



Sexual Assault Perpetration and Alcohol

Young Adult Perpetrators

Numerous, large studies on college men show that 4-11% of respondents report having engaged in behavior that meets the legal definition of sexual assault. Respondents report using alcohol rather than force to incapacitate their targets, and most remain undetected (i.e., never reported to authorities).

- Most men who acknowledge committing sexual assault, report committing more than one.
- This evidence that a very small proportion of men are responsible for a large number of rapes helps explain why a substantial proportion of women (and a portion of men) report having been sexually assaulted by men, while only a very small number of men report having committed sexual assault.
- Administering drugs indicates criminal intent and is seen by perpetrators and their peers as “crossing the line.” Therefore, it’s much more common for perpetrators to encourage alcohol consumption or to target victims who have been drinking.
- Sexual perpetrators report using “date rape” drugs in less than 2% of cases.
- At house and fraternity parties, high-proof alcohol mixed with sweet punch or juice is often served to increase the likelihood that partygoers will become intoxicated.

Additionally, men who report committing a sexual assault also report having a high number of consensual sexual partners. For college men, having multiple sexual partners typically enhances their social status. This can make it difficult for peers to detect predatory behavior. Predators often look like “regular” guys to those around them.

Alcohol and Sexual Assault

The majority of all sexual assaults involve alcohol consumption by the perpetrator, victim, or both. Typically, if the victim consumes alcohol, the perpetrator does as well, with estimates of perpetrators’ intoxication during the incident ranging from 30% to 75%. Intoxicated perpetrators are more likely than sober perpetrators to sexually assault a casual acquaintance.

Most perpetrators identified in college and community samples use verbal coercion or the victim’s impairment from alcohol or other drugs to obtain sex. Alcohol is the drug of choice, with more than 95% of the impaired victims in one large study reporting that they consumed alcohol.



Intoxication provides an excuse for engaging in behaviors that are typically censured. Thus, some perpetrators may decide to get drunk because it makes it easier to justify sexually aggressive behavior to themselves and others.

Additionally, alcohol focuses individuals on positive aspects of a social situation, like having fun and meeting new people, instead of potential danger cues indicating risk. Alcohol consumption by either offender or victim, along with unplanned, spontaneous social situations surrounding an assault (e.g. parties, bars) is associated with completed non-consensual penetration and decreased victim resistance.

Prevention Efforts

Effective prevention requires multiple exposures to education, which includes awareness and skill building opportunities, offered in various modalities (presentations, one-on-one conversations, online learning, and environmental messaging such as posters, social media, etc.).

In the past, sexual assault prevention has focused on either the perpetrator or on the target of sexual assault, but neither approach has led to any reduction in sexualized violence. Perpetrators of sexual assault are refractory to interventions that target changing their attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, the focus has shifted to emphasize the role that *both* men and women can play in identifying perpetrators and intervening in potentially harmful situations as bystanders.

Bystanders are particularly important in situations where someone is being targeted by a perpetrator because of their level of intoxication, or if a person has been intentionally drugged in an attempt to facilitate a sexual assault. Impaired or incapacitated people are usually unable to protect or advocate for themselves. That is why increasing students' ability to identify these high-risk situations and effectively intervene has the greatest potential for preventing sexual assault.