

## **Campus Sexual Assault: Conflicting Expectations and Beliefs**

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Scope: 1,200 people aged 18-25 nationwide, started or recently finished 2-yr or 4-yr college

Recruiting: Mechanical Turk and Prolific Academic. Online voluntary anonymous survey

Organized and funded by [Confi LLC](#) (women's health social venture)

### **Introduction**

Sexual assault is a serious health and safety problem on college campuses across the United States. The majority of cases go unreported, making in-depth research crucial to understanding the problem and designing effective interventions. This study's primary goal is to provide students and university administrators with accessible and actionable insights to inform interventions to prevent sexual assault. In particular, this study aims to increase the effectiveness of consent and bystander trainings by pinpointing what beliefs and misaligned expectations students may have that could promote sexual violence. By rooting the research in a student perspective, the study seeks to bridge any gap between what is being taught and how students actually experience and navigate college campuses.

### **Framing/Scope**

Many scenarios are included in the definition of sexual assault, ranging in tactics, degrees of premeditation and intent, rationalization of actions, and perpetrator motives. Just as with homicide, where killing someone while driving drunk and intentionally running someone over are both illegal but require unique prevention strategies, sexual assault arguably occurs within a variety of contexts which should be addressed in different ways. Training and education have the most direct impact on preventing unintentional or entitlement-driven, unplanned assault scenarios, so these are the focus of this study. This scope should not be misinterpreted as indicating all sexual assault is unintentional or as minimizing unintentional sexual assault. Instead, we hope to draw attention to understanding the less intentional, reckless cases of sexual assault that are less prominent in the media.

The *AAU Campus Climate survey (2015)* found that approximately 80% of sexual assault incidences occur in residential locations,<sup>1</sup> most perpetrators are friends or acquaintances with the victim,<sup>2</sup> and most victims are not drugged.<sup>3</sup> Because the most common context for sexual assault is also a common context for consensual sex, this study investigates the research question: "What does each person expect or want sexually if they go home together after a party or date?" This question is particularly relevant when considering sexual overperception bias,<sup>4</sup> and alcohol use has been shown to exacerbate this effect of misreading cues based on expectations.<sup>5</sup>

### **Main Findings**

The main sections we asked respondents were: what do you expect to happen in scenarios when people go home together, how often have you yourself experienced unwanted sex for a variety of reasons, how much do you agree or disagree with statements about gender beliefs, how acceptable are different scenarios of initiating sex without asking (testing cues), and background questions. In this summary, each section starts with the survey question in quotes, then provides the main findings.

## Expectations

“Two people of the same age and sexual orientation as you meet at a party. They are attracted to each other, dance with each other, and end up going home together. What do you expect to happen next?” (5-point scale from Extremely Likely to Extremely Unlikely).

- **66% of respondents said vaginal sex was likely** or extremely likely. Responses were similar between men and women.

“YOU are at a party and meet someone you are attracted to. You dance with each other, and end up going home together. What do you expect to happen next?”

- Significantly **fewer respondents thought that vaginal sex was likely** when asked “YOU” instead of “Two people” (37% said likely or extremely likely).
- **More men thought that vaginal and/or oral sex were likely than women.**
  - Men: 45% thought vaginal sex was likely, 38% thought cunnilingus was likely, and 41% thought fellatio was likely.
  - Women: 30% thought vaginal sex was likely, 19% thought cunnilingus was likely, and 24% thought fellatio was likely.
- There are not just differences between men and women or by social group, but every demographic shows a full range of expectations. This increases the likelihood that any pairing of people could have mismatched expectations and misread cues. There isn’t a clear social code for this common scenario.

## Unwanted Sex Reasons

“How often have you had vaginal or anal sex with someone when you really **DID NOT want** to for the following reasons?”

- **Both men and women are having a lot of sex when they really do not want to across 16 reasons.** (Previous research often gives only two options for unwanted sex: physically forced or incapacitated by alcohol or drugs).
- **31% of women** had unwanted sex because the other person “**persistently tried** to make moves even after you said no.”
- **18% of women** had unwanted sex because they “had wanted to have manual sex (fingering/hand job) or oral sex (fellatio/cunnilingus) and were pressured into vaginal or anal sex.”
- **22% of men and 34% of women** had unwanted sex because they were hoping it would lead to more romantically.

## Gender Beliefs

“Women usually have to be convinced to have sex.”

- **24% of men agree** or strongly agree, compared to 11% of women.

“Many accusations of sexual assault are the result of women regretting sex after the fact.”

- **28% of men agree** or strongly agree, compared to 9% of women.

“It is a woman’s responsibility to explicitly say no if she wants to stop anything sexual.”

- **45% of men agree** or strongly agree, and 38% of women similarly agree.

## Cues/Consent

In interviews, students indicated that ongoing verbal consent is rare in practice, so we test which cues are viewed as signifying consent. The main variables tested in the scenarios are (1) how drunk a man initiating sex is, (2) how drunk a woman receiving the sexual advance is, (3) what type of sexual act was being performed, and (4) what physical events led up to the sexual advance. We provide twelve versions (3 alcohol-level man x 4

alcohol-level woman) for three sexual act scenarios, “How acceptable is it if a [alcohol-level] man begins having [sexual act] with a [alcohol-level] woman without asking, if...”

- **Men viewed all of the scenarios as more acceptable than women did.** In particular, cues like taking clothes off or having done something sexual previously were viewed as more acceptable than just going home together.
- Alcohol: Men find the actions of a tipsy man to be much more acceptable than the actions of a sober man, and the actions of a blackout drunk man to be slightly more acceptable than sober. Women judge tipsy and sober men in about the same way, and find the actions of a blackout drunk man *less* acceptable. There is slight evidence that men seem to find drunkenness to be a mitigating factor, while women see it as an aggravating factor.
  - Furthermore, 16% of men and 5% of women agree with the statement, “**If both people are drunk, it can’t be sexual assault.**”

### Objectification/Entitlement

“Do you have any friends who have gone to a party extremely determined to have sex, no matter who the partner would be?” (Options: No, 1 friend, 2 friends, 3 friends, 4 or more friends)

- 61% of men and 49% of women have at least one friend who has done this; 15% of men have 4 or more friends.

### **Discussion**

There is a significant gap in what collegiate men and women expect to happen sexually. Almost twice as many men as women said that they think vaginal sex is likely when they go home with someone. Previous research has shown that men have a tendency to project their own level of sexual interest onto their partner (sexual overperception bias theory), making them more likely to misread cues as signs of sexual interest. With some men both expecting sex and being more likely to misread cues, it is not surprising that many say they do not verbally ask for consent (why ask if you think it is clear that your partner wants sex or if you think going home together indicates consent?). Most respondents also agreed that they have friends who have gone to parties extremely determined to have sex regardless of who the partner would be, indicating that many people have expectations going into a party and that there exists a culture of sexual objectification.

There is also a related gender perception disconnect regarding how much convincing women need before they will have sex. A third of women report having had unwanted sex because someone was too persistent, plus one in four men agree women “need to be convinced to have sex,” which is a dangerous combination.

These scenarios where people unintentionally engage in sexual assault or unintentionally pressure their partner to have sex when they really do not want to (though possibly not viewed as sexual assault by the recipient) may not appear at first glance as the most dangerous forms of sexual assault compared to utilizing narcotic stimulants or weapons, but they are precisely dangerous because the initiator is oblivious. A type of broken window theory<sup>6</sup> may also apply here, whereby allowing these behaviors to continue has a signaling and norm-setting effect of showing society’s acceptance of other sexual violence. As shown in the example above, these types of scenarios are also problematic because they create a vicious cycle of both reinforcing beliefs about needing to be persistent in sexual advances and reinforcing rape myths and victim blaming.

What can be done to reduce sexual assault on college campuses? Trainings rooted more in the realities of the student experience that address these problematic beliefs head on and facilitate discussion will be more effective than compliance-driven trainings. Increasing people’s awareness of these gaps in expectations is also important, and educating students about healthy, respectful relationships early, to enable them to better communicate with individuals they may be sexually attracted to and act accordingly, in college and society at

large. This study's findings can be used directly to spark conversation with students in a less charged way, showing students what their peers think and challenging them to develop a point of view as well. Confi (<http://confi.co/>) will provide free infographic discussion guides for parents to facilitate using research to talk to high school kids about sexual assault.

#### Notes

- (1) Female victims of forcible penetration reported 30% dorms or residence halls, 28% single-sex residential (e.g. fraternities or sororities), 34% off-campus residential, 11% on-campus other residential, 9% bars/clubs/restaurants/other social venue, 19% other. Female victims of penetration involving incapacitation reported 23% dorms or residence halls, 22% single-sex residential (e.g. fraternities or sororities), 42% off-campus residential, 10% on-campus other residential, 7% bars/clubs/restaurants/other social venue, 11% other.
- (2) For female victims of forcible penetration, 58% of offenders were a "Friend or Acquaintance," 32% were "Strangers," and 20% were "Involved or Intimate at the time." Results were similar for penetration while incapacitated (respectively 62%, 28%, 20%).
- (3) About 15% of female victims were certain or suspected that they were drugged without knowledge for both penetration involving force and incapacitation.
- (4) People tend to project their own level of interest in sex or in a committed relationship onto their partners (*Henningsen 2010; Haselton & Buss, 2000*). From an evolutionary perspective, the theory states that it is more costly for men to miss a mating opportunity by underperceiving cues than to err on the side of overperceiving cues.
- (5) Studies have shown that drinking alcohol led to increased bias for men reading women's ambiguous cues as sexual interest instead of friendliness. (*Farris, 2010*)
- (6) Wilson, James Q; Kelling, George L (Mar 1982), "Broken Windows: The police and neighborhood safety", *The Atlantic*.