

Study examines condom use during sexual assaults

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Eryn O'Neal, center, with Katharine Tellis and Cassia Spohn, examined more than 800 sexual assault cases to find out the rate of condom use by suspects.

(Medical Xpress)—A new study found that suspect age, alcohol use, and weapon use all influence whether a suspect uses a condom during sexual assault.

"Condom use during sexual assault isn't something that has been studied in depth in the past," explained Eryn Nicole O'Neal, a doctoral student in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Arizona State

University. "We didn't really have a strong grasp on prevalence rates and the issues that contribute to suspects using condoms."

There are three types of sexual assault – stranger, intimate, and acquaintance. Academic research on condom use and forced sex has mostly focused on sexual assault between intimates. O'Neal and her colleagues used law enforcement sexual assault reports to investigate the prevalence of condom use and the factors that influence condom use across all types of suspect/victim relationships.

Her article, "Condom use during sexual assault," co-authored by Scott Decker and Cassia Spohn of ASU, and Katharine Tellis of California State University, Los Angeles, was published online in the *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* last month.

The study examined 841 sexual assault reports from the Los Angeles Police Department, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department. The Los Angeles cases were reported in 2008; St. Louis in 2004. The dataset provided detailed information over large geographical locations.

"We wanted to use a dataset that represented two sites where we could compare prevalence rates across sites as well as the contextual factors that shape condom use and that influence suspects – whether they use condoms or not," O'Neal said.

They found that condoms were used in 11 to 15 percent of sexual assaults. Few differences exist across jurisdictions regarding the correlates of condom use. Factors contributing to [condom](#) use include the age of the suspect, the use of a weapon and suspect alcohol use.

The analysis showed that suspects under age 21 were more likely to use condoms.

"This is consistent with contraceptive statistics," said O'Neal. "Younger males are much more likely to use condoms consistently when engaging in any sexual activity."

The study also found that suspects who used or threatened weapons were more likely to use condoms. O'Neal and her co-authors attributed that to the increased control that happens when a weapon is used.

O'Neal and her team hypothesized that some suspects may use condoms during a sexual assault because of increased awareness of sexually transmitted infections (STI) as well as the popularity of CSI and other television crime dramas.

"So maybe suspects are either trying to guard themselves against STIs or they are fearful of leaving evidence on the victim," O'Neal suggested.

While some sexual assault suspects used condoms, the vast majority did not.

Suspects under the influence of alcohol were less likely to use condoms "due to self-control and inability to make decisions," O'Neal pointed out.

With only 11 to 15 percent of suspects using condoms, more than four out of five women were victims of forced, unprotected sex. O'Neal said that puts female victims at a higher risk of unplanned pregnancies and STIs.

"Condoms are not being used during sexual assault and this is a major health concern for women," O'Neal said. "We know that sexual assault is a very prevalent occurrence, it happens more often than we would like to acknowledge."

O'Neal and her colleagues found that more than 50 percent of victims

came into contact with emergency medical personnel or sexual assault nurse examiners after the assault. She said the study stresses the need for those that interact with victims to be aware of the health risks caused by suspects not using condoms and offer preventative medication and care.

"Given the low prevalence rates of [condom use](#) during [sexual assault](#), advocates, medical personnel, and law enforcement need to know that there is a real threat of contracting an STI or becoming pregnant," said O'Neal.

More information: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...ii/S1752928X13000759](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/...ii/S1752928X13000759)

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