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Incapacitated and Forcible Rape of College Women: Prevalence Across the First Year

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Abstract

Purpose—To document the point and cumulative prevalence of incapacitated and forcible rape among first-year college women.

Methods—Female students ($N = 483$) completed a health questionnaire: (a) upon arrival on campus, (b) at the end of the fall semester, (c) at the end of the spring semester, and (d) at the end of the summer following their first year of college.

Results—Before entering college, 18% reported incapacitated rape (attempted and/or completed), and 15% reported forcible rape (attempted and/or completed). During the first year of college, 15% reported incapacitated rape (attempted or completed) and 9% reported forcible rape (attempted or completed). By the start of the second year (lifetime prevalence), 26% and 22% had experienced incapacitated and forcible rape (attempted or completed), respectively.

Conclusions—Both incapacitated and forcible sexual assaults and rape have reached epidemic levels among college women. Interventions to address sexual violence on campus are urgently needed.

Keywords

college students; women; freshmen; sexual assault; incapacitated rape; forcible rape; prevalence

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Sexual assault (i.e., any non-consensual sexual contact) and rape (i.e., non-consensual intercourse) of female college students are increasingly recognized as prevalent. Annual incidence of rape among college women has been estimated at 5%, five times higher than the rate observed among non-college women (1). Estimates that distinguish between forcible (i.e., involving physical force) or incapacitated (i.e., when alcohol or other drugs are used) tactics suggest that incapacitated rape (IR) is more prevalent than forcible rape (FR) (1–4).

Confidence in prevalence estimates is limited owing to several methodological limitations; that is, many studies (a) conflate nonconsensual touching with attempted and completed rape (3–5), (b) use small, non-representative samples, (c) sample students regardless of year in college, even though the risk of IR and FR are higher in the first year (2), and (d) do not examine events over time even though IR may be more common in the first semester (6). To date, no studies have measured IR and FR separately and prospectively reported incidence across 2 semesters and the following summer.

The current study addressed these limitations. We provide point and cumulative prevalence estimates for attempted and completed (A/C) IR, and A/C FR in a sample of first-year women, and test the hypothesis that pre-college history of A/C IR or FR predicts revictimization with similar tactics.

Methods

The sample consisted of 483 first-year women, aged 18 to 21 years, constituting 26% of the incoming class at a large private university in the northeastern U. S. The sample was representative of first year female students with respect to age (94% were 18 years old), and race/ethnicity (66% White, 11% Asian, 10% Black, and 13% multiple races; 9% Hispanic). A detailed sample description is reported elsewhere (7).

Participants were recruited through a mailing sent to all matriculating first-year women, campus flyers, word of mouth, and a research participant pool, and provided informed consent. Compensation was \$20 for baseline and \$10 for subsequent monthly surveys. Data reported herein come from surveys taken at baseline, and at the end of the fall, spring, and summer. All procedures were approved by an institutional review board.

Sexual victimization was assessed at baseline and every four months using a 20-item version of the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) revised by Testa et al. to include the tactic of incapacitation (8). The SES was nested within a longer health survey; it crosses 4 perpetrator tactics (i.e., overwhelm you with arguments or continual pressure for sex, use physical force, threaten to harm you or someone close to you, perform sexual acts while you were incapacitated by drugs or alcohol) with 5 types of contact (i.e., fondle, kiss, or touch sexually; oral sex; try to have sexual intercourse, but it did not happen; succeed in making you have sexual intercourse; anal sex or penetration with a finger or objects). Participants reported how many times each had happened (a) before college, (b) fall semester, (c) spring semester, and (d) summer. We report rates of both attempted and completed FR or IR; completed FR or IR was defined as vaginal, oral, or anal penetration achieved using threats of violence or use of physical force (FR), or using the tactic of victim incapacitation (IR).

Results

Among participants who provided baseline data, retention rates were 90% (fall), 85% (spring), and 87% (summer). Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of A/C IR and FR over time. Before college, 15.4% had A/C FR, and 17.5% had experienced A/C IR. Over the study year, 9.0% reported FR and 15.4% reported IA/IR. By the end of the study, lifetime prevalence of A/C FR and IR was 21.7% and 25.7%, respectively; 37% of participants had experienced attempted or completed FR, IR, or both since age 14. Taken together, 11.4% and 8.5% of female first year students reported an attempted or completed rape in the fall and spring semesters, respectively.

Table 2 shows the association between pre-college history of incapacitated and forcible rape and revictimization. History of pre-college IR increased rates of both IR and FR during college. History of pre-college FR increased rates of FR during college. New cases constituted 56% of the IR and 73% of the FR during the study year. To test our hypothesis, logistic models regressed FR during study year on both precollege FR and precollege IR; and IR during study year on both precollege FR and precollege IR. Only pre-college IR predicted IR (OR = 6.37; $p < .001$) and FR (OR = 4.34; $p < .001$) during the first year after starting college.

Discussion

This study provides both cumulative and point prevalence of A/C IR and A/C FR on one campus during the first year of college. In addition, this study provides temporal resolution unavailable in most previous reports.

Prior to entering college, 28% of women had experienced attempted or completed rape. During their first year, 1 out of 6 female students had experienced A/C IR or A/C FR. The lifetime prevalence of attempted or completed rape increased to 37% by the start of sophomore year. These data make clear that prevention programs for both men and women (10) in both high-school and college are necessary. Programs may need to address trauma-related concerns for previously victimized women.

Consistent with previous research, IR was more common than FR. Whereas others have found that IR accounted for 69%–72% of rapes reported in college samples (4–6), 83% of reported rapes in our sample were incapacitated. Future research should explore whether first-year students are more vulnerable to A/C IR than older students.

These data provide more evidence that a pre-college history of sexual assault, particularly A/C IR, predicts revictimization (9), in that it increases the odds of both IR and FR in the first year. Thus, continued engagement in risky drinking behavior should be an important target for prevention (8). Note that because women without any history of sexual assault are in the majority, they account for more assaults. Thus, prevention of both revictimization and new cases is essential.

Several strengths of the study enhance confidence in these findings: a longitudinal design with four assessments, a large sample of first year women unselected for assault history, use

of reliable measures to separately assess A/C IR and FR, and strong retention rates. Our data document risk during a distinct developmental period for young women. Limitations include reliance on self-report and sampling from a single campus.

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Implications and Contribution

Sexual violence on campus has reached epidemic levels: During their first year in college, 1 in 7 women will have experienced incapacitated assault or rape and nearly 1 in 10 will have experienced forcible assault or rape. Interventions to reduce sexual violence on campus are urgently needed.

Table 1**Point Prevalence and Cumulative Prevalence of Forcible and Incapacitated Rape**

Behavior (% Yes)	Precollege	Fall Semester	Spring Semester	Summer	Academic year	Study year	Lifetime
Forcible Rape							
Attempted	13.3	4.3	3.3	2.8	6.0	7.3	18.6
Completed	6.0	3.4	3.6	3.3	5.2	6.6	11.0
Attempted or Completed	15.4	5.2	4.3	4.0	7.3	9.0	21.7
Incapacitated Rape							
Attempted	16.2	7.7	4.8	4.4	10.1	12.6	22.6
Completed	9.0	4.5	4.0	4.7	7.1	9.6	15.7
Attempted or Completed	17.5	8.4	6.4	6.5	12.1	15.4	25.7
Either A/C Forcible or Incapacitated Rape	28.0	11.4	8.5	7.9	15.3	18.6	37.1
Both A/C Forcible or Incapacitated Rape	4.8	2.0	2.2	2.4	4.1	5.6	9.5

Note. A/C = attempted or completed combined. Precollege represents any events from age 14 until starting college, 1st semester represents since starting college through December 31st, 2nd semester represents Jan 1st through April 30th, summer represents May 1st through August 31st, academic year represents since starting college through April 30th, study year represents since starting college through August 31st, and lifetime represents from age 14 through August 31st after freshman year.

Table 2

Associations between Forcible and Incapacitated Rape during the Study Year as a Function of Precollege History of Incapacitated or Forcible Rape

	Study Year Incidence					
	Incapacitated Rape			Forcible Rape		
Precollege Incapacitated Rape						
No (<i>n</i> = 386)			10%			6%
Yes (<i>n</i> = 78)			41%			23%
χ^2 (1)			46.54 ***			22.40 ***
Precollege Forcible Rape						
No (<i>n</i> = 412)			15%			8%
Yes (<i>n</i> = 49)			18%			15%
χ^2 (1)			0.68			4.61 *
Multivariate Logistic Regression Predictors	OR	SE	Z	95% CI	OR	SE
Precollege Incapacitated Rape	6.37	1.86	6.35 ***	3.60, 11.29	4.34	1.52
Precollege Forcible Rape	0.94	0.35	-0.17	0.46, 1.93	1.75	0.69
Likelihood Ratio χ^2 (2)	39.41 ***				20.28 ***	

Note. CI = confidence interval. All values represent combined attempted and completed events. Study year represents any events in the 12 months between starting college through August 31st after freshman year.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.