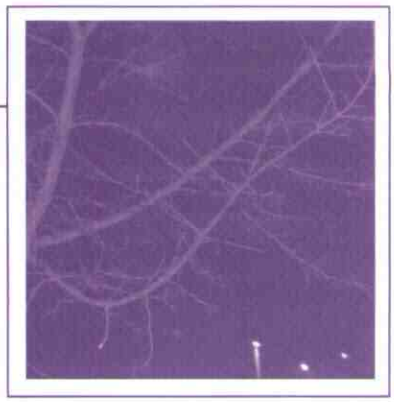
# Predators

## Uncomfortable Truths about Campus Rapists



DAVID LISAK

A quarter century of research on rape victims and the men who attack them has yielded a few incontrovertible insights. First, rape is ubiquitous. In 1987, Mary Koss, a professor at the University of Arizona, published research revealing that one in four college women is a victim of rape or attempted rape by age 21. The startling statistics have been corroborated over and over by subsequent studies, the latest a mega-study sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and published in 2000. Secondly, the vast majority of rapists don't go to jail. About 85 percent of rapes go unreported, and only a tiny fraction of reported rapes result in prosecution.

A look at Massachusetts statistics for 1998 is eye-opening. That year, 1,687 rapes were reported statewide, resulting in 526 arrests, according to the Massachusetts State Police. Applying what we know about rape reporting, we can assume there were really more than 20,000 rapes statewide.

Who are the rapists responsible for this scourge of violence? They are rarely reported, almost never prosecuted and they are responsible for the vast majority of sexual violence on our campuses and in our communities. They are successfully exploiting a wide seam in the criminal justice system.

Surprisingly, they too have been the subject of social science research for the past two decades. They tend to be willing research subjects, because like many in our society, they believe that a rapist wears a ski mask, carries a knife and attacks strangers from dark corners. Since they don't fit that profile, they don't see what they do as rape, and they don't label themselves as rapists. As a result, they can be easily coaxed into talking about their sexual behaviors.

Here is what we know about them: They come from all racial and ethnic groups; they are sophisticated sexual predators who plan their attacks exhaustively and with astonishing cunning. Most of them are serial rapists and a significant percentage of them are violent in multiple contexts. As a group, they are responsible for a wildly disproportionate amount of the sexual violence in their communities—whether college campuses or otherwise.

All of this flies squarely in the face of what many assume to be true about these men. These are the same men who are often referred to as "date rapists." Date rapists are widely assumed to be basically good guys who, because of a combination of too much alcohol and too little clear communication, end up coercing sex upon their partners. This image is widely promulgated, but it is flatly contradicted by research.

In a New England study published in 2002 in the journal *Violence and Victims*, 120 rapists were identified in a sample of 1,882 college students. Of the 120, 76 were serial rapists who had each, on average, left 14 victims in their wake. Their collective, grim tally included the following: 439 rapes and attempted rapes, 49 sexual assaults, 277 acts of sexual abuse against children, 66 acts of physical abuse against children and 214 acts of battery against intimate partners. These statistics leave little room for perceiving these men as basically good guys who fall victim to miscommunication and too much alcohol. Their violence and predatory behavior mirrors precisely that of the sexual predators who have been incarcerated and studied, except that by targeting non-strangers and by refraining from gratuitous violence, they have escaped prosecution.

**Date rapists are widely assumed to be basically good guys ... This image is widely promulgated, but it is flatly contradicted by research.**

Talking about "sexual predators" and "college campuses" in the same sentence gives most university administrators heartburn. Nevertheless, "sexual predator" aptly describes the men who are responsible for the vast majority of sexual violence on our campuses, as well as in our communities. And while the term might be

## The Mickey Culture

> If someone offers you a drink from the bar at a club or party, accompany the person to the bar to order your drink, watch the drink being poured and carry the drink yourself.

*—From a Boston College Police Department notice warning that potential rapists may lace drinks with "roofies" and other so-called "date rape drugs" that take away the ability to fight back.*

uncomfortable, it can also be instructive. For example, what we have learned about these predators should guide our prevention efforts. It used to be an axiom of rape prevention programs—and the idea is still prevalent—that "all men are potential rapists," because most men to some degree endorse attitudes and beliefs that have been associated with sexually aggressive behavior. According to this theory, all men are at some risk for acting on these attitudes. Rape research has never supported this axiom, and calling all men "potential rapists" is a decidedly poor way of trying to reach men—both literally and figuratively.

In contrast to this scolding approach, the research on undetected rapists tells us that actually a very small percentage of men—serial sexual predators—are responsible for a vastly disproportionate amount of the sexual violence in any community. These men cannot be reached or educated. They must be identified and removed from our communities. Our prevention and education efforts must be focused on the vast majority of men who will never themselves cross the line into criminal behavior, but who by their participation in peer groups and activities either actively or passively provide support or camouflage for the sexual predators in their midst. By laughing at their jokes, by listening uncritically to their stories of "conquests" and "scores," men become facilitators or passive bystanders of criminal behavior.

It is these facilitators and bystanders—men who know who the rapists are in their communities—who must be educated, challenged and coaxed back to a firm stance on the right side of the line, the side where we as a community plant ourselves in opposition to those few who choose the criminal path.

Colleges and universities do more than provide young people with the credentials to make their careers. They also help to socialize young men and women and prepare them for responsible citizenship in their communities. What lessons do we teach these young people when we allow sexual violence to flourish in the college community? The predators graduate, taking with them increased power and authority—the tools they turn into weapons of violence—and find new victims in the larger community beyond the ivied walls. The bystanders graduate with lessons in passive cooperation with criminal conduct, surely the opposite of what we would have wished for.

Sexual violence remains as much a dirty secret on our campuses as it is in the larger society. It flourishes because to confront it, an institution must be willing to shine a bright light on aspects of itself that are both ugly and painful. One of the most important steps that must be taken is a comprehensive, led-from-the-top campaign to change the community climate such that victims of sexual violence feel comfortable to report attacks to authorities. Paradoxically then, the first indication that an institution is courageously moving to end sexual violence is almost inevitably an increase in the official tally of that violence. This is not the kind of publicity that most college administrators strive to create.

Yet some institutions have moved forward regardless. The U.S. Air Force Academy, faced with a national spotlight on its sexual assault problems, has moved comprehensively to make fundamental changes in how sexual violence is handled institutionally and to alter the culture of the academy to make such violence less likely. The academy has used mandatory, small group meetings to educate the cadet corps as well as faculty and staff about sexual assault and sexual harassment. It has established new policies regarding sexual assault complaints and investigations and improved services to victims. If a military academy imbued with a traditional, masculine culture can take such far-reaching steps, surely the rest of our institutions of higher learning can do the same. It's a question of motivation.

---

***David Lisak*** *is associate professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston and founding editor of the journal Psychology of Men and Masculinity.*

## Social Sensitivity

> I've run into a couple of situations where, when I've asked the women outright 'Well, did you indicate that this was not all right with you?' they've stammered and said, 'No, not exactly, but he should have been able to tell.' And probably he should have, but we all arrive at Yale with different levels of social sensitivity.

*—Laura King, dean of Yale's Trumbull College, as quoted by Kristen Thompson in an October 2003 article in* The Yale Herald *student newspaper exploring the "rape culture" at the university.*

Copyright of Connection: New England's Journal of Higher Education & Economic Development is the property of New England Board of Higher Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.