

Sexual Assault and Stranger Aggression on a Canadian University Campus¹

Walter S. DeKeseredy

Carleton University

Martin D. Schwartz²

Ohio University

Karen Tait

Carleton University

There is a severe lack of knowledge about sexual assault on Canadian college campuses. This exploratory study of 259 Canadian undergraduate women (mostly white, of British or European heritage, with about half from families of total incomes of over Can \$50,000) provides evidence that although Canada generally has a lower crime rate than the United States, sexual aggression against women does not seem to be lower. Further, there is an extraordinary victimization rate for the stranger sexual advances that are legal or barely illegal, but which form a major component of women's fear. Most surveyed women have in the past year been victimized by uncomfortable stranger aggression in public places, while approximately one-third of those who date reported at least one episode of physical, verbal, or psychological sexual coercion. Close to 25% of the women said they had sexual intercourse when they did not want to during the past year.

In the United States, researchers have often demonstrated through self-report and victimization surveys that sexual assaults are endemic on university campuses (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Schwartz, 1991;

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²To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio 45701.

Ward, Chapman, Cohn, White, & Williams, 1991). However, no comparable Canadian studies have been conducted. Canadian research has focused mainly on the incidence, correlates, and causes of male physical and psychological attacks on women in marital and dating relationships (Brinkerhoff and Lupri, 1988; DeKeseredy, 1988; Kennedy & Dutton, 1989; Lupri, 1990; Mercer, 1988; Smith, 1987, 1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b; see also DeKeseredy & Hinch, 1991, for a comprehensive critique of this literature). However, feminist activists (e.g., Harris, 1991) claim that large numbers of Canadian female university students' lives rest upon a "continuum of sexual violence" (Kelly, 1987), and that there is a great need to address both their "well-founded fear" (Hanmer & Saunders, 1984) of sexually aggressive men and the academic "selective inattention" given to these males and their victims. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to present exploratory Canadian incidence data collected from a sample of eastern Ontario female university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a dearth of reliable Canadian research on female university students' experiences with sexual assault. For example, to the best of our knowledge, only one relevant incidence study has thus far been conducted (DeKeseredy, 1988), and this was a survey only of male potential offenders. One aspect of a broader project involved giving a self-administered instrument to a convenience sample of 308 male undergraduates at four Canadian universities. DeKeseredy asked men whether over the past 12 months they had threatened to use force, or actually used force "to make a woman engage in sexual activities."

Few participants responded positively to these questions, but that is typical of such surveys. For example, 2.6% of the respondents reported having sexually abused one or more dating partners in the year prior to the study. It is difficult to compare this to responses to questions worded differently in other studies. It is particularly difficult to know how each respondent reacted to the vague term "sexual activities." If one presumes that students read the term to mean sexual intercourse, attempted sexual intercourse, or oral or anal penetration, then this finding is very similar to U.S. studies. For example, Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) report that of 2972 males enrolled in 32 U.S. institutions of higher education approximately 2.4% replied that they had used threat or force in the past year to attempt or complete the above forms of penetration. Of course, if students in Canada read these questions to also mean forced kissing or petting, then Koss *et al.*'s equivalent finding was an admission by 3.4% of the men

(1987). Thus, although the overall reported crime rate in Canada is lower than in the United States, at least in DeKeseredy's preliminary data there seem to be similar rates of offending men on college campuses.

However, there is no equivalent study of the number of Canadian women who are victimized by sexual assault on campus. Once again, it is difficult to discover just what the equivalent rate is in the United States. Different methodologies, definitions, questions, and sampling procedures used in various studies have produced rather different results (Johnson and Ferraro, 1988; Schwartz, 1991; see Ward *et al.*, 1991, for a brief review of the various research techniques used to collect data on sexual assaults against U.S. female university students). However, most U.S. research has found lifetime prevalence rates that range from 15 to 25% (Kanin, 1957; Koss, 1985, 1988; Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss *et al.*, 1987; Makepeace, 1986; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Rivera & Regoli, 1987; Ward *et al.*, 1991).

Even though these rates are already high, like all self-report and victimization surveys these studies share underreporting as a major limitation (DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1991; Smith, 1987). For example, respondents may not disclose incidents because of embarrassment, fear of reprisal, or even memory error (Kennedy & Dutton, 1989). Despite these problems, however, it is apparent that many U.S. women are victimized by male sexual aggression. Where researchers have asked, they have found that a significant amount of this sexual aggression takes place on college campuses (Koss *et al.*, 1987; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Rivera & Regoli, 1987). As Schwartz (1991, p. 305) points out, "the conclusion is inescapable that a very substantial minority of women on American college campuses have experienced an event which would fit most states' definitions of felony rape or sexual assault." The question before us is whether Canadian female students have similar sexually abusive experiences.

METHOD

Subjects

The data reported here came from a purposive sample of 259 female undergraduate students enrolled in 1990 Fall and Winter sociology, psychology, and law classes at a large eastern Ontario university. Although this sampling technique does not produce representative sample survey data, it is consistent with procedures used in most campus studies conducted in the U.S. As Ward *et al.*, 1991, point out, it is extremely difficult to get a representative sample of students on a campus because of many factors, such as a high residential mobility and unreliable student

directories. Thus classes similar to those selected for this study are generally surveyed. Further, a purposive sample is appropriate for exploratory research (Sudman, 1983).

A self-administered victimization survey was distributed in classrooms. The major advantage of this approach is that the researcher's presence both guarantees a high completion rate and encourages respondents to answer all of the questions (DeKeseredy, 1989). The reliability and validity of this technique is also well established (Sheatsley, 1983). Of the group answering the questionnaire, 7 left most of the questions blank, and 33 reported that they had not been involved in either a casual or serious dating relationship in the past year. Of these 33, 14 were married or divorced. As the first part of the survey was designed to investigate mainly abuse in dating relationships, these women were not asked to fill out the first part of the questionnaire. (The implications of this decision will be discussed in the final section.) They were, however, included in the survey questions on stranger aggression. This led to a final sample of 219 university women, (or 252 cases when the nondating women were used in the analysis) ranging in age from 18 to 46, with a mean age of 21.9, but a modal age of 20. Most were first (45.8%) or third (28.5%) year students.

Subjects were given a choice of 17 ethnic backgrounds to choose from, but 7.2% chose "other" and 10.4% chose "do not know." Of the remaining group, 60% chose British Isles and 31.2% chose various other European and Scandinavian backgrounds. West Indian or Black were chosen by 3%, with smaller numbers choosing Asian or Native backgrounds. The total family incomes reported by these students were fairly high, with almost exactly 50% reporting incomes of Canadian \$50,000 or more per year.

Definition and Measurement of Sexual Assault

Ward *et al.* (1991, p. 67) defined sexual assault as events in which "the woman was certain at the time that she did not want to engage in sexual experience and either communicated this in some way (said no, protested, said she didn't want to, physically struggled, cried) or else was intimidated or forced." Although there is some problem with this definition, as we shall see, it is the one used in this paper. A slightly modified version of the Sexual Experiences Survey used by Koss and Oros (1982) was adopted to attempt to operationalize the wide variety of events covered by this definition of sexual assault. In general, this survey is a reliable and valid measure (Koss & Gidycz, 1985). The text of all items used is presented in Table I. The response categories for each of these measures were yes and no.

Table I. Incidence of Sexual Assault

Type of Abuse	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Have you ever in the past 12 months:		
1. Had sexual intercourse with a man when you both wanted to?	173	79
2. Had a man misinterpret the level of sexual intimacy you desired?	79	36.1
3. Been in a situation where a man became so sexually aroused that you felt it was useless to stop him even though you did not want to have sexual intercourse?	49	22.4
4. Had sexual intercourse with a man even though you didn't really want to because he threatened to end your relationship otherwise?	2	.9
5. Had sexual intercourse with a man you didn't really want to because you felt pressured by his continual arguments?	19	8.7
6. Found out that a man had obtained sexual intercourse with you by saying things he didn't really mean?	27	12.3
7. Been in a situation where a man used some degree of physical force to try to make you engage in kissing or petting when you didn't want to?	22	10
8. Been in a situation where a man tried to get sexual intercourse with you when you didn't want to by threatening to use physical force if you didn't cooperate, but for various reasons sexual intercourse did not occur?	6	2.7
9. Been in a situation where a man used some degree of physical force to get you to have sexual intercourse with him when you didn't want to, but for various reasons sexual intercourse didn't occur?	10	4.6
10. Had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he threatened to use physical force if you didn't cooperate?	1	.5
11. Had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he used some degree of physical force?	3	1.4
12. Have you ever been raped?	1	.5

RESULTS

The prevalence rate of victimization in this sample — that is, the number of women who reported being victimized in the past 12 months in one or more of the last 10 items (3–12) is 32.8% ($N = 85$). Obviously, this figure is much higher than DeKeseredy's (1988) incidence rate for men, but it is generally similar to results obtained in the United States.

Table I shows that every type of sexual assault was reported by at least one person. The use of this particular survey of women's sexual experiences has both positive and negative features. On the positive side, it allows us to look at some of the experiences women have which can be psychologically or emotionally scarring, but which may not be against current law in either Canada or the United States, or at least involve situations where legal intervention is impossible or improbable under the current political system.

For example, after a first question that establishes a base rate of voluntary sexual activity among these women, the second question asks directly about an issue that has been much discussed in the literature — the inability of men and women to communicate; or at least, the inability of men to hear what women are saying. Here, for the previous one year alone, more than 36% of all women reported that a man misinterpreted the level of sexual intimacy they desired. Still, we have not included it here in the definition of sexual assault victimization.

The third question, and the first used in calculating the total victimization figures, similarly asks a question about a very common situation, but one where there is "moral ambiguity" among not only men but also women. Society says that women are responsible for the regulation of sexual interactions. What happens if a man gets "too" excited sexually? Are men regulated only by raw biological urges, unable to stop once started? Are they inherently violent when they do not get their way? Whatever the truth, or whatever truth women believe, here close to one quarter of the women in the past one year alone had been in a situation where they did not want to engage in sexual intercourse but did anyway, because the man got too sexually excited and the woman felt it was useless to attempt to stop him. It is difficult to determine the conditions under which this is sexual assault, since most legal definitions and even the Ward *et al.* definition we began with require that the woman not only does not want the sexual activity but also communicate this fact to the man in some way. If a woman "gives up" to avoid trouble or pain, or because she feels that she is at fault, she enters an area of moral ambiguity. While many would argue that sexual assault takes place at any time there is not explicit agreement by the woman, certainly it would be difficult to gain agreement to this definition even within

a feminist legal community (Fenstermaker, 1989). There remains a serious problem, however, in a society where annually close to a quarter of college women find themselves coerced by circumstances into sexual intercourse that they do not desire.

The negative side of using this survey is that it has been rarely used in exactly this manner, so it is difficult to make comparisons to some other major studies. For example, Koss and Oros (1982) used essentially the same survey, but do not report rates for the previous one year; they report instead lifetime levels of victimization. However, to the extent that we can make rough comparisons to other sexual victimization surveys, the data in Canada are completely comparable to those in the United States.

The best comparison is with the studies led by Mary Koss, as reported for example in Koss *et al.* (1987) and Warshaw (1988). Koss *et al.* (1987, p. 168) report one year frequencies (on a slightly different set of questions) from what is widely agreed to be the most methodologically sound and representative survey of sexual experiences of college students ever conducted in the United States. The 3187 women in the sample came from 32 U.S. higher education institutions of varying missions. In the study here, only university women were surveyed, and only one major university was used, so some differences should be expected on those grounds alone.

However, what is most interesting is that given the methodological differences in sample selection and survey design, the results are not at all dissimilar. For example, Koss *et al.* report that in a question very much like Question 5 in Table I, 353 or 11% said they had given in within the past year to sexual intercourse they did not desire because of verbal pressure. Here, we would argue that Questions 4 and 5 should be combined, to make a comparison 9.6%, and that these two questions cannot be read without also looking at Question 6, which does not have an equivalent in Koss *et al.* It is possible that with all three questions here differentiated, some women took experiences that might ordinarily have gone into a positive response to Question 5, but instead put them into a positive response to Question 6 because it is more specific to her situation. In other words, if the question is how many university women give in to unwanted sexual intercourse because of male verbal pressure, the Canadian rate is certainly as high or higher than the U.S. rate.

Another area with possibly higher Canadian rates is in the use of physical force for nonintercourse-related sex. Koss *et al.* found that 111 women (3.5%) reported they were physically forced to engage in kissing or petting, but 22 (10%) of the women here report being the victims of physical force in this setting.

For attempted sexual intercourse, there are two questions here, with Question 8 asking about threats of force and Question 9 asking about actual use of force. The combined 7.3% who answered that they had been victimized here compares to the 5.6% who answered positively to the single question asking about both types of victimization in the Koss *et al.* survey.

Finally, the last three questions of Table I ask about completed sexual intercourse in a situation that constitutes forcible rape in all Canadian provinces and all U.S. states. For Koss *et al.*, the one-year incidence rate was just under 2%. For this Canadian study, it was 2.4%. (The women who answered affirmatively to Questions 10-12 were not the same; this is not a case of one person who answered all three positively.)

In another comparison that shows Canadian women have much to share with U.S. women, only 3 of the women in this survey reported that they reported their victimization to the police. None of the victims of the events covered in the last three questions reported them to the police. In the Koss survey only 5% of rape victims reported to the police (Warshaw, 1988); here seemingly none did.

NONPHYSICAL SEXUAL ASSAULT

Virtually all sexual experiences surveys take the point of view, both implicitly and explicitly, that sexual victimization requires physical contact. Most surveys enquire about a continuum of victimization, ranging from unwanted kissing or touching as the most minor to forcible rape as the most major. All of these ignore various types of "little rapes" (Kelly, 1988; Stanko, 1990) or acts of "non-criminal violence" (Jones, MacLean, & Young, 1986). However, these acts can be considered part of the sexual assault victimization experience since they commonly terrorize women and change their behavior (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1991; Gordon & Riger, 1989). These male behaviors include such acts as obscene phone calls, leers, suggestive comments, following women for blocks down the street, yelling obscenities or suggestive comments to women from automobiles, or making unwanted sexual advances in restaurants and bars (Kelly & Radford, 1987). These events and other items found on the continuum of sexual violence are hardly trivial because at the time they are taking place, victims do not know how they will end. It is only in retrospect that they are viewed as insignificant. Many women fear that perpetrators of the above behaviors will act upon their abusive threats, which is not irrational; some of them will (Stanko, 1990).

Table II. Percentage of Women Victimized by Stranger Uncomfortable Advances

	On the street	Bar/restaurant	On campus	Obscene calls
Full sample N = 253	55.6	61.7	19.0	41.1
Active dating N = 219	56.9	65.8	20.5	41.1
Not dating N = 33	48.5	36.4	9.1	42.4
Under 26 years old N = 222	57.5	64.9	20.8	42.3
26 or older N = 27	40.7	37.0	7.4	29.6

In this survey, we asked about several different summary forms of these unwanted advances. Respondents were asked if, over the *past 12 months* they had experienced an uncomfortable advance from a male *stranger* on the street, in a bar or restaurant, or on campus. Further, they were asked if they had received an obscene phone call, and how many they had received.

In Table II, we can see the percentage of several groups who have been victimized by each of the four types of nonphysical sexual assault victimization. The first line shows the full sample, the second the 219 women who claimed to be active in casual or serious dating, the third the 33 inactive women. Then, because there is some relationship between age and victimization, the last two lines show the incidence rates for women 26 and over, and women 25 and younger. Ten women did not list their age, and are not included in the last two lines of Table II, although they are included in the first three lines.

Overall, 84.1% of the total sample had experienced one or more of the victimizations over the past year. There is no relationship between year in school and victimization (Pearson $\chi^2 = 0.868$, $df = 3$, probability = 0.83). As can be seen from Table II, the group of 27 older women are slightly less likely to be victims of uncomfortable advances from male strangers in all categories. Unsurprisingly, women who are inactive in dating are slightly less likely to be the victims of advances in bars and restaurants or on campus, but it is essential to note that these lower rates are still extremely high: more than one third of all women inactive in dating were within the past year were victims of advances in bars and restaurants. This may be only slightly more than half of the 65.8% victimization rate for the dating women, but it still represents a significant problem.

Table III. Discriminant Function Analysis

Groups defined by whether or not victim of stranger aggression						
	Yes:	209	.843			
	No:	39	.157			
Canonical discriminant functions						
Function	Eigenvalue	Canonical correlation	Wilk's lambda	χ^2	df	Significance
1	.0537	.2257	.9491	10.222	3	.017
Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients						
Function 1						
	Age	.681				
	Dating	.542				
	Income	.167				

Similarly, it is interesting to note that obscene telephone calls were received by more than 40% of all women, and that even in the "low" group about 30% of the women were victimized in this way. Few of these victimized women received only one call in the past year (16.5%); most received between 2 and 5, but 27.5% received more than 5 calls and 10.1% received more than 20.

It is a common claim of the women's movement that any women can be a victim of male aggression. An alternative claim might be that some women attract a disproportionate amount of the victimization. It is interesting to note that there is no statistically significant correlation between the stranger victimization variable and the dating victimization variable here ($r = .128$). This suggests that one cannot predict victimization in one group by knowing who was victimized in the other. Table III shows a discriminant function analysis using the independent variables of age, total family income, and whether or not the person was dating, in an attempt to predict whether she was or was not a victim of stranger aggression. Other independent variables such as yearly income and whether or not the woman had been the victim of prior dating victimization did not meet the minimum tolerance test for inclusion in the model. The test statistics are low; the Wilks's lambda, for example, shows that the difference between

the two groups (victimized, not victimized) only accounts for slightly more than 5% of the variance in the predicting variables. These analyses support the notion that any woman can be victimized; the variables we have data on do not show a difference between victimized and nonvictimized women.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Surveys on the extent of sexual abuse at Canadian universities are in short supply. Thus, one of the main objectives of this exploratory study was to contribute to the development of a data base. What we have begun to discover is that the rate of sexual assault against Canadian women on college campuses is at least as high as it is in the United States, and perhaps a bit higher in places. This finding gains credibility from the recent finding of Barnes, Greenwood, and Sommer (1991) that the percentage of college students in Canada who are physically abused in dating relationships may be as much as 40% higher than in the United States.

Further, it is not only in threatened and completed physical sexual abuse that Canadian women suffer. As we have shown here, the overwhelming majority of college women in this sample (84.1%) have suffered at least one form of stranger aggression in public places. Critics of the women's movement have received great attention for arguing that "only" a small number of women come forward to report completed rapes each year, concluding that the fear women have on the streets is unfounded (Gilbert, 1991). One reason that surveys show that women have such a high fear (e.g., Jones, MacLean, & Young, 1986) is the regular and constant victimization on them. As discussed earlier, it is only with hindsight that we can know the difference between harmless catcalls and a prelude to rape.

Obviously, methodological improvements are required in future studies, and below are several suggestions for enhancing the accuracy of survey research on the incidence and prevalence of this major social problem.

One difficulty of this survey is the decision to remove women who had not been in a casual or serious dating relationship in the past year from the analysis of direct sexual assaults. The primary reason for doing so was to allow a more direct comparison with other studies of dating relationships. Adding in respondents who did not date would presumably have lowered all incidence rates. However, such a decision is not sensitive to the fact that women who do not date may still be similarly victimized by acquaintances, and that lesbian women are alienated from the sampling process. We know that lesbian women suffer from various forms of victimization (Renzetti, 1992), but this procedure will not be sensitive to their problems. This issue will need to be faced more directly.

Perhaps the most obvious recommendation is to study random samples of both male and female students, a point that should also be noted by U.S. researchers. Like most research on *physical* violence in university dating relationships (see DeKeseredy and Hinch, 1991, and Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989, for detailed reviews of the woman abuse in courtship literature), the majority of studies on *sexual* assault on postsecondary school victims present data from convenience samples not representative of larger student populations.

The quality of incidence data can also be improved by multiple measures (Weis, 1989). Rather than just relying on the SES—a unidimensional measure—to elicit sexual assault data, respondents can be asked more than once about their experiences. Subjects often do not report events because of embarrassment, fear of reprisal, or memory error. Some people may even consider some sexually aggressive acts as too trivial or inconsequential to mention (Straus *et al.*, 1980). Researchers could minimize these problems by using follow-up or supplementary open- and closed-ended questions about sexually abusive acts.

Smith's (1987) Toronto woman abuse study, although it did not devote much attention to sexual assault, indicates that these questions are effective ways of obtaining more information. Some silent or forgetful victims ($N = 60$) changed their answers when asked again later in the interview. Belated reports increased the prevalence rate in that study by approximately 10%. Furthermore, 21 belated disclosures to lengthy closed-ended invitations increased the severe abuse prevalence rate.

However, open-ended supplementary questions should also be considered for reasons heavily informed by feminist research on various types of woman abuse (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Hanmer & Saunders, 1984; Kelly, 1988; Kelly & Radford, 1987; Russell, 1990). One of the best summaries of the feminist rationale for this method is provided by Smith (1991b, p. 9), who asserts that

Open questions appear to have a decided advantage, however, when it comes to building interviewer—respondent rapport. For one thing, an open format may reduce the threat of a question on violence, because it allows the respondent to qualify her response, to express exact shades of meaning, rather than forcing her to choose from a number of possibly threatening alternatives. For another, open questions may reduce the power imbalance inherent in the interview situation (whereby the relationship between researcher and researched parallels the hierarchical nature of traditional male—female relationships), because open questions encourage interaction and collaboration (Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Hoff, 1990). The less threatening the question and the more equal the power relationship, the greater the probability of rapport and, in turn, of eliciting an honest answer to a sensitive question on violence.

These suggestions are likely to generate higher incidence and prevalence rates in subsequent studies, although these procedures do little to

yield information on the "risk markers" such as race, class, and educational status (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986) associated with sexual assaults on female university students. These factors may or may not be a causal variables, but in order to advance a better understanding of sexual abuse on campuses, and to both prevent and control it, we need to empirically discern the major correlates of this problem, an issue that has thus far been ignored by Canadian sociologists. Correlational research will also assist in the development of theories.

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