

Female social status factors into sexual aggression

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The study found that if one member of the group faced sexual aggression, the odds increased that others would be targeted. Credit: Galveston.com

Lower status in a peer group can increase the risk of a woman facing sexual aggression in nightclubs, research suggests.

The finding comes from a study involving Curtin University and partners in Canada and the USA which tracked 114 [young women](#) between the

ages of 19 and 29 entering a nightclub in groups of three to five.

Upon entry, participants filled out a survey to determine pre-drinking levels, height, weight and age and the [social hierarchy](#) of the group.

'Within-group status' questions saw group members rank one another according to who made decisions, whose opinions were generally listened to and perceived popularity.

Upon exit, a second survey found that over half of the [women](#) reported experiencing sexual aggression in the form of persistence (28.9 per cent), being touched unwantedly (5.3 per cent) or both (18.4 per cent).

Those with lower status who had drunk five or more drinks were more frequently targeted, with younger members most likely to face unwanted touching.

Professor Kathryn Graham says this result could be due to several possible reasons.

"Perhaps higher-status women who are intoxicated are more likely to be protected by friends, whereas lower-status women in the same condition are more likely to be on the fringe of the group and therefore more easily targeted," she says.

"Or, lower-status women, especially if they are intoxicated, might be targeted because they would be expected to be less assertive and therefore less likely to stand up for themselves or make trouble for the man."

Heavier drinkers faced more pestering

The study found that if one member of the group faced sexual

aggression, the odds increased that others would be targeted.

However, age, weight and height were not significant factors, though women who drank more faced more harassment.

"The relationship between number of drinks consumed and sexual aggression may be due to the effects of intoxication on the woman," Prof Graham says

"Such as making her less able to communicate clearly that the behaviour was unwanted, or even to recognise the risks of sexual assault."

Prof Graham says, regardless, understanding factors that increase risks for women does not imply that women are responsible for the sexual aggression directed toward them.

She says it highlights the need to change prevention messaging that focusses on female targets of sexual aggression, which advises them to drink less and look out for one another.

"Prevention should focus on men and the drinking culture more broadly, about the unacceptability of non-consensual sexual contact and persistence," Prof Graham says.

More information: "Young women's risk of sexual aggression in bars: the roles of intoxication and peer social status." *Drug Alcohol Rev.* 2014 Jul;33(4):393-400. [DOI: 10.1111/dar.12153](https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.12153). Epub 2014 May 21.

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