

Study finds high prevalence of incapacitated rape among college women

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Some 15 percent of women are raped while incapacitated from alcohol or other drug use during their freshman year at college, according to new research.

The report, published in the Nov. issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, also helps to offer a clearer idea of which [college](#) freshmen are at particular risk of what's known as 'incapacitated rape.'

Researchers found that freshmen women who'd been victims of such assaults before college were at substantial risk of being victimized again. Overall, nearly 18 percent of [students](#) said they'd been raped while incapacitated before college, and 41 percent of those [young women](#) were raped again while incapacitated during their freshman year.

The students' views on [alcohol](#) also seemed to be involved. Young women who said they believed alcohol can enhance a person's sexual experience were at increased risk of incapacitated rape during their first year of college—regardless of whether they'd been victims in the past.

It's important to get a clearer picture of the risk factors for college [sexual assault](#) to inform prevention efforts, explained lead researcher Kate Carey, Ph.D., a professor of behavioral and social sciences at Brown University School of Public Health, in Providence, R.I. No one is suggesting the victims are to blame, Carey stressed. The intoxication of a potential victim does not excuse the perpetration of sexual assault.

"We're trying to identify modifiable factors that increase risk for incapacitated rape," she said.

College programs aimed at preventing sexual assault need to be 'universal,' targeting all students, Carey said. But those programs can address specific attitudes or behaviors—such as students' expectations about alcohol and sex.

Drinking and other drug use is pervasive on college campuses: Four of five college students drink alcohol, with half of these saying they sometimes binge, according to the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

At the same time, campus sexual assault is being increasingly recognized as a major problem, and many of those incidents involve alcohol or other drugs. Research has found that incapacitated rape is more common on college campuses than forcible rape, in which perpetrators use threats or physical force.

But the current findings, Carey said, show that many young women are victims long before college.

"The pre-college assessment went back to as early as age 14," she said. "That suggests that sexual assault education needs to begin earlier."

If prevention efforts are limited to university campuses, Carey noted, they'll also miss all the young adults who do not go to college.

The findings are based on 483 female freshmen who completed several surveys over their first year of college. The students were from a single university in New York State, so it would be helpful, Carey said, for further studies to confirm the results at other schools as well.

More information: Carey, K. B., Durney, S. E., Shepardson, R. L., & Carey, M. P. (Nov. 2015). Precollege predictors of incapacitated rape among female students in their first year of college. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 76(6), 829-837.

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