

Study identifies risk factors for sexual assault, including age and alcohol consumption

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Risk factors for sexual assault, including young age and alcohol consumption, must be addressed when considering preventative strategies, suggests a new study, published today (15 October) in *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (BJOG)*.

The Danish study used data from all women attending the specialised centre for victims of sexual assault (CVSA) in Copenhagen for sexual assault or attempted sexual assault between March 2001 and December 2010. A total of 2541 women were included in the sample.

The study aimed to describe the victims of sexual assault and the circumstances in which the assaults occurred in order to identify risk factors and enable the development of preventative measures. A focus was placed on how age and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator were associated with the circumstance of the assault.

Over the last decade, it has been increasingly recognised that many patients seen in the healthcare system have a history of sexual assault and in 2002 the World Health Organisation classified [sexual violence](#) as a major public health problem and underlined the need for further research in this field.

Results of this study showed that 66% of the women were aged 15-24 years old and 75% had met the perpetrator before the sexual assault with

nearly 50% reporting that the perpetrator was a current or former boyfriend, family member or someone they considered a friend.

Women with no previous contact or knowledge of their perpetrator were more likely to report to the police and were at a higher risk of sustaining an injury, the research showed.

Looking specifically at alcohol, the study found that over 40% of women had consumed more than 5 units of alcohol. These women were more often sexually assaulted by a stranger or someone they met within 24 hours prior to the assault.

Furthermore, a physical injury was found in 53% of cases and 33% of the victims had suffered a previous sexual assault.

Dr Mie-Louise Larsen, from the Centre for Victims of Sexual Assault Department and the University of Copenhagen and co-author of the study said:

"Our results challenge the typical stereotype of a violent rape attack by a stranger, which is important in creating an environment where women are not reluctant to seek help after a sexual assault.

"We need to raise awareness of the fact that most sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone known to the woman, often in familiar surroundings. Many victims will not sustain a physical or anogenital injury. In order to change the general attitudes towards sexual assault, this information should not only target young people, but also the police, healthcare professionals and the general public."

Patrick Chien, BJOG deputy editor-in-chief said:

"Identifying risk factors for sexual assault is vital for both the prevention

of assaults and the improvement of early interventions.

"The results of this study suggest young age and drinking alcohol were risk factors for sexual assault. The study provides us with further insight and explores the circumstances in which [sexual assaults](#) occur, which women are vulnerable in which settings and identifies the most important contributory factors to help with the development of measures to prevent sexual assault."

More information: *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* [DOI: 10.1111/1471-0528.13093](https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.13093)

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