

Prevalence of Campus Rape: Strategic Leadership Prevention and Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

The fact is, rape is utterly commonplace in all our cultures. It is part of the fabric of everyday life, yet we all act as if it's something shocking and extraordinary whenever it hits the headlines. We remain silent, and so we condone it...Until rape, and the structures – sexism, inequality, tradition – that make it possible, are part of our dinner-table conversation with the next generation, it will continue. Is it polite and comfortable to talk about it? No. Must we anyway? Yes. To protect our children, we must talk to them about rape. – Desmond Tutu

The issue of campus rape has exploded, with dozens of schools, including Harvard Law School, under investigation. A 2009, study by the Center for Public Integrity found that between 1998 and 2008, the Department of Education (DOE), placed disciplinary actions against just five universities out of 24 complaints. Rape on college campuses has created a crisis in higher education of colossal proportions. It has unfortunately become a common occurrence on many college campuses. It not only affects persistence and completion rates for the victims, but damages the self-image and the soul of the affected students. Moreover, it promotes sexism, breeds inequality, and fosters privilege and entitlement gender paradigms.

The issue of “violence against women” also does not wait until male students are college-age. Take, for example, the case of Owen Labrie: Labrie attended the prestigious New Hampshire Episcopal college prep school, St. Paul’s, whose alumni included Secretary of State John Kerry and former FBI director Robert Mueller (Ortiz, 2015). The school has an unofficial, possibly decades-old, tradition referred to as the “Senior Salute” in which male seniors attempt to hook up with as many freshmen girls as they can, which sometimes involves having sex with them (Sutherland, 2015). Ultimately, Labrie was convicted of the felony of using an online service or the Internet to seduce a child under 16 in order to commit a sexual assault, as well as three misdemeanor counts, including a misdemeanor sexual assault and a misdemeanor child endangerment. He was acquitted of the felony of forcible rape and received a sentence of one year in prison followed by probation. He also has to register as a sex offender for life (Ortiz & Johnson, 2015). He has since filed a motion for a new trial (Merlan, 2016).

Rape is the most underreported violent crime in the United States (Gross, Winslett, Roberst & Gohn, 2006; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002). More than a third of college rapes happen on campus (Sampson, 2002), and it is estimated that less than 1 in 20 attempted or completed campus rapes are ever reported (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

There are many reasons why there are low report rates. Most rape victims are too embarrassed to report and choose not to report, due to having to relive the experience by verbally retelling their stories.

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In addition, many victims don't report for fear they will not be believed or will be shamed or blamed for the rape, or fear of retaliation, or fear that the perpetrator will not be prosecuted.

Alcohol is involved in three-fourths of college related rapes, as was revealed in data from one study involving 119 schools participating in three Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study surveys. The sample of randomly selected students included 8,567 women in a 1997 survey, 8,425 in a 1999 survey, and 6,988 in a 2001 survey (Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004). What complicates justice to the victims of campus sexual assaults and rapes is that only 10-25% of the college male perpetrators were ever expelled (Shapiro, 2010; Roark, 1987).

Social Norms Theory

The idea that rape is a normative part of the culture and why rape persists is based in social norms theory. Social norms theory maintains that cultural norms of violence, sexism, and social context are part of the picture of acceptance surrounding rape incidences (Berkowitz, 2000; Rickert & Wiemann, 1998). Attitudes about sexual violence usually have this in common: violence begins with accepting cultural norms of entitlement, particularly accepting thoughts and attitudes of gender inequality which breeds misogyny, disrespect, and bullying (Berkowitz, 2000; Foubert, 2000; Rickert, & Wiemann, 1998). From there it can escalate to aggression, forced coercions, and then rapes. Understanding cultural models of sexual violence helps to explain why societal norms of sexual attitudes and violence contribute to victimization.

About 1.5 million women are raped (reported cases in the United States) and or physically battered by an intimate partner each year (Banyard, Moynihan, & Crossman, 2009; Foubert, 2000). We know from research that this number is low. Research postulated that more than 40% of reported cases sustain physical injury as a result of sexual violence. One study revealed an estimated 42% of rapes were never reported to the authorities (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). A different report revealed the number is closer to 90% of rape cases that go unreported, according to the Brigham Young University Police Department (Sheffield, 2003). Some other studies reported that for every reportable rape there are ten that are unreported (Meilman & Haygood-Jackson, 1996), making the reporting rate just 9%. Rape is not just a problem on U.S. college campuses; a University in England reported similar numbers: 94% of reported cases do not end with a conviction, and 70-90% of rapes go unreported (University of Surrey, 2009). Due to the level of underreporting, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the prevalence of rape. Nevertheless, it remains an enormous public health concern; many students are injured physically, mentally, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and academically as the result of campus rape. Many women do not complete college as a result.

Rape is ultimately a male behavioral phenomenon increasing during ages 18-24 (Berkowitz, 2000; Martin & Hummer, 1989). College age students are especially vulnerable to becoming victims of sexual violence (for females) and becoming sexual perpetrators (for males) for many reasons. Their age group makes them vulnerable; they are in a new setting away from parents, with new environmental stressors and sex urges that expose female students to the potential of sexual assault (Roark, 1987). For male students, they lack full physical, cognitive, emotional, and brain development (i.e., 18-24 year olds); the pre-frontal cortex (the rational side of the brain) is not fully developed, according to developmental theorist Erik Erikson (Kozier & Erb, 2008). They are in the process of attaining cognitive maturity—the ability to make decisions based on the knowledge of options and their consequences; and they continue to be influenced by peers; in addition, they are in the transitional process of building skills to become self-sufficient (Kozier & Erb, 2008). Nevertheless, rape and sexual abuse behavior is a choice the perpetrator always makes knowingly.

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