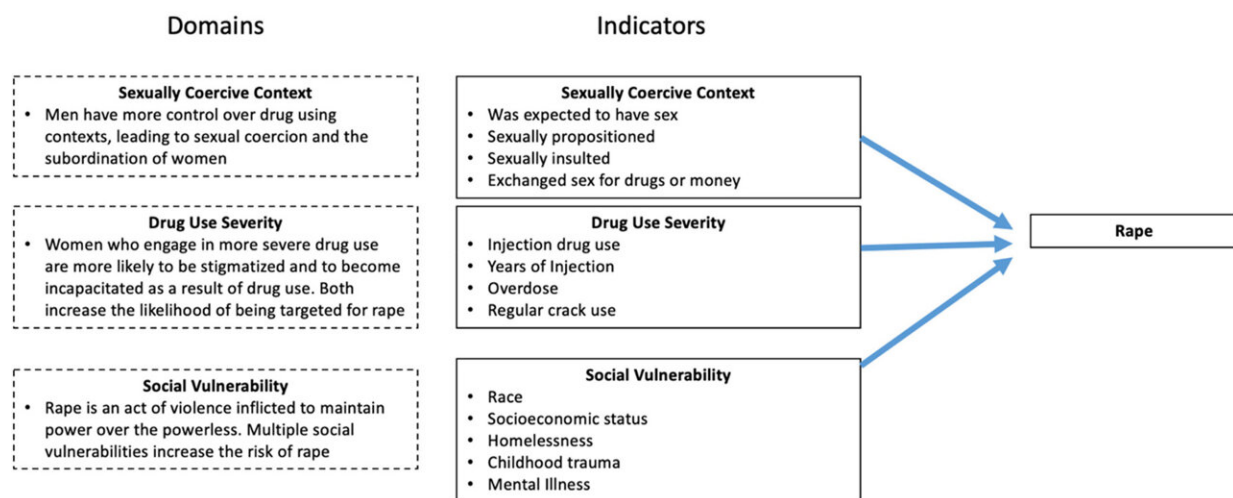


# Social vulnerabilities, not individual behavior, put opioid-using women at risk for rape, finds research

January 11 2023



Hypothesized factors associated with rape among women who use opioids (WWUO). Credit: *Violence Against Women* (2022). DOI: 10.1177/10778012221137921

As rates of opioid use continue to rise among women in the United States, emerging research reveals a worrisome prevalence of rape among opioid-using women.

In a new study published in *Violence Against Women*, a team of researchers from the CUNY SPH Institute for Implementation Science

in Population Health (ISPH) sought to understand why [young women](#) who use prescription opioids nonmedically and/or heroin are at heightened risk of rape.

Affiliated Researcher Lauren Jessell, Associate Professor Pedro Mateu-Gelabert, Research Associate Professor Honoria Guarino and Data Analyst Chunki Fong used data from 168 female participants of a study that examined the drug and [sexual risk behaviors](#) of 539 young adult opioid users in New York City. Structured interviews included questions about socio-demographics, [drug use](#), and sexual experiences.

The responses revealed a shockingly high prevalence and frequency of sexual violence, including rape, among women who use opioids. One-third of the sample had been raped at least once while using drugs.

Social vulnerabilities such as low household income, having experienced homelessness or living with a [mental illness](#) increased women's risk of being targeted for sexual violence.

The findings suggest it is not drug use itself that puts women at risk, but the sexually coercive context in which drugs are used and the multiple social vulnerabilities that women who use opioids experience. Participants described situations where they were often insulted, propositioned for sex, or otherwise felt they were expected to have sex after drugs were shared with them.

Women's individual behavior such as how severe their drug use was and whether they had ever injected drugs had no impact on their risk of being raped when the impact of social vulnerabilities and context was accounted for.

"It is our hope that these findings will help in the development of more useful prevention efforts," says Jessell. "These efforts should target risky

contexts and patriarchal norms rather than the behavior of individual women."

**More information:** Lauren Jessell et al, Why Young Women Who Use Opioids Are at Risk for Rape: The Impact of Social Vulnerabilities and Sexually Coercive Drug Using Contexts, *Violence Against Women* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/10778012221137921](https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012221137921)

Provided by The City University of New York

Citation: Social vulnerabilities, not individual behavior, put opioid-using women at risk for rape, finds research (2023, January 11) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-01-social-vulnerabilities-individual-behavior-opioid-using.html>

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