DATING VIOLENCE ON CAMPUS:

A FACT OF LIFE

BY CRESSIDA WASSERMAN

In America, admission to an institution of higher education is usually a significant landmark. For most students, college represents a period of transition that shapes their adult lives. In addition to providing opportunities to gain academic, technical, or professional qualifications, these years allow young people to mature intellectually and emotionally in a wider sense, letting them explore new interests, broaden horizons, develop social skills, and engage in romantic relationships while remaining largely insulated from the pressures of the outside world.

Sadly, the idyllic picture of burgeoning youth cocooned in a safe environment does not always match the reality students actually encounter. Campus life is not necessarily safe and can be violent and frightening. For some young people, what could be the best time of their lives becomes a nightmare that blights their entire college experience and sometimes shatters future hopes and dreams.

What Is Campus Dating Violence?

Campus dating violence is one of the more common types of violence encountered by college and university students.[1] The term covers a wide range of controlling, abusive, and aggressive behaviors in student dating relationships (heterosexual or homosexual) that occur alone or in some combination.

Dating violence can refer to **physical violence**, such as throwing, pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, kicking, biting, hitting, beating up, or using (or threatening to use) a knife or gun.[2] It often refers to **sexual violence**, a broad term covering sexual assault, abuse, aggression, coercion, and rape. Dating violence also encompasses **stalking**—willful and repeated harassment that instills fear in the victim. Stalking behaviors may include fol-

lowing the victim, waiting for and watching the victim, showering the victim with unwanted attention or gifts, threatening to hurt the victim, and using technology such as hidden cameras to track the victim's whereabouts.[3]

The various types of dating violence are not mutually exclusive. Perpetrators may, for example, engage in both physical and sexual abuse, or combine stalking with physical aggression.[4] Dating violence victims often suffer multiple incidents as part of a continuum of violence and abuse used to coerce and control them.

For many campus authorities, assessing the full meaning and impact of dating violence is a difficult task complicated by inherent shortcomings in federal rules that only mandate collection of statistics for certain crimes.[5] A lack of clarity over what constitutes a campus crime and confusion about jurisdictional boundaries between college authorities and local police further compound the unreliability of published statistics.[6] "Looked at alone, official statistics provide an inadequate gauge of the extent and nature of dating violence among student populations," says Lara Murray, director of the Dating Violence Resource Center of the National Center for Victims of Crime.

For a better understanding, surveys of American college students (that reveal unreported as well as reported incidents) offer a more detailed picture and some critical insights.

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The Numbers

Looking at the research literature, it is hard to escape the conclusion that for many students dating violence is a fact of college life. For example, in one large random survey at an urban university in Florida, 21 percent of students reported that they had experienced violence in a relationship with a current partner, and 32 percent with a previous partner.[7] While the most serious incidents (*e.g.*, beating up a partner, threatening and/or using a knife or gun, or forcing sex on a partner) may be relatively rare, it is still shocking that at least 1 in 5 college students reported some form of physical violence and abuse in their dating relationships.

Findings on sexual violence are especially troubling. Indeed, it has been suggested that college women (who comprise the great majority of student victims of sexual assault) are "at greater risk for rape and other forms of sexual assault than women in the general population or in a comparable age group."[8]

The disturbing amount of sexual violence on American campuses is reflected in findings from *The Sexual Victimization of College Women*, a recent large-scale survey involving 4,446 college women nationwide. This study concluded that 2.8 per-

cent, 1 in 36 female students, experienced a completed or attempted rape during a 7-month period, [9] and in 9 out of 10 cases, the offenders were known to the victim.

The researchers describe the implications of their findings as "critical, and potentially disquieting." Indeed, they pointed out that if the figures are projected over a 12-month period, the rate increases to nearly 5 percent, and over an entire college career, might rise to more than 20 percent. Looked at another way, on a campus of 10,000 women, there might be 350 rape incidents in a single academic year, taking into account repeat victimizations.

But rape is only one part of a broader picture of sexual violence that includes other threatening and coercive behaviors. The same study found 15.5 percent of college women experienced some kind of sexual victimization during the academic year. Most assaults (especially rapes and physically coerced sexual contact) occurred at student living quarters, often at the victim's on- or off-campus residence. While a higher percentage of victimizations occurred off campus, it should be remembered that some off-campus locations (such as bars and nightclubs) are very much a part of campus life.

Surveys have also revealed stalking to be a common form of dating violence among students. More than 1 in 10 college women report being stalked. The vast majority of victims knew their stalkers who were most often identified as boyfriends or ex-boyfriends.[10] It has also been estimated that in 25 percent of stalking incidents, electronic devices (such as cell phones or pagers) and Internet technologies (such as e-mail, chat rooms, or message boards) are used by stalkers to harass their victims.[11]

In addition to documenting the extent and character of dating violence on college campuses in the United States, research also offers important insights into the role of alcohol, the nature of prevailing attitudes, underreporting of violent incidents, and the impact of dating violence on its victims.

Role of Alcohol

Alcohol—almost a hallmark of campus social life—has been linked to dating violence in successive surveys. Approximately fifteen years ago, alcohol was found to be one of four primary predictors of college rape.[12] More recently, data from the Department of Education's

Core Alcohol and Drug Survey (involving nearly 90,000 students nationwide) revealed that substance use (primarily alcohol) was involved in 74 percent of sexual assaults on campuses.[13] Another study identified "frequently drinking enough alcohol to get drunk" as one of four main factors that consistently increase the risk for sexual victimization.[14] The Harvard School of Public Health also found 4 out of 5 students living on campus *but not excessive drinkers*, experienced one or more of the repercussions of heavy drinking, including being the victim of an assault or unwelcome sexual advance.[15]

Prevailing Attitudes

Alarmingly, many students seem willing to tolerate some degree of violence in their dating relationships. In one study, although the majority of undergraduates said dating violence in most circumstances was unacceptable, many thought it was acceptable or normal in *some* circumstances.[16] In another, approximately 70 percent of female students listed at least one form of physical violence (for example, slapping, punching, or kicking) as acceptable, and more than 80 percent described dating situations in which physical force was acceptable.[17]

Tolerant attitudes are also notable in relation to sexual victimization. For example, some perpetrators admit they have committed acts that meet the legal definition of rape, although most do not label it as such,[18] and other students report that they would commit rape, in some circumstances, if they believed they could get away with it.[19] At the same time, female rape victims frequently take responsibility for what happened to them, and the majority do not define their experience of rape as a crime,[20] even when the men who raped them do.[21]

"Attitudes towards sexual violence on campus are especially troubling," says Dating Violence Resource Center's Lara Murray. "Both victims and perpetrators often downplay the significance of sexual aggression and sexual assault." Thus, students commonly differentiate between "real rape" and "other events" and do not see stranger rape in the same way as acquaintance or date rape.[22] Even college women who have experienced acquaintance rape take more precautions against stranger rape, despite the much greater risk that they will be assaulted by dates.[23] While stranger-rape myths may have diminished, acquaintance-rape myths remain much in evidence.[24]

Widespread Underreporting

Few students report incidents of dating violence to campus officials. About half of all victims tell no one, not even a friend or relative.[25] *The Sexual Victimization of College Women* reports that fewer than 5 percent of completed and attempted rapes of college women were reported to law enforcement, although two-thirds of rape victims tell someone, typically a friend.[26] Another recent report found 86 percent of rapes and sexual assaults of college students were not reported to the police.[27] Other studies show few students report date or acquaintance rape to physicians, counselors, police, or administrators.[28] In the case of stalking, 83 percent of incidents are not reported to the police or campus law enforcement officials, although 93 percent of victims confide in someone, most often a friend.[29]

Low reporting rates have been attributed to many factors, including tolerant attitudes toward dating violence, self-blame, trauma, fear of victim-blaming attitudes, lack of confidence in how resident assistants will respond, belief the incident is a private or personal matter, a feeling victims can deal with it on their own or it was not important, and failure to recognize the assault as a crime.[30] One study found the two most common factors inhibiting reporting are fear of retaliation by the perpetrator and lack of faith in the criminal justice and institutional disciplinary systems.[31]

"Even when there are natural avenues for reporting and getting help," says Murray, "the prevailing atmosphere on campus may minimize the seriousness of the incident and discourage reporting." Murray stresses the importance of creating an environment where dating violence is taken seriously. "Unless incidents are reported, nothing can change. Colleges will not be able to assess the extent of the problem or respond appropriately. It is therefore vital to create an environment where dating violence is taken seriously."

Impact of Dating Violence

Dating violence is often an amalgam of physical, sexual, and psychological harm with potentially serious repercussions. When physical aggression is combined with other types of victimization, the impact on the victim may be especially traumatic. But even in the absence of physical injury, dating violence can affect a student's entire post-secondary educa-

tional experience.[32] Victims of rape and sexual assault may suffer from symptoms that include anxiety, depression, loss of trust in others, sexual dysfunction, fear of pregnancy, and fear of AIDS.[33] Some researchers report that student victims of date rape have significantly more trauma symptoms compared to non-victims.[34] Others suggest that stalking can provoke pervasive fear, erosion of a sense of safety and personal control, posttraumatic stress, severe anxiety, panic reactions, sleeping and eating disorders, loss of self-esteem, and stress-related illnesses.[35]

While individual reactions vary, dating violence also may have significant educational consequences for the victims. In some cases, rather than face their attacker in class, in the dorm, in the dining hall, or at campus functions, students may even drop out of college.[36]

To prevent these and other adverse outcomes, campus authorities must take dating violence seriously and actively promote helpful responses to victims.

According to Connie Kirkland, director of Sexual Assault Services at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, the first step is to get institutional commitment. "The biggest issue is getting campuses to understand the importance of an immediate and continuing meaningful response to victims," says Kirkland. "Colleges must have a real understanding of the types of incidents that occur and the issues facing the victims."

Reducing Campus Dating Violence

Campus dating violence presents complex challenges: how to change attitudes, raise awareness, hold offenders accountable, and, above all, persuade victims to come forward and get help. Community-based victim advocates can be an important resource for those seeking to meet these challenges. If they foster relationships with campus authorities, victim service providers can help build institutional commitment, improve responses to victims, and protect students from victimization.

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The National Center's Dating Violence Resource Center offers some concrete steps to help reduce campus dating violence:

- **Educate campus authorities.** Campuses may have sexual assault policies in place, yet current programs and practices may nonetheless discourage reporting and fail to adequately help students. If community-based victim advocates foster good relationships with local colleges, they can help educate campus administrators about the wide range of behaviors that constitute dating violence, promote the commitment critical to success, and assist with the development of more effective responses to victims.
- **Reach out to student populations.** Fewer than half of all institutions of higher education provide new students with sexual assault awareness education; fewer than 60 percent of schools notify victims about the availability of campus counseling (on or off campus), medical treatment, or other student services; and, only a minority of schools provide victim-related support services to special populations such as students living off campus, non-native English speakers, sexual minorities, or those who are physically challenged.[37] These gaps suggest ample opportunities for the involvement of victim advocates in efforts to educate student populations about dating violence. Since active support from friends appears to be a key factor influencing decisions to report violent incidents, the case for educating *all* students about dating violence becomes even stronger.[38]

- **Train staff and students on how to respond to victims.** Fewer than 40 percent of schools require training for campus police, security personnel, and others most likely to respond to sexual assault victims.[39] Only 40 percent of schools provide resident hall assistants or student security officers with sexual assault response training. Where colleges lack their own resources, victim advocates can offer valuable advice on and/or participate in trainings for campus staff and students and help draft protocols. They can also promote peer counseling programs in which students help educate their peers and provide victims with information and support.[40]
- **Foster community collaboration to support victims.** Much dating violence occurs off campus and may not be treated as the proper concern of campus authorities. It is important that community-based programs maintain links with college authorities and other agencies to ensure that students who do not receive assistance through campus-based services or would prefer to seek help off campus have somewhere to turn. Victim advocates can collaborate with campus staff, local law enforcement, local healthcare providers, and others to develop better-coordinated, more effective responses to victims, whether dating violence occurs on or off campus.

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