

RAPE FACT SHEET

Victimization Rates

Currently, the best estimate of the incidence and prevalence of rape is provided by the National Violence Against Women study, published in 2000 and sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control¹. This study employed a sampling strategy that closely matched national demographics and found the following:

- 14.8% of women were victims of rape at some point during their lifetime
- 2.8% of women were victims of attempted rape at some point during their lifetime
- 0.3% of women were victims of rape during the previous 12 months, yielding an 8.7 per 1000 “incidence rate”

Extrapolating this incidence rate to the population of Metro Boston reveals the stark disparity between “official” rape statistics and the reality of sexual violence. In 1998, there were 1,687 rapes reported in all of Massachusetts, and 526 arrests were made¹⁷. That same year, among the approximately 1.75 million women in the Boston Metro area, there were actually 15,225 rapes.

The NIJ study findings described above closely match those of the Rape in America study², published in 1992, which found:

- 13.0% of women were victims of rape at some point during their lifetime
- 0.7% of women were victims of rape during the previous 12 months

Two other prevalence studies have documented even higher victimization rates, probably due to the unique characteristics of their samples. A study of naval recruits published in 1999³ found:

- 36.1% of female recruits were victims of rape since the age of 14
- 9.4% of female recruits were victims of attempted rape since the age of 14

A study of a national sample of college students, published in 1987⁴, found:

- 15.4% of women were victims of rape since the age of 14
- 12.1% of women were victims of attempted rape since the age of 14

Perpetrators: Numbers

Estimates of the percentage of men who acknowledge committing rape and attempted rape have come from studies that ask questions about sexually violent behavior without labeling such behavior as “rape” or “assault.” Below is a list of such studies and their findings:

OFFENSE TYPE	PERCENT	REFERENCE
sexual assault & rape	12.0	Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984 ⁵
rape, attempted rape, & sexual assault	9.2	Koss, Leonard, Beezley & Oros, 1985 ⁶
rape	6.0	Mosher & Anderson, 1986 ⁷
rape, attempted rape, & sexual assault	9.0	Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987 ⁴
rape & sexual assault	9.9	Greendlinger & Byrne, 1987 ⁸
Rape	6.1	Kosson, Kelly & White, 1997 ⁹
rape, attempted rape, & sexual assault	14.9	Lisak & Roth, 1988 ¹⁰
rape	10.0	Rubenzahl & Corcoran, 1998 ¹¹
rape & attempted rape	8.8	Ouimette & Riggs, 1998 ¹²
rape & attempted rape	14.8	Merrill et al., 1998 ³
rape	6.0	Collings, 1999 ¹³
rape	4.8	Weiss & Zverina, 1999 ¹⁴
rape	5.0	Spitzberg, 1999 ¹⁵
rape & attempted rape	6.5	Lisak & Miller, (2002) ¹⁶

Perpetrators: Characteristics

The vast majority of rapists are never prosecuted for their crimes. The attrition rate between the commission of the crime and the prosecution of it reveals starkly how unpunished is the crime of rape. Approximately 85% of rape victims do not report their victimization to criminal justice authorities. Of the 15% who do report, it is estimated that perhaps 10% result in the filing of charges, and perhaps 40% of those cases result in some sort of conviction.

This attrition rate means that studies of incarcerated rapists cannot be generalized to the vast majority of rapists who are never reported or prosecuted. Twenty years of research on this latter group – so-called “undetected rapists,” has revealed a group of sexual predators who have escaped detection by the criminal justice system.

These undetected rapists:

- are extremely adept at identifying “likely” victims, and testing prospective victims’ boundaries;
- plan and premeditate their attacks, using sophisticated strategies to groom their victims for attack, and to isolate them physically;
- use “instrumental” not gratuitous violence; they exhibit strong impulse control and use only as much violence as is needed to terrify and coerce their victims into submission;
- use psychological weapons – power, control, manipulation, and threats – backed up by physical force, and almost never resort to weapons such as knives or guns;
- use alcohol deliberately to render victims more vulnerable to attack, or completely unconscious.

In addition, the majority of undetected rapists are serial rapists who also commit other forms of serious interpersonal violence. In a study of 120 undetected rapists in the Boston area¹⁶, 63% were serial rapists. These 76 serial rapists had, on average, attacked 14 victims, and were responsible for:

- 439 rapes and attempted rapes
- 49 sexual assaults
- 277 acts of sexual abuse against children
- 66 acts of physical abuse against children
- 214 acts of battery against intimate partners

References

- ¹ Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000). Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women (NCJ 183781). National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington, DC.
- ² National Victim Center and the Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center (1992). *Rape in America: A Report to the Nation*, 211 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201.
- ³ Merrill, L. L., et al., (1998). Prevalence of premilitary adult sexual victimization and aggression in a Navy recruit sample. *Military Medicine*, 163, 209-212.
- ⁴ Koss, M.P., Gidycz, & Wisniewski, N. (1987). The scope of rape: Incidence and prevalence of sexual aggression and victimization in a national sample of higher education students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 55, 162-170.
- ⁵ Rapaport, K. & Burkhart, B. (1984). Personality and attitudinal characteristics of sexually coercive college males. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 93, 216-221.
- ⁶ Koss, M.P., Leonard, K.E., Beezley, D.A., & Oros, C.J. (1985). Nonstranger sexual aggression: A discriminant analysis of the psychological characteristics of undetected offenders. *Sex Roles*, 12, 981-992.
- ⁷ Mosher, D.L. & Anderson, R. (1986). Macho personality, sexual aggression, and reactions to guided imagery of realistic rape. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 20, 77-94.
- ⁸ Greendlinger, V. & Byrne, D. (1987). Coercive sexual fantasies of college men as predictors of self-reported likelihood to rape and overt sexual aggression. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 23, 1-11.
- ⁹ Kosson, D.S., Kelly, J.C., & White, J.W. (1997). Psychopathy-related traits predict self-reported sexual aggression among college men. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 12, 241-254.
- ¹⁰ Lisak, D. & Roth, S. (1988). Motivational factors in nonincarcerated sexually aggressive men. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, 795-802.
- ¹¹ Rubenzahl, S.A. & Corcoran, K.J. (1998). The prevalence and characteristics of male perpetrators of acquaintance rape. *Violence Against Women*, 4, 713-725.
- ¹² Ouimette, P.C. & Riggs, D. (1998). Testing a mediational model of sexually aggressive behavior in nonincarcerated perpetrators. *Violence and Victims*, 13, 117-130.
- ¹³ Collings, S.J. (1994). Sexual aggression: A discriminant analysis of predictors in a non-forensic sample. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 24, 35-38.
- ¹⁴ Weiss, P. & Zverina, J. (1999). Experiences with sexual aggression within the general population in the Czech Republic. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 28, 265-269.
- ¹⁵ Spitzberg, B.H. (1999). An analysis of empirical estimates of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration. *Violence and Victims*, 14, 241-260.
- ¹⁶ Lisak, D. & Miller, P. M. (2002). Repeat rape and multiple offending among undetected rapists. *Violence and Victims*, 17, 73-84.
- ¹⁷ Violent Crime & Weapon Use in Massachusetts, Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety, Statistical Analysis Center, November, 2000.

The Undetected Rapist

David Lisak, Ph.D.
University of Massachusetts Boston

False stereotypes and misconceptions about who rapists are and how rapists behave continue to hamper the criminal justice system. These stereotypes and misconceptions stem from decades of social science research and media coverage that have focused on the tiny handful of rapists whose crimes are reported by victims and who are then subsequently successfully prosecuted. These incarcerated rapists have been extensively studied. Many of them committed acts of grievous violence, inflicting gratuitous injuries on victims. In many cases, their victims were total strangers, and often these cases received considerable media coverage. As a result, there is a widespread belief that rapists typically attack strangers, use weapons, and inflict extensive physical injuries. Thus, when a rape case arises in which the rapist does not appear to fit this stereotype, many people find it hard to view the assault as a “real rape.”

However, twenty years of research on so-called “undetected” rapists – men who commit rapes but who are either not reported or not prosecuted for their crimes – has clearly demonstrated that the old stereotypes about rapists are false. These undetected rapists represent the vast majority of rapists, and account for the vast majority of rapes. These men tend to be far more in control of their anger than their incarcerated counterparts, and therefore far less likely to inflict gratuitous injuries on their victims. However, their crimes are characterized by extensive planning and premeditation, the frequent use of alcohol and other drugs to render their victims vulnerable, and the use of sufficient force and threats to terrify their victims into submission. Further, a majority of these rapists are serial offenders, and a majority commit other forms of violence, such as battery and child abuse.

Understanding the similarities and differences between undetected and incarcerated rapists helps to focus the efforts of all those involved in the criminal justice system, from law enforcement to prosecutors to victim advocates and service providers. With a sharper understanding of the motives and characteristics of undetected rapists it should be possible to successfully prosecute criminals who have historically flown below the radar of the criminal justice system.

Characteristics of Undetected Rapists

Sexual Behavior

“Undetected” rapists have consistently been shown to more sexually active than other men. Apart from their sexually aggressive behavior, they engage in consensual and coercive sex far more often than is typical for men of their age group. Their sexual activity tends to be an important component of their identities. Thus, rather than being a product of greater sex drive, their increased sexual activity appears to be driven by their view that if they are not very active then they are neither “successful” nor adequate as men.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Sexually aggressive behavior is typically part of a belief system that views women as sexual objects to be conquered, coerced and used for self-gratification. Undetected rapists are much more likely to hold stereotyped beliefs about the “proper” roles for women and men in society, and to rigidly adhere to those beliefs. They adhere to “rape myths” that both justify their aggressive acts and foster them. Their adherence to rape myths and rigid stereotypes frequently allows them to distort their perceptions of their victims’ behavior. For example, because they tell themselves that “women say no to sex even when they really want it,” they can disregard their victims’ obvious signs of terror and resistance.

Emotions and Motivations

Undetected rapists have repeatedly been found to harbor chronic, underlying feelings of anger and hostility toward women. They typically feel easily slighted by women, and carry grudges against them. This underlying hostility is easily evoked and colors their distorted perceptions of women as “teasers” who either “secretly” want to be coerced into sex, or else “deserve” it. These men have also consistently been shown to have strong needs to dominate and to be in control of women, and to be particularly fearful of being controlled by women. This characteristic leads them to view sexual relations as “conquests,” and all women as potential “targets” of conquests. Consistent with their very stereotyped beliefs about sex roles, undetected rapists have been shown to be more emotionally constricted than nonaggressive men. They are less able to label their own emotional experience, and much less emotionally expressive. As a consequence, they are also less capable of resonating with the emotional experience of other people, and are therefore less empathic than nonaggressive men.

Sexually Violent Subcultures

A consistent finding in the recent research on “undetected” sexually violent men is that most of this violence emerges either directly or indirectly from what have been termed “sexually violent subcultures.” Examples of such subcultures include fraternities and delinquent gangs. These subcultures are powerful forces that both reflect the rapist’s views about women and sexual conquest, and also help to shape them. For example, at certain college fraternities the use of violent pornography is a frequent form of “entertainment,” providing explicit images of rape as being acceptable, noncriminal, and the sign of male virility. Within these subcultures, “sexual conquest” – having sex with as many women as possible – becomes a critical measure of how men view themselves and each other. The greater the number of such conquests, the more manly is he viewed. The use of coercion and violence to secure these conquests is normalized in the subculture and becomes simply another part of the man’s “sexual arsenal.”

Hypermasculinity

Consistent with their stereotyped and rigid views about the “proper” roles of men and women in society, undetected rapists tend to adopt highly “gendered” identities; that is, they see themselves as hyper-masculine, they strive to always behave in rigidly and stereotypically masculine ways, they are always on the alert for any perceived slight to their masculine identities, and they are made very anxious by any situation that might cast doubt on their perceived masculinity. Thus, while in general aggression and violence are perceived to be more masculine than feminine traits, the rapist tends to view aggression and violence as crucial markers of his adequacy as a male. They prove to him that he is a “real man.” When such deeply held beliefs are combined with the effects of sexually violent subcultures, as described above, the mixture often becomes dangerous. The “power” motivation that underlies the constant striving for sexual conquests mixes with the rapist’s underlying hostility toward women and his hypermasculine identity. When a woman resists his coercive sexual pressure, he is very likely to perceive this as a challenge and affront to his masculinity and to react with anger and aggression, behaviors which restore his sense of adequacy.

Developmental Antecedents

While the traditional view about incarcerated rapists was that they harbored deep-seated anger towards their mothers, the evidence indicates that among undetected rapists anger and disappointment about their fathers is far more salient. For some of these men, damaged relationships with their fathers appears to feed their need to view themselves as hypermasculine, and to drive their rigidity and stereotyped beliefs and behaviors. Another developmental factor that has been associated with sexual aggression is child abuse. The rate of child abuse among undetected rapists, particularly childhood physical abuse, is much greater than it is among nonviolent men.