

# A Study of the Factors That Affect Attitudes Towards Reporting Sexual Assault of Females at Colorado State University

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to Fulfill the Requirements of the University Honors Program

## The Problem: Sexual Assault Reporting Rates

A female student on a college campus has a 20-25% chance of being sexually assaulted during her college years. However the number of sexual assaults that are reported to law enforcement agencies is alarmingly low, only 3.2% of rape victims and 2.3% of attempted rape victims report their victimization to the police or to campus authorities. (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000)

The issue of low reporting rates is a problem on college campuses because there are many benefits that result from reporting sexual assault:

- Many resources become available to sexual assault victims when they report the incident such as eligibility to assault related health, social, and legal services.
- Other benefits to victims when they report the assault include protection, restored sense of well being, and reduced chance of repeat victimization.
- Law enforcement agencies, victim assistance services, and communities also benefit from increased reporting because they can begin to create better informed social policy and intervention techniques that will hopefully prevent assaults from occurring in the future.

## Literature Review

There are several theories about why women do not report sexual assault.

- One theory is that the stereotypes of "real rape" and "real victim" affect the reporting practices of women who experience sexual assault circumstances that differ from the stereotypical model of violent forceful penetration committed by a stranger in a deserted place where the victim is a moral white woman who is physically injured while resisting. (DuMont et al., 2003)
- Another theory is that internal psychological barriers such as guilt, embarrassment, shame, not wanting the attention, fear of being blamed, fear of not being believed, and fear of discomforting medical procedures prevent women from reporting. (Binder, 1981)

## Research Question

What are the variables that both encourage and discourage a female at Colorado State University when considering reporting an incident of sexual assault? This study also evaluated female students knowledge of and willingness to use the various resources that are available to sexual assault victims at Colorado State University or in the Fort Collins community.

For the purpose of this study reporting is defined as contacting the police or other law enforcement agency and does not include contacting other agencies such as victim assistance programs. Sexual assault incidences are defined as any sexual contact without consent, and may include touching on intimate body areas, intercourse, or penetration.

## Methodology

- The research method used in this study was a self-administered questionnaire.
- The study was exploratory and was a cross sectional design because the respondents were surveyed based on their attitudes at one point in time.
- The survey tool used was developed specifically for this study because an existing measurement tool was unavailable for the specific research question posed. The questions were developed based on the evidence discovered in the literature review about the factors that cause women not to report sexual assault incidences.
- The questions related to reporting attitudes were broken down into three separate categories, individual feelings, circumstances, individual characteristics. The questionnaire also contained a section that assessed respondents knowledge and willingness to use five of the resources available to them in the Fort Collins area. The questionnaire also collected basic demographic information that was pertinent to this study.
- Women were the unit of analysis for this study. The population for this study was all females at Colorado State University during the Spring Semester 2004.
- The selection process used for this survey was nonrandom convenience sample.
- The achieved sample was 98 females (N=98).
- The questionnaire also contained and Emergency Contact Card provided by the Office of Women's Programs and Studies for all respondents to keep as a resource.

## Description of Sample

Females between 18-49 years of age, with 88.5% of the sample between the age of 18 and 25 years of age.

|                 |                       |  |                            |                             |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Race/Ethnicity: | 81.4% Caucasian/White | 7.2% Hispanic/Mexican American/Puerto Rican/Spanish/Latina | 6.2% Asian/Asian American  | 5.2% African American/Black |
| Marital Status: | 84.5% Never Married   | 13.4% Married  | 2.1% Divorced or Separated |                             |
| Income Level:   | 94.7% \$0-\$25,000    | 2.1% \$25,001-\$50,000                                     | 2.1% \$50,001-\$100,000    | 1.1% \$100,001 or more      |



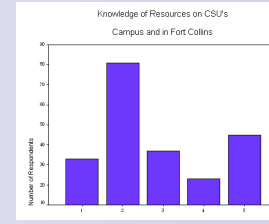
## Results

| Top Factors that Encourage Reporting Sexual Assault                      | Percentage of respondents that did not feel the variable would discourage them from reporting the assault. |
|--|--|
| The assault is committed by an acquaintance known for less than 24 hours | 93.8%  |
| Clinically observed injuries resulting from the assault                  | 91.9%  |
| The use of physical force during the assault                             | 91.8%  |
| The presence of a weapon during the assault                              | 88.8%  |
| The existence of penetration during the assault                          | 86.7%  |
| The assault is committed by a stranger                                   | 85.7%  |

| Top Factors that Discourage Reporting Sexual Assault           | Percentage of respondents that did feel the variable would discourage them from reporting the assault. |
|--|--|
| If the assault is committed by a current romantic partner      | 30.8%  |
| The attention received as a result of reporting                | 24.4%  |
| The consumption of illegal drugs within 3 hours of the assault | 23.7%  |
| The consumption of Alcohol within 3 hours of the assault       | 17.5%  |
| Fear of not being believed                                     | 17.3%  |
| Personal shame about the experience                            | 16.5%  |

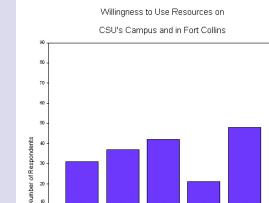
## Knowledge and Willingness to Use Resources

The results of this section of the questionnaire are displayed in the following graphs:



- Colorado State University Victim Assistance Team
- Colorado State University Police Department
- Fort Collins Police Department Victim Services
- Larimer County Sheriff's Department Victim Response Team
- Sexual Violence/Rape Crisis 24 hr. Hotline

This shows that 82.7% of the respondents said they were aware of the Colorado State University Police Department as a resource. This is followed by the Sexual Violence/Rape Crisis 24 hr. Hotline with 45.9%, the Fort Collins Police Department Victim Services with 37.8%, the Colorado State University Victim Assistance Team with 33.7%, and finally the Larimer County Sheriff's Department Victim Response Team with 23.5%.



- Colorado State University Victim Assistance Team
- Colorado State University Police Department
- Fort Collins Police Department Victim Services
- Larimer County Sheriff's Department Victim Response Team
- Sexual Violence/Rape Crisis 24 hr. Hotline

This shows that 49% of the respondents said they would be most likely to use the Sexual Violence/Rape Crisis 24 hr. Hotline if they were sexually assaulted. This is followed by the Fort Collins Police Department Victim Services with 42.9%, the Colorado State University Police Department with 37.8%, the Colorado State University Victim Assistance Team with 31.6%, and finally the Larimer County Sheriff's Department Victim Response Team with 21.4%.

## Limitations

- Respondents were not asked to disclose if they had been sexually assaulted so I could not distinguish between individuals who were considering a hypothetical situation and those who were responding out of actual experiences.
- The section of the questionnaire that examined individual characteristics, such as age, race/ethnicity, income, marital status and sexual activity, and how they affect the decision to report sexual assault was not clearly worded and respondents were often confused by the questions. Responses to these questions did not clearly demonstrate how the respondents felt about reporting in relation to the variables. As a result of this these questions had to be thrown out when analyzing the data. This unfortunately did not enable this study to assess how these variables affect a woman's decision to report.
- As a result of the nonrandom convenience sample the results of this study are not able to be generalized to the larger population of female students at Colorado State University. However the results do provide some insight as to what discourages women from reporting sexual assault.

## Implications/Recommendation

The results of this study demonstrate that females at Colorado State University are still being discouraged from reporting an incident of sexual assault for several reasons.

- As a result of this I recommend that victim services such as the Victim Assistance Team and CSU Police Department better educate the population about reporting even when the factors that discourage reporting are present.
  - One particular area of focus could be an educational campaign about the use of drugs and alcohol and how they can inhibit a woman's ability to consent to sexual contact, and how any sexual contact without consent is considered sexual assault.
  - Another area to educate around is the issue of date rape and partner rape, again focusing on the fact that any sexual contact without consent is considered sexual assault.
- The factors that encourage women to report sexual assault also provide insight about the attitudes of women.
  - Women are more willing to report if the assault involves a weapon, physical force, clinically observed injuries, penetration, or if it is committed by a stranger. This may indicate that if these are not present in a sexual assault the individual may feel as though it is not a "real" sexual assault.
  - Again women need to be educated about what sexual assault really is and that not just one specific circumstance is considered to be sexual assault.
- This study demonstrates that women have knowledge of the Colorado State University Police Department as a resource available to them more than any of the other resources.
  - I would recommend that the other resources, especially Colorado State University Victim Assistance Team, provide more public advertising of their services so that more women on the CSU campus are aware of what they have to offer.
- The study demonstrates that women are more willing to use the Sexual Violence/Rape Crisis 24 hr. Hotline than any of the other resources, and only about half of the respondents were willing to use this resource.
  - Women need to be further educated on the positive benefits that these resources have to offer an individual who has been sexually assaulted in an attempt to increase their willingness to use these resources.

