

Making Campuses Safer for Women

Sexual predators often blend in easily at college, their criminal intent seemingly unthinkable.

By

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It has been a long seven years since a landmark study in 2007 found that one in five college women has been raped or the subject of attempted rape. The Campus Sexual Assault Study, conducted by the Research Triangle Institute with funding from the National Institute of Justice, received widespread attention when it was published, but keeping a focus on this scourge of college life has not always been easy. The effort, though, has received considerable help during the Obama administration, particularly last month when the president heralded a new commitment to addressing sexual violence on campus. Mr. Obama on Jan. 22 issued a presidential memorandum establishing a White House task force to address the matter with specific policy recommendations.

There is much to be done in the effort to create safe communities where young people can learn and thrive, with the threat of sexual violence radically reduced. The one-in-five figure for sexual assault should make the parents of a college-age daughter shudder, but it doesn't give the full picture. The aftermath of rape can have a direct effect on educational attainment for survivors. Various studies, including one in 2007 led by Dr. Dean G. Kilpatrick at the Medical University of South Carolina, have found that college survivors suffer high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and drug or alcohol abuse, which can damage their ability to succeed in school.

A particular area of concern for those of us who work in this field is the underappreciated complexity of the relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual assault in college settings. Too often, the fact that alcohol is present in an unwanted sexual incident is allowed to short-circuit examinations of what occurred: The victim is assumed to be partly to blame. But the messy social dynamics of campus life shouldn't be allowed to obscure an unsettling truth: Alcohol is sometimes used by rapists as a tool for rendering their targets more vulnerable. These predators often blend into their schools and student communities with ease. They seem so like their male peers that sexual criminality seems out of the question.

Notably, campus perpetrators are often serial offenders. A 2002 study by David Lisak and Paul M. Miller found that 7% of college men admitted to committing rape or attempted rape, and 63% of these men admitted to committing multiple offenses, averaging six rapes each. These men know that alcohol, in addition to rendering their victims more vulnerable to

assault, also makes them less likely to remember the event and less likely to be believed or taken seriously if they report it.

Dr. Kilpatrick's 2007 research cited above indicates that only 12% of campus sexual assaults are reported. Research done by Dr. Kimberly Lonsway and former sex-crimes detective Joanne Archambault of End Violence Against Women International has showed that false reporting of rape is very rare. Additionally, their research looking at federal data reveals that there has been little or no change in the rate of prosecution, conviction and incarceration for rape in the past two decades. Of 100 forcible rapes that are committed, approximately 5-20 will be reported; 0.4 to 5.4 will be prosecuted; 0.2 to 5.2 will result in a conviction; only 0.2 to 2.9 will yield a felony conviction; and only 0.2 to 2.8 will result in incarceration of the perpetrator.

Those numbers are a scandal, and there is no reason to think that they are any different on college campuses.

What's to be done? Greater public understanding and strengthened prevention efforts must be undertaken in a dedicated and consistent way *before* young people get to college. Rape crisis centers provide prevention programs in middle and high schools with federal Rape Prevention and Education Program funds from the Centers for Disease Control, but this program is woefully underfunded. Ideally, young people would be receiving layered messaging from a variety of sources about bystander intervention, consent and healthy sexuality like those in the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center's "Youth 360" campaign.

The Campus SaVE Act, passed as part of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, requires universities to provide prevention information to students; we urge the schools to pair with rape crisis centers and expert advisers to meet the spirit rather than just the letter of the law.

The aim should be to make students—and faculty members, administrators and parents—aware that sexual assault is everyone's problem. With more work, we can create higher-education environments where men and women together take responsibility for each other's welfare—so that when sexual predators try to prey on vulnerability, they will find someone standing in their way.

Ms. Johnson Hostler is president of the board of the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence.