

# More than half of students surveyed experienced sexual coercion

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More than half of young women in high school or college have experienced at least one incident of sexual coercion, according to a new study by U. of I. alumnus Bryana H. French and Helen A. Neville, left, a professor of African American studies and of educational psychology. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

(Medical Xpress)—More than half (53 percent) of young women have experienced at least one incident of verbal, physical or substance-facilitated sexual coercion – and more than half of those incidents resulted in sexual intercourse, a recent study of high school and college students found.

The 335 [young women](#) who participated in the study reported that they

had been coerced into sexual activities in a variety of ways, with physical and verbal coercion being the most common tactics.

Verbal coercion was linked to increased engagement in risky sexual behavior, such as not using condoms, potentially exposing women to sexually transmitted infections and HIV.

"Given the disproportionate rates of sexually transmitted infection and HIV among young [black women](#), understanding ways that pressured and coerced sex inform sexual behavior creates a more complete picture and helps to inform future research and culturally relevant prevention interventions," said Bryana H. French, one of the study's co-authors and a faculty member at the University of Missouri.

French and co-author Helen A. Neville, a professor of African American studies and of educational psychology at the University of Illinois, conducted the research while French was earning her doctorate in educational psychology at Illinois.

Participants completed assessments about their experiences with sexually coercive incidents, including verbal coercion, such as a peer's threatening to end a relationship with the victim; physical coercion, which was defined as partners threatening to use or using a weapon; and substance-related coercion – incidents in which partners encouraged women to use alcohol or drugs in order to take advantage of them sexually.

Participants who had experienced a sexually coercive incident were asked to indicate the outcome of that incident on a continuum of sexual behaviors that were ranked in severity and ranged from nothing occurring to completed oral, anal or vaginal intercourse. Their responses were then added to obtain a total coercion experience score.

Participants also were assessed on their levels of psychological distress, self-esteem, beliefs in sexual stereotypes and sexual risk-taking behaviors, such as their number of sex partners during the prior year and their use of alcohol in relation to sex.

About 40 percent of participants reported that they had experienced some type of physical sexual coercion – a rate that far surpassed that found by a Centers for Disease Control youth survey – and an equal number of women had experienced at least one form of verbal coercion.

These rates suggest a pervasiveness of unwanted sex for young women, particularly when the definition of what constitutes sexual coercion is broadened, the researchers said.

However, reports of substance-facilitated coercion were much lower than those found in other studies, and the researchers theorized that this might have been related to the sample's younger age, which averaged slightly more than 18 years for black women and just over 17 years for [white women](#).

While the rates of sexual coercion experiences were comparable for black women and white women, French and Neville found differing correlates on black survivors' and white survivors' self-esteem and feelings of distress.

For black women, the total number of sexual coercion experiences and nearly all forms of sexual coercion had small to moderate effects on each psychological and behavioral indicator.

Greater numbers of experiences with substance-facilitated coercion were linked to both lower self-esteem and increased psychological distress among black women. Likewise, childhood sexual abuse was linked to lower self-esteem in black women as well.

Among white women, each form of sexual coercion was positively related to risky sexual behavior but not to lower levels of self-esteem, a finding that the researchers said was unexpected.

Endorsement of sexual stereotypes played differing roles among black women and white women who had experienced the highest numbers of sexually coercive incidents. Whereas lower endorsement of sexual stereotypes was linked to higher self-esteem among black women in this group, it was associated with higher levels of distress among white women in the same group.

Internalization of sexual stereotypes may affect how young black women view themselves as women in society, diminishing their self-esteem, but may lead white women to feel greater sadness or distress without influencing their self-concept, the researchers suggested.

"The results suggest that the pressure for young women to fit the narrow socially prescribed definitions of sexuality and relationships may further intensify the trauma of sexual coercion," the authors wrote. "The unique relations to self-esteem and psychological distress for black and white young women, respectively, may suggest cultural differences in the ways that young [women](#) process these sexual stereotypes."

"We thought it was important for the research to explore unique cultural processes of sexual coercion recovery rather than merely control for race or ethnicity as a confounding variable," Neville said. "We know very little about the potential ethno-cultural variables that may help explain the racial differences that were found, and we encourage future studies to replicate and extend our findings by including potential mediating variables, such as self-blame, and moderating variables, such as racial-gender stereotypes, in understanding the relations between sexual coercion type and health outcomes."

**More information:** The study, which is available [online](#), appears in a recent issue of *The Counseling Psychologist*.

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