

2010

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#### Recommended Citation

Lowell, Gary (2010). A Review of Rape Statistics, Theories, and Policy. *Undergraduate Review*, 6, 158-163.  
Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev/vol6/iss1/29](https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol6/iss1/29)

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# A Review of Rape Statistics, Theories, and Policy

GARY LOWELL



Gary Lowell is a senior majoring in political science and minoring in criminal justice. This paper was written

for Dr. Dina Perrone's Applied Crime Theory course. Gary is thankful to Dr. Perrone for her guidance, as without her this paper would not appear in its current form. Gary hopes to pursue a career in public service.

**R**ape is defined in the laws of Massachusetts as “[s]exual intercourse or unnatural sexual intercourse by a person with another person who is compelled to submit by force and against his will or by threat of bodily injury” (Mass. Gen. Laws Ann. ch. 277, § 39, 2009). Although traditional definitions of rape have been that only a female can be raped and only a male can rape, “courts have held that the rape statutes in their jurisdictions are gender-neutral and apply equally to perpetrators of either sex” (Lynton, 1995). Still, since male on female rape is more prevalent (see Gonzales, Schofield & Schmitt, 2006), this paper focuses on that form of rape.

Patterns in the commission of rape include that college women are raped at a higher frequency than non-college women (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007), drug use is common among rapists (Baltieri & Guerra de Andrade, 2008), and fraternity or athletic team members are more likely to engage in rape (Humphry & Kahn, 2000). Many theories explain why people commit rape, such as evolutionary, feminist, self-control, narcissistic reactance, and the American Dream and Crime. The theories on rape can be used to outline many different rape prevention strategies; among these are educating high school students and college men about rape, lobbying for improved rape legislation, and teaching women how to defend themselves.

## I: RAPE STATISTICS

### Rape Rate

According to the 2008 Uniform Crime Reports, the rate of women raped by men reported to the police was 29.3 per 100,000 inhabitants (UCR, 2008). The rape rate has decreased substantially since 1993 when it was around 40 per 100,000 inhabitants. The rates are much higher in the Midwest (34 per 100,000) than in other parts of the US. In the Northeastern part of the US it is the lowest at 20 per 100,000 inhabitants. The rates in the South (30.4 per 100,000) and West (30.2 per 100,000) are very similar. Rape is also more prevalent in cities (38.2 per 100,000 inhabitants) than in either metropolitan areas (29.3 per 100,000) or nonmetropolitan areas (23.4 per 100,000).

Similar to the UCR, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) also shows that the rape rate has been going down over time, though this rate represents both male and female rape. In 1973, the rate was 2.5 rapes per 1000 citizens aged twelve and older (NCVS, 2010). In 2008, the last year for

which data are available, the rate was 0.8 per 1000 citizens aged twelve and older. However, the rape rate rose each successive year from 2004 when it was 0.4 per 1000 (NCVS, 2010).

The 2006 National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS; Gonzales, Schofield & Schmitt, 2006) found that 17.6% of women are raped during their lifetime, which is significantly greater than male victims of rape (0.3%). The NVAWS shows that more women have been victims of a completed rape (14.8%) than of an attempted rape (2.8%). The NVAWS also suggests “the risk of being raped as a child or adolescent has increased steadily for women over the past half century” (Gonzales, Schofield & Schmitt, 2006, p. 19).

Rape statistics indicate those populations most likely to commit rape, the situations most conducive to rape, and the relationship between drug abuse and rape. For instance, women in college settings are more likely to be raped than women in non-college settings (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). “Sexual offenders against women have significant problems with drug use” (Baltieri & Guerra de Andrade, 2008, p. 74; Abbey, Parkhill, Clinton-Sherrod & Zawacki, 2007), and men who are a part of a fraternity have a greater likelihood of committing rape than men who are not in a fraternity (Humphrey & Kahn, 2000).

Of college females, 20% reported having sex forced on them at least once (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). Studies show that, “25.2% of college men surveyed reported engaging in some form of sexually aggressive behavior after age 14 years” (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007, p. 841). These sexual assaults are most likely to occur in social situations where heavy drinking is common (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007, p. 830). Studies show that a problem with drug use is the most important predictor of sexual aggression (e.g., Baltieri & Guerra de Andrade, 2008). People who abuse drugs, legal and illegal, are more likely to rape women (Baltieri & Guerra de Andrade, 2008).

Participation in fraternities and athletic teams also increases the probability that one will engage in rape (Humphrey & Kahn, 2000). Some studies show “a causal effect of belonging to a fraternity on heavy drinking and its consequences” (DeSimone, 2009, p. 349). Since there is a relationship between fraternity membership and heavy drinking, and between fraternity membership and rape, the inference can be drawn that a heavy amount of drinking may cause a higher frequency of rape.

## II: RAPE THEORIES

According to Baumeister, Catanese, and Wallace (2002), a rape theory cannot simply explain why men commit rape; it must also explain why men do not commit rape. They also believe that a rape theory should explain why violence against women

takes a sexual form and not a purely violent one (Baumeister et al., 2002). Some theories that may help explain why an individual commits rape are evolutionary theory, feminist theory, self-control theory, narcissistic reactance theory, and American dream theory.

### Evolutionary Theory

A biological explanation of rape includes Thornhill and Palmer’s evolutionary theory of rape (Siegert & Ward, 2002). Proponents of this theory claim that those men who were able to force their sexual desires on women were able to reproduce more efficiently, and thus have more offspring with their traits. Thornhill and Palmer are “dismissive of rape theories that emphasize the role of culture and learning in the acquisition of rape-prone traits, arguing that culture is only possible because individuals have evolved capacities that enable them to learn” (Siegert & Ward, 2002, p. 6). They argue that, over time, rape may have been part of evolution because it was a way for men to “circumvent females’ caution when it comes to selecting a mate” (Siegert & Ward, 2002, p. 6). They claim this evolutionary trait survived over time because it guaranteed the continuance of the human species. They purport that “rape can only really be understood in the context of mate selection and the adaptive problems faced by both males and females in the Pleistocene environment. The act of rape effectively blocks or interferes with females’ core reproductive strategies” (Siegert & Ward, 2002 p. 6).

However, Siegert and Ward (2002) also argue that Thornhill and Palmer’s evolutionary theory of rape is not able to adequately explain why men commit rape. They dispute Thornhill and Palmer’s claim that men commit rape for the sole purpose of obtaining sex. Instead, they say that “rapists are an extremely heterogeneous population motivated by quite distinct issues and characterized by different clusters of psychological characteristics,” thus making such a generalized statement impossible (Siegert & Ward, 2002, p. 162).

### Feminist Theory

Another theory that could help explain rape is Feminist Theory. Feminist theorists assert that rape is only one symptom of the larger problem of a male dominated society (Cahill, 2001). Feminist theorists see rape as more of a violent act than a sexual act, and purport that rape is inspired by political motivations to dominate and degrade. Feminist theorists also deny that rape has an individualistic nature, but claim that rape is “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men keep all women* in a state of fear” (Cahill, 2001, p. 16, emphasis original). Feminists see rape as serving the function of “ensure[ing] the continued and necessary protection of women by men” (Cahill, 2001, p. 17). Feminists argue that, as a result

of women's fears of being raped, they become dependent on men to protect them (Cahill, 2001).

Feminists also argue that the representation of women, the social construction of femininity, the socialization of men and the social construction of masculinity can explain rape. For example, men who commit rape against women may claim that women are "inherently different from men and that these differences cannot be understood readily by men" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 10). This "serves to inhibit development of a realistic complex understanding of women's beliefs and desires" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 10). This also implies that these men may feel sex is a "competitive game between two opponents with incompatible needs" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 10). Because these men think women are inherently different, it is easier for them to harm women (Polaschek & Ward, 2002).

Theorists who promote the theory of entitlement, which is also linked to gender and feminist theories, postulate that men think they are entitled to having their sexual needs met on demand by women (Polaschek & Ward, 2002). Studies suggest that the likelihood that men will engage in rape depends on their "tendency to attribute to women certain beliefs, capacities, and desires" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 2), such as the belief that, "women are inherently duplicitous or constantly seek and desire sex with men" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 2). Some men believe that "women exist in a constant state of sexual reception. They were created to meet the sexual needs of men, and women's most significant needs and desires center around the sexual domain" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 11). Men with this belief think that women were put on the earth only to please men, and that women want only what men want. As a result, these men tend to perceive a woman's actions as being sexual, even when they are not.

Some men also think that a woman's actions and her sexual needs are often in opposition to each other (Polaschek & Ward, 2002). They think women are "unaware of the unconscious messages their bodies are emitting" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p.11). They often conclude that "a woman can enjoy sex even when it is forced upon her" and "rape is generally a misinterpretation of sexual cues" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 11). This idea leads them to believe that it is acceptable to forcibly rape a woman because, even if she claims she does not want it, she at least subconsciously does.

Often those men who see women as sex objects and as inherently inferior to men are more likely to commit to rape (Polaschek & Ward, 2002). Men who hold these beliefs think that they are "entitled to control women's sexuality, and to determine

what a woman really wants" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 14). Such men also think they "are entitled to shape women's sexual and nonsexual behavior, and to decide what is acceptable or unacceptable" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 14). Therefore, women should meet male needs on demand, men are entitled to force their desires onto women, and therefore, men are entitled to rape women.

Martin, Vieraitis, and Britto's (2006) study supports the feminist claim that rape is only one symptom of a male dominated society. In their study, areas of greater gender equality tended to have higher rape rates. They state that the "results indicate[d] a backlash effect for the gender equality measures [because] men may perceive as threatening their hold on socioeconomic status" (Martin et al., 2006, p. 334). This seems to support the feminist claim; since some males may perceive greater gender equality as a threat, they may resort to rape to feel that they are still dominant.

### **Self Control Theory**

One theory that can lead to a man committing rape against a female is based on the premise that the male sex drive is uncontrollable (Polaschek & Ward, 2002). Men with this belief say that their sexual urges cannot be controlled and they are not responsible for their actions. Proponents of this theory "[propose] both that men's sexual energy is difficult to control and that women have a key role in its loss of control," since women deny sex to men who have to relieve their sexual drive (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 13).

This theory can be tied to Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) low self-control theory. Low self-control theorists posit that, since criminal acts provide immediate gratification, criminals will engage in them because they are not able to defer gratification. In addition, theorists claim that crime is easy, exciting, requires little skill, and may result in pain to others. Since individuals with low self-control will be more impulsive, adventurous, self-centered, and have fewer skills, they will be more likely to engage in crime because of its perceived benefits (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Studies show that lifestyle impulsivity may be a predictor of sexual aggression (e.g., Prentky & Knight, 1991). Having poor social and interpersonal skills can also be a predictor of sexual aggression (Prentky & Knight, 1991). Studies also show that rapists tend to have "lower empathy, lower adult attachment... [and] stronger sexual dominance motives" compared to the average citizen (Abbey et al., 2007, p. 1574). Thus, men, who have low self-control and are not able to control their sex drive, may obtain "sex without courtship" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 89). They are more likely to commit rape.

### **Narcissistic Reactance Theory**

Another theory that can explain rape is the Narcissistic Reactance Theory, which is also tied to Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) low self-control theory (Agnew, Brezina, Wright & Cullen, 2002). In this theory, narcissists are defined as having a "lower proneness to shame and guilt," having "unrealistically positive self-evaluations," and being "especially likely to respond to bad evaluations by blaming other sources, including the evaluator and the technique of evaluation" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 3). These theorists claim that the, "tendency to respond to esteem threats by getting angry and blaming others may contribute to the elevated level of interpersonal difficulties that narcissists report" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 4).

The authors also claim that narcissists have "shallow relationships, along with contempt for and devaluation of others" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 4). Narcissists are "eager to obtain the admiration of others and are prone to envying the successes of others. They are charming and adept at influencing others to do what they want, yet ironically they are also insensitive to others and indifferent to other people's feelings and desires" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 4). Narcissists tend to be willing to do whatever it takes to achieve the goal that they want from a relationship, including rape (Baumeister et al., 2002). Since they are willing to use any means to achieve their goals, narcissists, arguably, have low self-control and are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve immediate gratification (e.g., rape).

The narcissistic reaction theory of rape is based on the following model: When a man desires sex with a woman, and she refuses, "[h]e is thus presented with a choice between acquiescing to her refusal or using force to obtain sex" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 4). For those who are narcissistic and lack self control,

...an unavailable woman would become increasingly attractive to the man as a potential sex partner...[the man] would try that much harder to reclaim his lost option by having sex with [the woman]...[and the man] may aggress against [the woman], because [the woman] is the person who restricted [the man's] freedom. (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 5)

According to Narcissistic Reactance Theorists, with narcissism comes an "exaggerated sense of entitlement" which they say could "cause [men] to form higher expectations of receiving sexual favors than other men would have" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 6). A narcissistic man would, "take a woman's sexual refusal as a personal affront, regardless of her actual reasons" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 6). A narcissistic man is "more likely than others to attribute sexual rejection to personal rather than situational factors" (Baumeister et al., 2002, p. 6).

In Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, and Baumeister's (2003) study, men were shown films depicting rape, and were asked to rate the films in terms of favorability. The findings show that narcissists had a more favorable view of depictions of rape than other men. In fact, "the relatively higher enjoyment of narcissists was most pronounced when the rape scene was preceded by depictions of consensual affectionate activity" (Bushman et al., 2003, p. 1038). This lends support to the narcissistic reactance theory claim that if a narcissistic man desires sex with a woman, reactance could cause him to force sex on the woman.

### **American Dream and Crime Theory**

Messner and Rosenfeld (2007) claim that American goals and values pursuant to the American dream are conducive to crime. They claim that the American value of achievement with low emphasis on how to achieve the goal is criminogenic (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007). According to Messner and Rosenfeld (2007), since the American Dream emphasizes power with little emphasis on the legitimate means to achieve that power, citizens are not restrained from employing any means necessary to achieve power. In other words, the American dream, since it does not specify legitimate means that can be used to obtain power, in fact encourages citizens to employ illegal means (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007). For example, some rapists may believe that "the world is inherently a hostile and uncaring place where, by default, others are out to harm, exploit, and degrade and deceive in order to promote their own interests" and obtain power (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 14). They engage in "hostile behavior towards others as a preemptive action to prevent inevitable harm to [themselves]" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p. 14).

In the US, one's power is a measure of one's worth, and it is valued above all else. Since power is advantageous in American society, individuals may use any means to achieve power. If a man is unable to obtain power through legitimate means or feels powerless, he may seek to obtain that power and feel powerful through rape. One study shows that, "[r]apists [are] more motivated to have sex as a means of achieving power over women" (Abbey et al., 2007, p. 1575).

### **III: POLICY**

To help address rape, several approaches should be taken, including educating high school students on what constitutes rape, educating college students on how to prevent rape, lobbying for improved rape legislation, and educating women on how to defend themselves.

#### **High School Education Campaign**

High school students should be educated about rape. This

program should be based on Karen Fay and Frederic Medway's program, in which they seek participants to:

...understand acquaintance rape and its frequency, rape laws and the relation of rape to violence and coercion...explore feelings about acquaintance rape, and discuss teasing, honesty in dating, decision making, aggression, submission and assertion...Learn about the cultural forces contributing to the frequency and social acceptance of acquaintance rape, such as traditional gender stereotypes, media violence and cultural norms and myths...learn about the role of inconsistent verbal and non-verbal communication... and learn how to communicate wants and desires clearly...[and] identify rape prevention strategies and learn about local sources of victim support. (Fay & Medway, 2006, p. 226-227)

The program teaches about "assertive behavior...sexual pressure and mixed messages... communication, gender expectations and dating and drinking...rape myths, victim blaming and sexual violence in the media...date rape definition and problem-solving...[and] rape prevention and what to do if rape occurs" (Fay & Medway, 2006, p. 227). One study shows that this program succeeds in lowering the acceptance of rape myths among participating students compared with students who did not participate in the program (Fay & Medway, 2006).

### **College Education Campaign**

Educating college students on how to prevent rape should also be implemented. This program should be similar to that used by Potter, Moynihan, Stapleton, and Baynard (2009). Since college-aged women are four times more likely to be raped than non-college-aged women, directing an education campaign towards college-aged students would likely reach a large number of both men and women who may be affected by rape.

Potter et al. (2009) hung posters across a college campus to increase awareness of what to do if rape occurs. The posters "model[ed] prosocial intervention behaviors..." which included intervening in a rape situation and listening to a friend who has been raped (Potter et al., 2009, p. 109). Students who were exposed to the posters "demonstrated significantly greater awareness of effective bystander behaviors than the [students] not exposed to the campaign" (Potter et al., 2009, p. 109). In the poster campaign, students "who reported seeing the posters exhibited greater awareness of the problem...and greater willingness to participate in actions aimed at reducing sexual violence...compared to those students who did not report seeing the poster[s]" (Potter et al., 2009, p. 117-118). Such

a poster campaign at colleges could increase the willingness of college students to prevent rape should they see it, and could lead those students to remain active in preventing rape.

### **New Legislation**

Legislation should be implemented that would mandate counseling and support group sessions for rapists once they are released from incarceration. This program should emphasize teaching rapists what they did wrong, what led them to commit rape, and how to help prevent committing rape in the future. This legislation is similar to Delaware's Alternatives to Violence Program (Miller & Shuford, 2005). The Alternatives to Violence Program emphasizes "Bias Awareness, Manly Awareness, and Anger and Forgiveness" (Miller & Shuford, 2005, p. 1). People who participated in the Alternatives to Violence program had a lower recidivism rate than did non-participants (Miller & Shuford, 2005). Implementing this program nationally could teach offenders the causes of rape to reduce their likelihood of recidivating.

### **Self-Defense Program**

Teaching women to defend themselves when attacked and to avoid risky situations could be another effective program. "Research shows that women who have experienced a completed rape have poorer mental health, such as more depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts, than women experiencing attempted rape" (Ullman, 2007, p. 413). Research has shown, "that using more resistance strategies and resisting immediately are related to avoiding completed rape" (Ullman, 2007, p. 413). Although it is useful for women to resist rape in general, "different types of resistance are related to different odds of suffering completed rape and physical injuries" (Ullman, 2007, p. 413). Resistance techniques that increase the chance of a woman avoiding a rape situation include "physical actions women use against their attackers, including biting, scratching, hitting, using a weapon, and martial arts or other physical self-defense techniques" (Ullman, 2007, p. 413).

## **IV: CONCLUSION**

Prentky and Knight (1991) claim that "rape is a multidetermined behavior that will ultimately be explained only by models incorporating a multitude of dimensions" (p. 657). Evolutionary, feminist, self-control, narcissistic reactance, and the American Dream and Crime theories can all be used to help explain why rape occurs. Evolutionary theorists claim that men are born with predispositions towards committing rape. Feminist theorists explain that the culture of male dominance is responsible for rape occurring. Self-control theorists say that rapists are not able to control their sexual desires. Narcissistic reactance theorists argue that men who may not accept a woman's rejection may force her to have

sex. American Dream and Crime proponents would say that men who feel powerless or seek power are prone to commit rape because American culture uses power as a measure of an individual's worth. Educating high school students on what constitutes rape, educating college students on how to prevent rape, lobbying for Alternatives to Violence Programs for rapists, and educating women on how to defend themselves may help to reduce rape and the effects of rape.

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