

Young women report higher rates of forced sexual intercourse during pandemic

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The rate of forced intercourse in early adulthood rose during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a potential increase in unintended pregnancies and many other sexual, reproductive and mental health

problems, according to a University of Michigan study.

The prevalence of forced sexual intercourse among women in the United States was already high, with more than 25% of women reporting forced intercourse in their lifetimes.

The study, published in *BMC Public Health*, uses measures from the National Survey of Family Growth, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics Transition into Adulthood Supplement, and the American Family Health Study to establish time trends in the rates of forced sexual intercourse among the American population.

It addresses shortcomings in data from the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, which did not measure forced intercourse during the pandemic, according to lead author William Axinn, a research professor at the Survey Research Center and Population Studies Center at the Institute for Social Research.

"Forced intercourse represents about half of all sexual assaults, but it's a very severe form of sexual assault," Axinn said. "The government of the United States monitors the rates of both women and men reporting forced intercourse, because it has a lot of other health consequences. One reason we wanted to update those data is because the COVID-19 pandemic changed the potential risk of the experience of forced intercourse."

The study found that reports of forced intercourse remained high during the pandemic, but rose among females aged 24–28. The reported rates of forced intercourse were higher among women who did not complete college.

"National data was beginning to show a decline in forced intercourse before the pandemic—not a big decline, but a decline," Axinn said.

"And then during the pandemic, rates rose, and in some specific age groups of women, the rise was a statistically significant increase."

While it doesn't directly address the underlying causes for the increase among certain populations, Axinn hypothesized that women who were in abusive relationships may have had additional difficulties leaving them during the [pandemic](#), which may have contributed to the increase.

Whatever the cause, he said policymakers should take note of the increase due to the far-reaching impact of forced [sexual intercourse](#) on many different public health fronts.

"Rates of forced intercourse in the general U.S. population are exceptionally relevant to [government policies](#) about abortion and related reproductive health matters, especially because a common consequence of forced intercourse is unintended pregnancy," Axinn said.

More information: William G. Axinn et al, Forced intercourse in America: a pandemic update, *BMC Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-023-16102-y](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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