

# Campus Sexual Assault Series

Series Editor: Cortney Franklin, Ph.D.

Crime Victims' Institute

College of Criminal Justice | Sam Houston State University



## Sexual Assault: An Overview

Cortney A. Franklin, Ph.D.

Alondra Garza, B.S.

Sexual assault happens with frequency both among the general public and on college campuses. Official data and self-report surveys have demonstrated that, among the general population, 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men will experience an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). On college campuses, women face increased odds of victimization, where between 20 to 25% of women will experience unwanted sexual contact or attempted/completed rape during their time in college (Koss et al., 1987; Fisher, Turner, & Cullen, 2000; Franklin, 2010). This vulnerability to victimization has prompted widespread efforts toward prevention and response to sexual assault. The current issue of the Sexual Assault series provides an overview of sexual assault, prevalence data, perpetrator characteristics, risk factors and consequences of victimization for survivors.

### What is Sexual Assault?

Sexual assault is a broad term used to describe a wide range of sexually violating experiences, including coerced or unwanted sexual contact, attempted and completed intoxicated or drug-induced rape, attempted or completed incapacitated rape, and force or threats of force that produce attempted or completed rape. Legal definitions have evolved over time to be more inclusive in the experiences that qualify as sexual assault, though statutes vary by jurisdiction. Currently, the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) definition, updated in 2012, states that *rape* is “penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person without the consent of the victim” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). Texas state statute defines *sexual assault* as “the penetration of the anus or sexual organ of another person by any means, without that person's consent; the penetration of

the mouth of another person by the sexual organ of the actor, without that person's consent; or causing the sexual organ of another person, without that person's consent, to contact or penetrate the mouth, anus, or sexual organ of another person” (Texas Sexual Assault, Sec. 22.011). Scholars and academics have captured sexually assaultive experiences through the use of descriptions that detail behaviors that meet legal definitions, rather than using the triggering terms “rape” or “sexual assault” to limit the bias associated with these terms that could inhibit reporting (Koss et al., 2007).

### Sexual Assault Prevalence and Reporting

The prevalence of sexual assault has been of interest to scholars, academics, policy makers, and state coalitions for decades, though widespread analysis has historically depended upon the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and more recently, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). In 2015, the UCR recorded 90,185 incidents of rape reported to law enforcement nationally. It is important to note that this figure does not include unreported rapes. Even so, 2015 official data has demonstrated a 6.3% increase from the 2014 UCR report of 84,864 rape incidents. Additional analyses have focused on college campus environments due to the high risk, hypersexualized, and insular nature of these institutional spaces (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997; Franklin, 2016). Indeed, the pervasiveness of sexual assault on college campuses is substantial. Estimates have suggested that 20 to 25% of college women will experience attempted or completed rape during their tenure in college (Koss et al., 1987; Franklin, 2010; Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000), and 1 in 17 men will experience a form of sexual violence as university students (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007).

In spite of the frequency with which these crimes occur, rape continues to be the most underreported crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015; Fisher et al., 2000). According to the NCVS (2015), less than 32% of rapes and sexual assaults were reported to police agencies. Many factors inhibit a sexual assault disclosure. These include the type of assailant, the presence of weapons or demonstrable harm, whether victims label the assault as a “real rape,” and the supportive response (or lack thereof) afforded to a victim following her/his disclosure. Stranger rapes, incidents involving weapons, and those characterized by visible injury are misconstrued as “real rape” and are more likely to be reported to authorities as compared to sexual assault perpetrated by an acquaintance, without a weapon, and involving alcohol.

### Who Are the Perpetrators?

Contrary to commonly held misperceptions surrounding sexual assault, more than 60% of sexual assaults are perpetrated by an acquaintance, friend, or partner (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported, for example, that among college-aged women from 1995 to 2013, 80% of perpetrators had a previous relationship with the victim. Additionally, 2012 data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted that approximately 86% of sexual assault perpetrators targeted women with whom they were acquainted. The Department of Justice (2013) has also identified that more than 90% of sexual assaults did not involve the use of a deadly weapon, such as a gun or knife. Data from self-report surveys administered to college students has consistently demonstrated that from 75 to 90% of victims are assaulted by someone with whom they are acquainted (Fisher et al., 2000; Matlin, 1993) and approximately 50% have involved alcohol use by the perpetrator, the victim, or both (Abbey, 2002). These characteristics have biased general views of “date” or “acquaintance” rape, particularly on college campuses, as poor decision-making, regretful behavior, or “bad sex” rather than as serious victimization experiences worthy of criminal justice intervention.

Lisak and Miller (2002) have noted the degree to which sexual assault on college campuses goes unreported so that rapists remain “undetected.” They have described how college men who sexually assault women strategically plan their predatory behavior by selecting female acquaintances, using alcohol, and refraining from gratuitous violence—thus eliminating the types of physical evidence that would corroborate the survivor’s story and uphold the prosecution of such cases in formal court proceedings (Lisak and Miller, 2002). Their analysis of 1,882 college men identified 120 men, or 6.4% of their sample, who had engaged in behavior that met the legal definition of rape. Among this subsample of rapists, 76 men (63.3% of the rapists) were repeat offenders, who reported an average of 6 rapes each. Additionally, Lisak and Miller (2002) highlighted the many ways in which these undetected college campus perpetrators are similar to incarcerated sex offenders

in that they are repeat offenders who engage in a wide range of interpersonal violence, including battery, physical abuse, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, and rape. Lisak and Miller (2002) concluded that undetected rapists on college campuses are to be taken seriously, despite prevailing stereotypes that suggest otherwise.

### Risk Factors for Victimization

In assessing sexual assault vulnerability, research has focused on official and self-report data to identify important developmental and situational risk factors that may increase an individual’s likelihood for victimization. Sex has been the most robust predictor as women make up 94% percent of rape and sexual assault victims (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). Age has also been consistently correlated with sexual assault victimization. Specifically, women between the ages of 18-to-24 years old have faced the highest risk for sexual assault (Sinozich & Langton, 2014), in part because this group of women are often involved in social functions that involve mate selection, likely with limited guardianship, and face significant pressure for intimacy among potential partners (Franklin, 2013). Developmental risk factors include early engagement in sexual activity and a childhood history of physical and/or sexual abuse (Centers for Disease and Control, 2016). Indeed, women who have experienced sexual victimization during childhood face increased risk for revictimization due to maladjustment, poor psychological functioning, and limited exposure to healthy intimate relationships that stem from previous abuse (Gidycz, Coble, Latham, & Layman, 1993; Trujillo, 2011). Situational risk factors include drug and alcohol exposure, which decreases inhibitions, increases expectancies, and exacerbates sexual miscommunication (Abbey, 2002). Further, being isolated and alone together (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987) and misconceptions about the way a “typical date” should end (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Franklin, 2013) have also obstructed a would-be victim’s ability to assertively respond and interrupt attempts at sexual coercion or force.

### Consequences of Victimization

Sexual assault, regardless of perpetrator type or tactic, is a life-changing event that produces detrimental and far-reaching consequences for a survivor’s mental and physical health. Survivors of sexual assault may experience both deleterious psychological and physiological health outcomes following the assault. Negative psychological effects can include anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and elevated fear and startle responses. Physical health sequelae range from migraine headaches, sleep interruptions, sexual dysfunction, appetite abnormalities, and gastrointestinal problems (Mason & Lodrick, 2013; Ullman and Brecklin, 2003). In addition, victims of sexual assault may be at risk for unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases or infections.

## Awareness and Education

Communities, advocacy groups, and university campuses have long focused efforts on combatting sexual violence through awareness-raising campaigns. Earliest efforts to educate the public and empower survivors have included Take Back the Night marches that occurred in San Francisco and New York in 1978. These marches protested sexual violence and honored the experiences of survivors. In the late 1980s, activists from the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) dedicated a week in April to combatting and raising awareness for sexual assault. In 2001, efforts from NCASA, in collaboration with state coalitions across the country, culminated in the national recognition of April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) (NSVRC, n.d.). While efforts for increasing awareness are ongoing, SAAM draws attention to sexual violence occurring in communities and highlights evidence-based prevention strategies.

Currently, the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) is endorsing “Break the Box,” a media-based awareness campaign with the goal of ending sexual violence and gender inequality throughout the state by targeting youth and encouraging positive bystander intervention. Programming consists of a short video, discussion, activity guide and posters to convey messages intolerant to violence. For more information on TAASA’s “Break the Box” campaign, please see [www.taasa.org/about/primary-prevention](http://www.taasa.org/about/primary-prevention).

## REFERENCES

- Abbey, A. (2002). Alcohol-related sexual assault: A common problem among college students. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, Supplement, 14*, 118-128.
- Abbey, A., McAuslan, P., & Ross, L. T. (1998). Sexual assault perpetration by college men: The role of alcohol, misperception of sexual intent, and sexual beliefs and experiences. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 17*, 167-195.
- Ahrens, C. E., Cabral, G., & Abeling, S. (2009). Healing or hurtful: Sexual assault survivors' interpretations of social reactions from support providers. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 33*, 81-94.
- Campbell, R., Wasco, S.M., Ahrens, C.E., Sefl, T., & Barnes, H.E. (2001). Preventing the “second rape:” Rape survivors' experiences with community service providers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 16*, 1239-1259.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). Sexual Violence: Facts at a Glance. Washington, DC: Injury Prevention & Control, Division of Violence Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.
- Gidycz, C. A., Coble, C. N., Latham, L., & Layman, M. J. (1993). Sexual assault experience in adulthood and prior victimization experiences. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 17*, 151-168.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2015). *Uniform Crime Report for the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2000). The sexual victimization of college women (NCJ 182369). Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.
- Franklin, C. A. (2010). Physically forced, alcohol-induced, and verbally coerced sexual victimization: Assessing risk factors among university women. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 38*, 149-159.
- Franklin, C.A. (2013). Anticipating intimacy or sexual victimization? Danger cue recognition and delayed behavioral responses to a sexually risky scenario. *Feminist Criminology, 8*, 87-116.

- Franklin, C.A. (2016). Sorority affiliation and sexual assault victimization: Assessing vulnerability using path analysis. *Violence Against Women, 22*, 895-922.
- Koss, M. P. (2000). Blame, shame, and community: Justice responses to violence against women. *American Psychologist, 55*, 1332-1341.
- Krebs, C. P., Lindquist, C. H., Warner, T. D., Fisher, B. S., & Martin, S. L. (2007). The campus sexual assault (CSA) study: Final report. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice.
- Mason, F., & Lodrick, Z. (2013). Psychological consequences of sexual assault. *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology, 27*, 27-37.
- Matlin, M. (1993). *The psychology of women*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Muelenhard, C., & Linton, M. (1987). Date rape and sexual aggression in dating situations: Incidence and risk factors. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 34*, 186-196.
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (n.d.) <http://www.nsvrc.org/saam>.
- Planty, M., Langton, L., Krebs, C., Berzofsky, M., & Smiley-McDonald, H. (2013). *Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010: Special Report* (NCJ 240655). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.
- Rennison, C. A. (2002). Rape and sexual assault: Reporting to police and medical attention, 1992-2000 [NCJ 194530]. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.
- Schwartz, M. D., & DeKeseredy, W. (1997). *Sexual assault on the college campus: The role of male peer support*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sinozich, S., & Langton, L. (2014). Rape and sexual assault victimization among college-age females, 1995–2013 (NCJ248471). Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full report of the prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women series: Research report*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Trujillo, O. (2011). *The sum of my parts: A survivor's story of dissociative identity disorder*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- Truman, J., & Morgan, R. (2015). *National Crime Victimization Survey—Criminal Victimization* (NCJ 250180). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.
- Ullman, S. E. (1996). Social reactions, coping strategies, and self-blame attributions in adjustment to sexual assault. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 20*, 505-526.
- Ullman, S. E., & Brecklin, L. R. (2003). Sexual assault history and health-related outcomes in a national sample of women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 27*, 46-57.

## About the Authors

**Cortney A. Franklin, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology and the Assistant Director of the Crime Victims' Institute at Sam Houston State University. Her research focuses on victimization and specifically sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and perceptions of sex trafficking victims. Her work has appeared in *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Violence Against Women*, and *Victims and Offenders*.

**Alondra D. Garza, B.S.**, is a first year M.A. student in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University. Her research interests include victimology, violence against women, sexual assault, and gender and crime. She is also a member of the Graduate Bridge program.

## Resources

SAAFE House – Huntsville family violence and sexual assault shelter

[www.saafehouse.org](http://www.saafehouse.org) Office 936-291-3529; 24-hour hotline 936-291-3369

Montgomery County Women’s Center

[www.mcwcthewoodlands.org](http://www.mcwcthewoodlands.org) Office 281-292-4155; 24-hour hotline 936-441-7273

Texas Association Against Sexual Assault – Information on ending sexual violence in Texas

[www.taasa.org](http://www.taasa.org)

The National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline

800-656-HOPE (4673)

## Relevant Readings

Fisher, B. S., Daigle, L. E., & Cullen, F. T. (2009). *Unsafe in the ivory tower: The sexual victimization of college women*. Sage Publications.

Krakauer, J. (2016). *Missoula: Rape and the justice system in a college town*. Anchor Books.

## Suggested Documentaries

*The Hunting Ground*

### Crime Victims’ Institute Advisory Board

**Blanca Burciaga, Ft. Worth**  
Director, Victim Assistance Unit

**Victoria Camp, Austin**  
Consultant

**Dottie Carmichael, College Station**  
Texas A&M PPRI

**Stefani Carter, Austin**

**Robert Duncan, Austin**  
TTU System Chancellor

**Ana Elizabeth Estevez, Amarillo**  
District Judge

**Ann Matthews, Jourdanton**  
Domestic Violence

**Rodman Goode, Cedar Hill**  
Law Enforcement Teacher

**Henry Porretto, Galveston**  
Chief, Galveston Police Department

**Geoffrey Puryear, Georgetown**  
District Attorney

**Richard L. Reynolds, Austin**  
Psychotherapist

**Stephanie Anne Schulte, El Paso**  
ICU Nurse

**Jane Shafer, San Antonio**  
San Antonio PD Victim Liaison

**Debbie Unruh, Austin**  
Ombudsman

**Ms. Mary Anne Wiley, Austin**  
Office of the Governor

**Mark Wilson, Hillsboro**  
Hill County Sheriff’s Office

### Texas State University System

**Rossanna Salazar, Chairman**  
Austin

**William F. Scott, Vice Chairman**  
Nederland

**Charlie Amato**  
San Antonio

**Veronica Muzquiz Edwards**  
San Antonio

**Dr. Jaime R. Garza**  
San Antonio

**David Montagne**  
Beaumont

**Vernon Reaser III**  
Bellaire

**Alan L. Tinsley**  
Madisonville

**Donna N. Williams**  
Arlington

**Dylan J. McFarland**  
Student Regent, Huntsville

**Brian McCall**  
Chancellor

We’re on the web

[www.crimevictimsinstitute.org](http://www.crimevictimsinstitute.org)