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Teenagers' Attitudes towards Rape

Executive Summary

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ACQUISITIONS

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Adolescents and rape are an important area of study for two reasons. First, a high percentage of both rapists and rape victims are adolescents. Secondly, adolescent rape victims are difficult to counsel because they find it hard to express themselves and talk about the assault. The present study was designed to provide data on adolescents' information about and attitudes towards rape, in hopes that this data would be useful to those designing rape education and prevention programs for adolescents and to those counseling adolescent sexual assault victims.

The study involved interviews with young people between the ages of 14 and 17 in the Milwaukee area. The sample was obtained through a random digit dialing procedure. It consisted of 513 young women and 460 young men. They were interviewed in private by trained survey interviewers.¹

The sample included young people varying in race, religion, social class background, and neighborhood. On virtually all characteristics, it was representative of the Milwaukee area.

The sample was evenly distributed among the ages of 14 through 17. The sample was 73% white, 23% black and 3% Hispanic. With respect to religious background, 44% were Catholic and 31% were Protestant. About 20% were not brought up in any religion. About two-thirds of the sample lived in the city of Milwaukee, with about 15% in the inner city. About one-third lived in the immediately surrounding suburbs.

¹ The interviewing was carried out with great skill and diligence by the staff of the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory.

The parents' occupations were typical of Milwaukee, a city with a large amount of heavy industry. Of the fathers or stepfathers, about 40% were blue collar workers (craftsmen, foremen, skilled and semi-skilled workers). About 30% were in professional, technical, managerial, or proprietary jobs. Of the mothers and stepmothers, about two-thirds were working, the largest number in clerical jobs.

In education, about 80% of both fathers and mothers were high school graduates, and 40% of the fathers and a third of the mothers had some education beyond high school.

A number of questions dealt with the young people's conception of the rapist and the type of situations in which rape occurs. Males' and females' answers to these questions were very similar. The young people perceived the rapist as primarily motivated by sexual needs and desires. They perceived the rapist as unsuccessful in heterosexual relationships and someone who felt inferior. They thought the rapist was emotionally disturbed, someone who was obviously abnormal to those in contact with him. In other words, they saw the rapist as trying to satisfy sexual motives which had been thwarted and/or psychologically distorted. They were relatively unaware of power and anger as motives for rape. They overestimated the percentage of rapes which are committed by a stranger, probably because they were less likely to think of rape by an acquaintance as being rape. These results indicate that young women tend to be relatively trusting of the attractive, apparently psychologically normal male whom they are personally acquainted with.

Information on the young women's perceptions of sexual assault was obtained by giving them vignettes, brief stories which described sexual assault incidents, and asking them about their reactions if such a thing should happen to them. In one vignette, the victim was raped by a stranger on the street. In another, she was raped by an acquaintance at a party. For comparison, a third vignette involved consensual sex. For all three vignettes, the young women felt that if such a thing happened to them, health worries would be a major area of concern, particularly fear of pregnancy. (In fact, pregnancy is quite unlikely). Fears (fear of being assaulted again, etc.) were a frequently mentioned concern for the street vignette. For the party vignette, social concerns (what would people think, etc.) were important. The young women were relatively unaware of the other psychological consequences of rape (guilt, loss of self-esteem, etc.).

Virtually all of the young women thought that the attack by a stranger was rape. They thought that they would probably tell their parents about it, and anticipated that their parents would react in a positive, sympathetic way. (In this respect, they may have been unrealistic.) They were less likely to think that they would tell a friend or friends.

A lower percentage thought that the attack by an acquaintance at a party was rape, and perceiving it as rape was associated with intention to tell parents about it. Overall, the young women were less likely to intend to tell parents, and more likely to intend to tell friends than about the assault by the stranger on the street. They anticipated a less positive reaction from both parents and friends than to the assault on the street.

For both sexual assault vignettes, the young women anticipated that friends would react more positively to them than parents. Anticipation of positive feelings from parents was associated with intentions to tell parents; the same was true for friends.

The results suggested that the young women saw parents and friends as playing different roles. They intended to tell a parent when the incident was seen as rape, a serious problem to which they thought the parent would react positively. Since there was a negative relationship between intentions to tell parents and friends, the results suggest that the young women intended to tell a friend when they would not tell a parent, and when they anticipated a sympathetic reaction from the friend. Perceiving the incident as rape was not related to intention to tell a friend about it.

The young men were given a vignette in which a young man was sexually assaulted by two strangers on the street. Their responses to this vignette were compared with the young women's responses to a similar vignette in which a female was raped by a stranger on the street. If such a thing happened to them, high percentages thought that social concerns (concerns about what others would think) and fears would be felt. Significantly more males than females mentioned a social concern; significantly fewer males mentioned a health concern. Naturally, males were not concerned about pregnancy; however, they were significantly less likely than females to anticipate concern about VD or some other disease.

Males were also significantly more likely than females to think they would be concerned about getting back at the assailant. This intended retaliation seemed to refer to a private type of revenge.

There were no significant sex differences in the percentage who said that they would call the police, or catch and arrest the assailant..

When anticipated reactions of others were compared, there was no significant sex difference in the percentage who anticipated at least one positive reaction from parents. For both males and females, the most common anticipated positive reactions were understanding, concern, and feeling sorry for the victim. Females were significantly more likely than males to anticipate that their parents would be fearful on their behalf and would want to protect them. However, in spite of the equally positive anticipated reactions, males were significantly less likely than females to say that they would tell a parent about the assault.

There was a significant sex difference in negative reactions towards the assailant, with females significantly more likely to anticipate that their parents would be angry at and would hate the assailant. In contrast, males were concerned about retaliating themselves.

Males were significantly more likely to anticipate that their friends would react in a negative way to the assault, in particular, that the friends would think that they were homosexual. Also, fewer males than females anticipated that they would tell a friend. In other words, the young men perceived sexual assault as more stigmatizing than the young women did.

A separate series of questions dealt with sexual assault treatment centers (SATCs). The young people in the sample believed that the services offered by such a center were important. They generally were aware that their visit to such a center would be kept

in confidence. Only a few said that they would be prevented from using such a center from fear of who would be told or find out. (Of course, if they were actually assaulted shyness and embarrassment might prevent them from contacting an SATC.) The major barrier to use of an SATC was lack of awareness of it. Only a little over half of the young people knew that there was a center in Milwaukee. Of those, most did not know the name of it or where it was located. When asked what they would do in various sexual assault situations described in the vignettes, almost none mentioned an SATC. Therefore, rape education efforts in the community should emphasize the existence of the sexual assault treatment center. Emergency room personnel and others who come in contact with rape victims should be sure to suggest the SATC to them.

Also, the young women in the sample were asked what type of SATC they would prefer to go to, if it were necessary. The majority preferred a "free clinic" type of SATC, one independent of other institutions, one run by women active in the women's movement, and one with a partly volunteer staff, some of whom were adolescents and themselves had been sexually assaulted. SATCs with these characteristics should publicize them in their community education work with young people. More traditional SATCs should consider acquiring counselors who have been assaulted and who are themselves adolescents.

The young people were asked if they had been raped or sexually assaulted. Twelve percent of the young women and two percent of the young men said that they had been. The ratio of male to female respondents who were sexually assaulted was much higher than the

ratio of male to female clients served by the Milwaukee Sexual Assault Treatment Center. This finding indicates that males are much less likely to seek treatment for sexual assault than females.

No segment of the sample was immune from sexual assault. Too few males were involved in assaults for conclusions to be drawn concerning them. But for females, the percentage who had been raped was almost identical for whites, blacks, and members of other ethnic groups. Rape was not significantly related to neighborhood; it was as frequent in the suburbs as it was in the inner city and in the rest of Milwaukee.

Attitude scales, developed for this study, were used to measure attitudes towards rape (tolerating, excusing or condoning it) and "male chauvinist" attitudes towards heterosexual relationships (beliefs that men should control male-female relationships, viewing members of the opposite sex as "sex objects," etc.). A revised version of the Gough Socialization Scale, which is associated with delinquent tendencies, was administered to the males. (The Rape Attitudes and Gough Socialization Scales were validated by giving them to men who had been convicted of sexual assault, men who had been convicted of other violent crimes, and a control group of men in the Milwaukee community.) Tolerance of rape was strongly related to high scores on the Heterosexual Relationships Scale (beliefs that men should dominate women and tendencies to view the opposite sex as "sex objects"). Tolerance of rape was somewhat related to low scores on the Socialization Scale. In other words, rape tolerant young men were more "male chauvinist" in their attitudes, and tended to be less socialized. Males with "male chauvinist" attitudes also tended to be

less socialized. Of course, the commission of rape by particular men may have different causes than the attitudes prevalent in society at large. An understanding of the relationship between rape tolerant attitudes and the commission of rape will require further research.

The study has a number of implications for rape prevention and education:

1. Young people thought of the rapist as someone obviously abnormal, probably a stranger. They should be aware that the rapist is often an apparently normal acquaintance.
2. Some teenagers did not define rape by an acquaintance, in a social situation, as rape. They should be made aware that acquaintance rape is rape and should be reported to the police.
3. Teenagers anticipated more positive reactions from friends than from parents, to hypothetical assaults by a stranger and an acquaintance. This finding suggests that peer counseling could be a useful component of the treatment of adolescent rape victims.
4. Lack of awareness was the major barrier to the use of sexual assault treatment centers. More publicity about them should be directed at young people.
5. The young women said that they would prefer a sexual assault treatment center independent of other institutions, run by women active in the woman's movement, and partly staffed by volunteers. Other types of centers should move towards this model in their services to adolescents.

6. The data indicate that young men perceived a sexual assault as more stigmatizing than young women did, and that they would be less likely to tell parents, the police, or friends. These data suggest that more education on male sexual victimization is needed.
7. Among males, rape-tolerant attitudes were related to "male chauvinist" attitudes (beliefs that men should control male-female relationships, a view of members of the opposite sex as "sex objects"). Rape prevention efforts should attempt to reduce male chauvinism in order to create a climate which discourages rape.