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Dear Colleague,

Discovering the Undetected Rapist

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

This month, we chose to take a controversial stand on an important article about unreported sexual assaults on college campuses. We felt the article was incredibly important because it highlights the high level of sexual abuse at colleges today.

While widely quoted, the article (written in 2002) is missing critical perspectives about prevention, is not informed by what is known about adolescents and young adults who abuse, and is lacking a complexity of responses by endorsing an exclusively criminal justice response.

Because all of the young men in the study were labeled "undetected rapists" it pushes the reader towards a "one-size-fits-all" emotional and intervention response. In contrast, today's research tells us that we need to consider the risk posed by each individual in order to create a better intervention

Question

What do we know and what don't we know about the young men who sexually abuse on college campuses?

The Research

In 2002, David Lisak and Paul Miller conducted one of the first explorations into the perpetration of sexual violence on college campuses from the perspective of the young men who are causing the harm. The fact that most sexual abuse (64%-95%) goes unreported underscores the importance of understanding this hidden population. Lisak and Miller also ask whether this population is similar to men who have been convicted of sexual abuse.

Lisak and Miller pooled results from four different samples to assess a total of 1,882 men. All of the men attended a mid-sized university, ranging in age between 18 and 71 years, with a mean age of 26.5 years. Through the surveys, they found that 120 men (6%) acknowledged behaviors that would meet the legal definition of rape or attempted rape but were never reported. 80% of these men reported that the women were unable to give consent because of drugs or alcohol. A majority of men who admitted to committing a rape also admitted to perpetrating other forms of interpersonal violence.

The results showed no difference among ethnic groups. Furthermore, the results showed that a relatively small group of men committed a large number of the rapes. These repeat offenders represented only 4% of the sample but committed 28% of the sexual violence. Lisak and Miller used these results to aptly

and ultimately maintain a safer community. Furthermore, if we think of these young men as rapists and monsters, we may not see the inappropriate behaviors and other warning signs in our friends or our sons.

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Sincerely,
Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

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challenge the notion that these crimes are less than other forms of rape and are merely "college men under the influence of alcohol, mistakenly crosses the line between sexual pressure and rape."

Unfortunately, the authors then compared these results to recidivism studies of adult male sex offenders in prison. The studies they referenced were quite dated and with more recent research in mind would now be considered inaccurate. This link to dated research may have led Lisak and Miller to a single focus, and in our minds, inaccurate conclusion that their results "support a more vigorous criminal justice response to [all] these cases."

Implications for Professionals

Lisak and Miller's research supplies important information about sexual assault on college campuses by identifying an alarming number of young men who rape or attempt to rape and never enter the criminal justice system. Their research was the first to point to this alarming and all too common behavior. But, the conclusions of what to do with these findings are problematic. They conducted the research over a decade ago, and they did not have access to what is now known about adolescents and young adults who have sexually abused. Although Lisak and Miller's research about prevalence continues to be influential, their understanding of a diverse population and their suggested responses no longer reflects the current state of our research and knowledge.

Most college men are between the ages of 18-21 and legally adults, but developmentally, they often have more in common with older adolescents. As such, recent research supports the need to differentiate them from adults and to caution us about the one-size fits all adult labels (undetected rapist) that create a single perception of an adolescent-to-adult profile. Further, the majority of these young adults may return to one campus or another. There is an opportunity to bring to light the most effective approaches to maintaining safety which involve risk assessments, risk management protocols and individualized interventions targeted to that person's risks, needs, and individual characteristics.

Implications for the Field

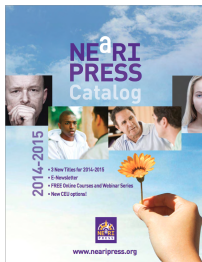
Given the attention that this 2002 article is receiving in the media today, it is essential to tie this important information about the scope of the problem with what we now know in 2014 about intervention, treatment, and prevention - and particularly what we know about preventing the perpetration of sexual abuse. In the last decade, there has been a growing body of research about the risk and protective factors for sexually abusive behaviors. This same research indicates that the majority of adolescents and young men do learn to live a healthy life, free from further sexually abusive

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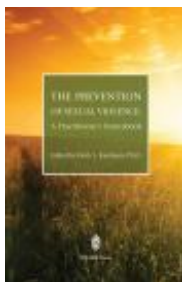
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behaviors, especially if they receive specialized treatment. College campuses that use current research and evidence-based practice to build their programs will be especially effective for increasing campus safety and addressing the epidemic of sexual assault on campuses.

If the college community does want to create a safe environment, it is vital that we all acknowledge the current epidemic on college campuses, we learn to intervene effectively when we see someone at risk to be abused or to be abusive, and for those that do sexually harm, we hold these young men accountable for their actions (not label them "monsters" or in this case the "undetected rapist"), do everything possible to ensure they learn to live healthy and safely in the future.

Abstract

Pooling data from four samples in which 1,882 men were assessed for acts of interpersonal violence, we report on 120 men whose self-reported acts met legal definitions of rape or attempted rape, but who were never prosecuted by criminal justice authorities. A majority of these undetected rapists were repeat rapists, and a majority also committed other acts of interpersonal violence. The repeat rapists averaged 5.8 rapes each. The 120 rapists were responsible for 1,225 separate acts of interpersonal violence, including rape, battery, and child physical and sexual abuse. These findings mirror those from studies of incarcerated sex offenders (Abel, Becker, Mittelman, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, & Murphy, 1987; Weinrott and Saylor, 1991), indicating high rates of both repeat rape and multiple types of offending. Implications for the investigation and prosecution of this so called "hidden" rape are discussed.

Citation

- Lisak, D & Miller, PM. (2002). Repeat rape and multiple offending among undetected rapists. *Violence and Victims*, 17, 73-84.

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