

Past sexual assault triples risk of future assault for college women

August 29 2014, by Cathy Wilde

Disturbing news for women on college campuses: a new study from the University at Buffalo Research Institute on Addictions (RIA) indicates that female college students who are victims of sexual assault are at a much higher risk of becoming victims again.

In fact, researchers found that [college](#) women who experienced severe [sexual victimization](#) were three times more likely than their peers to experience severe sexual victimization the following year.

RIA researchers followed nearly 1,000 college women, most age 18 to 21, over a five-year period, studying their drinking habits and experiences of severe physical and sexual assault. Severe physical victimization includes assaults with or without a weapon. Severe sexual victimization includes rape and attempted rape, including incapacitated rape, where a victim is too intoxicated from drugs or alcohol to provide consent.

Kathleen A. Parks, PhD, senior research scientist, was the study's principal investigator.

"Initially, we were attempting to see if victimization increased drinking, and if drinking then increased future risk," Parks says. "Instead, we found that the biggest predictor of future victimization is not drinking, but past victimization."

The study provided some good news, however. "We found that severe

sexual victimization decreased across the years in college," Parks says.

In light of the recent report from the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, the study shows that campuses need to be aware of the increased risk of future victimization for women who have experienced sexual assault, the researchers say.

Colleges also must keep an eye out for long-term drinking problems with trauma victims: women who were victims showed an increase in drinking in the year following their assaults, perhaps as a coping mechanism. "Our findings show that women who have been victims may need to be followed for many months to a year to see if their drinking increases," Parks says.

Parks' previous research has shown that freshmen college [women](#) have a much higher likelihood of victimization if they partake in binge [drinking](#). (For more information on the role of alcohol in college [sexual assault](#), see RIA's recent Expert Summary on the subject at www.buffalo.edu/ria/news_events/es/es11.html .)

The current study appeared in the online edition of *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* in August.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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