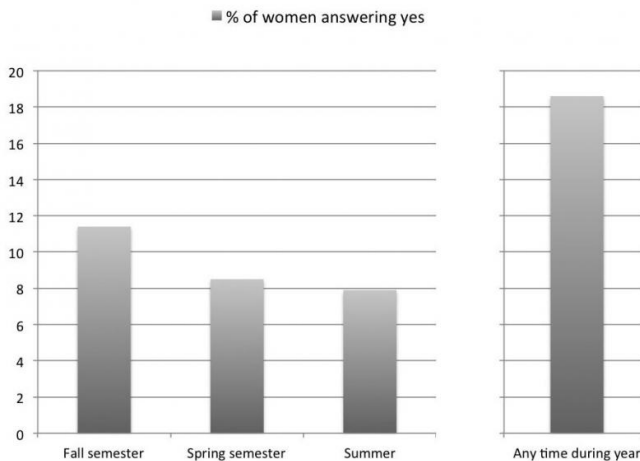


A statistical study of first-year college rape

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Rape prevalence by time period



Figures include incidents of rape by incapacitation or force, both attempted or completed, as reported in a research survey of first-year women at an upstate New York university. Credit: Brown University

Beginning in the fall when they arrived on campus and continuing through the following summer, 18.6 percent of freshmen women surveyed at a university in upstate New York in 2010 endured at least one—completed or attempted rape, according to a new study that is the first to examine the risk of sexual attack on first-year women in detail.

"It's an important transition year," said lead and corresponding author Kate Carey, professor of behavioral and social sciences in the Brown University School of Public Health and Brown's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies. "People are usually moving away from home for the first time, they are experimenting with a lot of freedoms including the use of alcohol and other drugs and learning how to live by themselves. We have a better sense after our research of what are the risks within that first transition year."

The study, published online in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, is based on questionnaires of

483 participants. It counted self-reports of completed or attempted forcible [rape](#) and rape while incapacitated, for instance because of drugs or alcohol. The female students, who were demographically representative of the school's overall freshman class, answered the standardized survey questions when they arrived on campus, at the end of fall semester, at the end of spring semester, and again after the following summer.

The study defined rape as "vaginal, oral, or anal penetration using threats of violence or use of physical force, or using the tactic of victim incapacitation." Thus, the study data do not conflate other forms of sexual misconduct such as unwanted touching or verbal abuse with the incidence of rape.

Over the study year, 9 percent of surveyed [women](#) reported an attempted or completed forcible rape and 15.4 percent reported an attempted or completed rape while incapacitated. Some women reported more than one event, which is why those numbers sum to more than the 18.6 percent prevalence of at least one such incident.

During the academic year (fall and spring semesters), 15.3 percent of the women disclosed a rape or an attempt of either kind.

These events in just one year added substantially to the women's cumulative exposure to sexual trauma. Upon entering college, 18 percent of the women surveyed said they had suffered an incapacitated rape or an attempt since age 14, and 15 percent reported suffering a forcible rape or attempt since age 14. By the beginning of sophomore year those figures had risen to 26 percent for incapacitated rape and 22 percent for forcible rape.

All told, 37 percent of the women said they had experienced at least one rape or attempted rape between age 14 and the beginning of sophomore year, according to the data.

"In our sample, by the time they were college sophomores, 37 percent of these women had experienced one or the other kind of rape—that's over a third of female students," Carey said. "That is remarkable. If I have a class with 25 upperclass women, eight of them may have experienced an event like this and all that can come with it—increased mental health concerns, difficulty trusting new partners, increased risk of substance misuse to cope, and the risk of getting behind and not doing well in school."

Prevention and counseling

The authors' analysis of the data shows that women who had experienced rape or an attempted rape before college were significantly more likely to experience these events during freshman year. This statistical association does not explain why some women are repeatedly victimized, Carey said, but it points to a need to discover potential underlying vulnerabilities in order to craft an intervention that could help women at higher risk.

"A substantial number of young women start their college career having already experienced either attempted or completed forcible or incapacitated rape—and that, we know, is a historical and experiential factor that puts them at greater risk for re-victimization and other kinds of adverse outcomes related to drinking and substance use," Carey said. "We really need to be looking earlier to prevent these events."

Although women already victimized were relatively likely to be so again, Carey said, in absolute numbers most of the rape incidents disclosed in the study happened among the vast majority of women who had not been assaulted before. Colleges should develop effective prevention and counseling programs that can serve women with different experiences and histories of rape, she said.

By bringing these statistics to light, Carey said, she hopes rape on campus will come to be regarded as the widespread and serious problem that it is. Carey and her coauthors write that the prevalence of rape incidents is at "epidemic levels."

Although the issue has attained greater public

attention lately, she said, it has remained inadequately addressed.

"If you swap in any other physically harmful and psychologically harmful event, a prevalence of 15 percent would be just unacceptably high," Carey said. "If, for instance, 15 percent of our young people were breaking their legs in their first year of school, we would expect that the community would do something to enhance the safety of the environment."

In addition to Carey, the study's other authors are former Brown University undergraduate Sarah Durney, who worked on the project as an honors thesis, Robyn Shepardson of the Syracuse Veterans Affairs Center for Integrated Healthcare, and Michael Carey of The Miriam Hospital and Brown.

Provided by Brown University

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