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Acquaintance Rape among Adolescents and the Youth: A Fast Emerging Public Health Problem

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Abstract: Researchers believe that college rape prevention programs, including the most widely used ones, are insufficient. Most rapes are unreported, perhaps giving campus administrators and police the false impression that current efforts are adequate. In addition, the police may be influenced by college administrators who fear that too strong an emphasis on the problem may lead potential students and their parents to believe that rape occurs more often at their school/college than at others. Understanding the factors that contribute to this problem can help to analyze the problem, determine effective measures of prevention, recognize key intervention points and select appropriate responses. Combining the basic facts with a more specific understanding of our local problem can go a long way in planning and implementing the school/college rape prevention program.

Key words: Rape, date rape, acquaintance rape, alcohol and rape, rape prevention

INTRODUCTION

Acquaintance rape and date rape are widespread problems among adolescents and youth in the USA and European countries and are becoming a fast emerging problem with the ongoing modernization in India also. According to reports, rape is the most common violent crime on American college campuses today (Humphrey and Kahn, 2000). Women ages 16 to 24 experience rape at rates four times higher than the assault rate of all women, making the college years the most vulnerable for women. College women are reported to be more at risk for rape and other forms of sexual assault than women of the same age but not in college (Fisher *et al.*, 2000). The prevalence of adolescent victimization warrants need to cause awareness, planning and implementation of preventive strategies, routine screening and effective counseling strategies at high school and college level.

According to reports, rape rates vary to some extent by type and region of school/college, suggesting that certain schools and certain places within schools are more rape-prone than others. Some features of the college environment like frequent unsupervised parties, easy access to alcohol, single students living on their own and the availability of private rooms-may contribute to high rape rates of women college students. A recent large-scale study, including students at both two- and four-year colleges, found 35 rapes per 1,000 female students (US Department of Education, 2001). According to an estimate 1 in 4 women in the United States will be raped in their lifetimes and approximately 75% of all rapes are date or acquaintance rapes (Anglin and Spears, 1997).

A study on sexual victimization in dating relationships among female Chinese college students in Hong Kong reported that non-stranger sexual victimization was common among Chinese female college students, especially for less intimate forms of sexual contact. Prevalence of such sexual victimization was reported to be similar to that in North America (Tang and Critelli, 1995).

Another study reported that lifetime prevalence of date or acquaintance rape ranges from 13 to 27% among college-age women and 20% to a high of 68% among adolescents. Demographic

characteristics that increase vulnerability to date rape include younger age at first date, early sexual activity, earlier age of menarche, a past history of sexual abuse or prior sexual victimization and being more accepting of rape myths and violence toward women. Other risk factors include date-specific behaviors such as who initiated, who paid expenses, who drove, date location and activity, as well as the use of alcohol or illicit drugs. Alcohol use that occurs within the context of the date can lead to: 1) the misinterpretation of friendly cues as sexual invitations, 2) diminished coping responses and 3) the female's inability to ward off potential attack (Rickert and Wiemann, 1998).

A survey based on 70% returns (N = 140) of a random sample of 200 women at one college indicated that, although 5% had been date raped, none reported the rapes to authorities due to feelings of self-blame and embarrassment. That rapes are not reported perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy that rapes do not occur. A victim of rape may feel that she is the only one and may be reluctant to become the exception who reports. This denial by victims does not encourage programs for rape prevention (Finkelson and Oswald, 1995).

However, while community-based surveys expose higher levels than police data, under-reporting is still a problem and survey data do not provide insight into non-consensual sex in dating relationships. Research amongst adolescents indicates that forced sexual initiation is reported by just under a third of respondents and coerced sex has been reported by up to 70% of teenage respondents. The study also reports that in addition to marital and date rape, 3% of women had at some stage to agree to sex in return for a job. This may be a substantial underestimate (Jewkes, 2000).

In 1999, reported forcible and non-forcible sexual offenses totaled 2,469 incidents for all U.S. college campuses combined (US Department of Education, 2001), underscoring the low levels of rape reporting. Stranger rape of college students has been reported to be less common than acquaintance rape. It has also been reported that 90% of college women who are victims of rape or attempted rape know their assailant who is usually a classmate, friend, boyfriend, ex-boyfriend, or other acquaintance (Fisher *et al.*, 2000).

According to available figures from the USA, fewer than 5% of college women who are victims of rape or attempted rape report it to police (Fisher *et al.*, 2000). However, about two-thirds of the victims tell someone, often a friend (but usually not a family member or college official). In one study, over 40% of those raped, who did not report the incident said they did not do so because they feared reprisal by the assailant or others (US Department of Education, 2001). In addition, some rape victims may fear the emotional trauma of the legal process itself. Low reporting, however, ensures that few victims receive adequate help, most offenders are neither confronted nor prosecuted and the community is left in the dark about the extent of the problem.

Acquaintance rape victims offer a range of reasons for not reporting the rape to authorities (Sharma and Gupta, 2004) that include:

- Embarrassment and shame;
- Fear of publicity, reprisal from assailant, social isolation from the friends;
- Self-blame for drinking or using drugs before the rape, for being alone with the assailant, in one's own or the assailant's residence;
- Fear that their family will come to know and that the police will not believe them.

On the other hand, the law enforcing agencies think that a rape report is unfounded or false if any of the following conditions apply:

- The victim has a prior relationship with the offender (including having previously been intimate with him);
- The victim used alcohol or drugs at the time of the assault;

- There is no visible evidence of injury;
- The victim delays disclosure to the police and/or others and does not undergo a medical examination and/or
- The victim fails to immediately label her assault as rape and/or blames herself.

Acquaintance Rape may be of different types as for example, Party Rape (that may also include gang rape); Date Rape (usually takes place in the victim's or offender's residence or in a car after the date); rape in a non-party and non-date situation (e.g., while studying together); rape by a former intimate; and rape by a current intimate. In each case, the offender's behavior before the attack and the contributing environmental factors during the attack may be different. For instance, the typical party rape occurs at an off-campus house and involves the offender's plying a woman with alcohol or targeting an intoxicated woman (Benson *et al.*, 1992). Environmental factors that could facilitate the rape include easy access to alcohol, availability of a private room, loud music that drowns out the woman's calls and, potentially, a cover-up by the house's residents, who may choose to maintain group secrecy over reporting the rape. By contrast, a date rape typically involves two people who are just becoming acquainted and the offender rapes the woman in a car or residence after the date. Stranger rapes tend to occur in isolated areas of campus (e.g., parking lots or campus garages). In these cases, the victim usually has not drunk any alcohol and there is no prior relationship or even acquaintance between the victim and the rapist (Bohmer and Parrot, 1993).

A review of the temporal patterns of the acquaintance rape reveals that the college students are the most vulnerable to rape during the first few weeks of the freshman and sophomore years (Ostrander and Schwartz, 1994). In fact, the first few days of the freshman year are the riskiest, limiting the value of any rape prevention programs that begin after that. It has been documented that rapes of college women tend to occur after 6 pm, and the majority occurs after midnight. According to the reports 34% of completed rapes and 45% of attempted rapes take place on campus. Almost 60% of the completed rapes that take place on campus occur in the victim's residence (Fisher *et al.*, 2000).

Available reports reveal that only 20% of college rape victims have additional injuries, most often bruises, black eyes, cuts, swelling, or chipped teeth (Fisher *et al.*, 2000). Thus, stressing for the modification in the investigative practices to obtain more subtle evidence of lack of consent, rather than just use of force. It is important to mention that in an acquaintance rape case, consent is the most likely defense. Disproving consent becomes the most important part of the investigation. It also follows that evidence of non-consent in a party rape will differ from that of non-consent for a date rape that occurred in a car. Furthermore, it has been documented that only about 50% of the college rape and attempted rape victims use force against their assailant. Most victims try to stop a rape by telling the assailant to stop, screaming, begging, or running away (Sharma and Gupta, 2004).

Risk Factors Associated with Acquaintance Rape

Acquaintance rape is less random and more preventable than stranger rape (Himelein, 1995). A woman's condition or behavior does not cause rape, but certain factors appear to increase a woman's vulnerability to it. These include:

- Frequently drinking enough to get drunk;
- Being single;
- Engaging in social activities with sexually predatory men (Schwartz and Pitts, 1995);
- Being at an isolated site;
- Miscommunicating about sex and
- Holding less conservative attitudes about sexual behavior (Himelein, 1995).

Studies on campus rape have reported that a substantial number of victims are repeat victims (Schwartz and Pitts, 1995). College women most at risk of rape are those who were previously victims of childhood or teen sexual assault. They are nearly twice as likely to be raped in college than those with no previous history of sexual assault (Hanson and Gidycz, 1993). Adolescent/young adult victimization is the most robust risk factor for victimization in the college years and victimization in one semester predicts victimization in the following semester (Greene and Navarro, 1998). Some researchers believe that college men can sense out women who are less able to defend themselves, or target women whose behavior weakens their credibility (Greene and Navarro, 1998).

Alcohol appears to play a large role in acquaintance rape, although it is not the cause. Research indicates that in over three-quarters of college rapes, the offender, the victim or both had been drinking (Abbey *et al.*, 1996). Researchers provide several explanations for alcohol's presence in so many rapes (Finn, 1995):

- Men expect to become more sexualized when drinking and view the world in a more sexualized manner than women do. Consequently, they are more likely to interpret ambiguous cues as evidence of sexual intent.
- Alcohol increases misperceptions because it reduces a person's capacity to analyze complex stimuli thus increasing the risk that men and women will misinterpret messages between them.
- Some men believe that women who drink are more sexually available than those who do not.
- Some men use alcohol to justify or excuse acting out, misbehaving or committing a crime.
- Alcohol causes poor sending and receiving of friendly and sexual cues and while drinking alcohol, a woman may not notice her date's persistent attempts to get her into an isolated location or encourage her to consume even more alcohol.
- Alcohol slows motor functions, reducing the likelihood that a woman can verbally or physically resist a rapist. Some studies have found that men (more so than women) view certain cues as evidence that a woman is interested in having sex, such as her wearing revealing clothing, agreeing to a secluded date location such as the man's room or the beach, drinking alcohol, complimenting the man during the date, etc.
- It has been established that when alcohol or drugs are involved in acquaintance rape—which is frequently the case—peers tend to hold women more responsible for the rape and men less responsible for it.

Conducting Acquaintance Rape Prevention and Risk-Reduction Programs for Women

Research suggests that educational programs are the most effective acquaintance rape prevention approach. Typically, the campus authorities role in rape prevention consists of providing self-defense training, doing environmental assessments of outdoor areas vulnerable to rape and recommending the installation of cameras, lights, locks, etc. There is a strong argument that these approaches do not focus on preventing the most prevalent type of campus rape: acquaintance rape. If campus authorities predominantly invest in such approaches, the message to students is that real rape is stranger rape and that is what police prevent. Programs should focus on changing behavior, not just attitudes and program evaluations must be done to determine if the various components are effective for your particular population.

Even though the vast majority of college rapes entail men raping women, interventions geared toward changing only men's behavior will not be 100% effective. It is also important to provide risk reduction programs for women. Outlined below are program elements that researchers suggest.

- A preprogram survey of women's knowledge of acquaintance rape, risk factors and risk reduction techniques.
- The provision of accurate definitions of stranger, acquaintance, party, gang and date rape and information about related state laws and sanctions, as well as college rules and sanctions.

- The use of realistic scenarios to illustrate risky situations in which college women may find themselves.
- Comparison of the frequency of acquaintance rape with that of stranger rape. Research suggests that many women are in denial about their risk for acquaintance rape. Although some women are knowledgeable about acquaintance rape, they think it is more likely to happen to others than to themselves (Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1997).
- An emphasis that the harm acquaintance rape victims suffer is the same as that suffered by stranger-rape victims.
- Discussion of the need for explicit consent.
- Discussion of accurate labeling of rape, acknowledging when an assault occurs and the importance of reporting in stemming repeat offending.
- Discussion of risk factors, including the potential for repeat victimization.
- Discussion of how friends can help and support acquaintance rape victims.
- Review of the investigative and disciplinary processes for rape cases.
- Discussion of counseling services for rape victims.
- Follow-up surveys several months after the programs to assess knowledge retention and behavioral change.

In studies conducted in the early 1980s and 1990s, approximately one-third of college men reported that they would rape a woman if they knew they would not get caught (Earle, 1996). Given the number of college women raped, researchers have tried to explain the basic question, Why Men Rape? by forwarding the following explanations:

- Some men have stereotypic views of women's sexual behavior. In light of the high number of rapes, researchers believe that rape is not the product of psychopathic behavior; rather it is the product of mainstream beliefs about women's role in sexual situations (Fisher and Sloan, 1995). For example, many men are socialized to believe that women initially resist sexual advances to preserve their reputation and, because of this, prefer to be overcome sexually. If a woman says no, a man is to proceed as if she said yes. If she then claims rape, she changed her mind after the fact. Such men generally believe that most rapes are false reports.
- Some college men have sexist attitudes and seek sexual conquests. They simply do not care about women's feelings. They have learned that what counts, in the popular sports term invariably adopted...is that they score (Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1997).
- Some men see alcohol as a tool for sexual conquest. While alcohol use does not cause rape but alcohol abuse is strongly related to abuse of women. In addition, many college men may be unaware that having sex with someone who is drunk is rape.
- Some men receive peer support for sexually abusive behavior. Sexually abusive men often are friends with and loyal to other sexually abusive men and get peer support for their behavior, fostering and legitimizing it (Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

- Certain colleges and certain places within a college are more rape-prone than others.
- Some features of the college environment may contribute to high rape rates of women college students.
- A woman's condition or behavior does not cause rape, but certain factors appear to increase a woman's vulnerability to it.
- Educational programs are the most effective acquaintance rape prevention approach.
- Low reporting ensures that most offenders are neither confronted nor prosecuted.

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