moderate Amount	2.07	7.90**
Considerable/Great Amount	1.87	6.51**
Aggressive High School Sports	1.11	3.04*

Figure 7. The Role of Athletics in Sexual Assault



Discussion

Most men do not perpetrate sexual assault. Findings presented here demonstrate a significant relation between aggressive high school sports and predatory sexual behavior; conclusions that reiterate existing research (Forbes et al., 2006; McMahan, 2015; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). These results cannot disentangle the role of aggressive sports and whether individual men were independently drawn to a highly masculinized group that would encourage sexually aggressive behavior or if they were socialized upon membership to this group (e.g., Franklin et al., 2012). Understanding the relations between athletics, attitudes towards women, and sexual assault is vital for increasing awareness among athletes and reducing violence against women. Additionally, the number of sexual partners and the level of peer pressure encountered by men also predicted sexual assault perpetration.

These results underscore early findings that sexually aggressive men reported an increased number of sexual partners (Kanin, 1967, 1985). Perhaps frequently engaging in impersonal sex reflects differences in motivation and increases opportunities for sexual assault (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss & Tanaka, 1991).

Men may have also engaged in sex with multiple partners to achieve expectations by peer groups (Kanin, 1985). Perpetrators have reported encountering group dynamics that encouraged, pressured, or offered status to men who engaged in sexual conquest—labeling them a “success” (Kanin, 1967; Malamuth et al., 1991). Other research suggested sexually aggressive males were more comfortable in committing sexual assault with peer encouragement (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Malamuth et al., 1991). Further, men who did not meet group norms for sexual activity may have become frustrated (Kanin, 1985)—feelings that have been identified as justification by perpetrators to force sex (see Franklin, 2013 for a review).

Implications and Recommendations

Recent focus has identified the importance of engaging campus community members in the prevention, interruption, and response to sexual assault (Banyard, 2014), with specific attention to fraternity members (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013) and other high-risk groups. Campus communities would benefit from a systematic expansion of programs to university athletic teams to enhance empathy, increase awareness, encourage bystander intervention, and teach healthy/acceptable intimacy (see Foubert & Newberry, 2006). Examples of effective programs that have targeted athletes include, “Coaching Men into Boys,” “Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP),” and “SCREAM Athletes.” These programs focus on the leadership role of athletes (McMahon, 2015) in influencing and changing a climate that does not tolerate violence. Program evaluations have yielded positive results, including 1) reduced sexist attitudes, 2) increased recognition of abusive behaviors and identifying violence as wrong, 3) increased bystander intervention, and 4) improved self-efficacy in violence prevention (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011; Miller et al., 2012). Indeed, proactive investment in prevention for athletes has the potential to benefit the sexual safety of college students and the campus communities in which they work, study, and recreate.

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