

Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault
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What Is Sexual Assault?

Many victims are not sure if what happened to them was assault because numerous misconceptions surround the issue. Our goal in this chapter is to present the facts about sexual assault by looking at its definition and prevalence. Sexual assault is not just rape by a stranger with a weapon. Approximately 80 percent of victims are assaulted by an acquaintance (relative, spouse, dating partner, friend, pastor, teacher, boss, coach, therapist, doctor, etc.). Sexual assault also includes attempted rape or any form of nonconsensual sexual contact.

Many victims experience the effects of sexual assault, but feel isolated or confused because they believe misconceptions of what sexual assault entails. This may result in you feeling self-blame, denial, shame, guilt, anger, distorted self-image, and despair. We want you to know the prevalence of your experience and offer a definition of sexual assault. To accomplish this we endeavor to be as precise and comprehensive as possible.

Definition

Sexual assault is used as an overarching term, encompassing a large number of sexual behaviors—physical, verbal, and psychological—that violate the agency and well-being of an individual. Sexual assault is the current legal term that replaced the narrow definition of rape. Some states use this term interchangeably with rape. The exact definition of “rape,” “sexual assault,” “sexual abuse,” and similar terms varies from state to state.¹

With some definitions of sexual assault, it is difficult to truly discern between those who are victims of sexual assault and those who are not. When this happens, many victims feel as if they do not fit into the rigid qualifications of sexual assault, hence ignoring the ongoing or past situations in which they are or were victimized.

There are varying definitions of sexual assault.² For some researchers, a very narrow interpretation of sexual assault is preferable, as it avoids over reporting, a phenomenon that would provide inflated statistics. Conversely, those who favor a more broad explanation of sexual assault support its expanded definition, because it includes behaviors that often go unreported.³

The fluid definitions used to define this issue can, at times, exclude victims as well as add to the misconceptions held by many victims surrounding their experiences, society in general, and those in support roles. Slight changes in the definition and perception of sexual assault can change whether a person is considered a victim or not. This is why defining sexual assault is very important.

A definition that is too narrow can cause some victims of assault and those who should be supporting them to downplay the experience. Our definition of sexual assault is *any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained and is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority*. This definition gets beyond our society's narrow understanding of the issue and expands the spectrum of actions to be considered sexual assault.

The reasoning behind our cohesive and comprehensive definition of sexual assault is manifold. First, clarity helps victims know that they are not alone in their experience. Second, victims would be more motivated to report if they knew that what happened to them was a crime. Third, a clear definition would reduce myths and victim blaming. Fourth, it would also enable more services to be established to cater to the needs of victims of an extremely violating crime, in addition to educating authorities on how to properly handle such a sensitive topic. Fifth, surveys and studies indicate that most people know almost nothing about the dynamics of sexual violence and have little or no experience in dealing with it.

There are three parts to our definition of sexual assault: 1) any type of sexual behavior or contact 2) where consent is not freely given or obtained and 3) is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority. We will look at each of these separately.

Sexual Behavior or Contact

Sexual assault is a display of power and control by the perpetrator against the victim. It is not a product of an “uncontrollable” sexual urge. Sexual assault is mainly about violence, not sex. Even though perpetrators use sexual actions and behaviors as a weapon, the primary motivation is to dominate, control, and belittle another. This can be done with physical sexual contact and nonphysical sexual behavior. Sexual assault is about power, and a victim may be physically or emotionally unable to resist even when there is no actual physical violence involved.

When defining sexual assault as any sexual act that is nonconsensual—forced against someone’s will—it is important to understand that the “acts” can be physical, verbal, or psychological. There are four types of sexual violence. Each type involves victims who do not consent, are unable to consent, or refuse to allow the act:⁴

- 1) A completed sex act that is defined as contact between the penis and the vulva or the penis and the anus involving penetration, however slight; contact between the mouth and penis, vulva, or anus; or penetration of the anal or genital opening of another person by a hand, finger, or other object
- 2) An attempted (but not completed) sex act
- 3) Abusive sexual contact that is defined as intentional touching, either directly or through the clothing, of the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks of any person
- 4) Noncontact sexual assault that is defined as assault that does not involve physical contact. Examples of noncontact sexual assault include voyeurism (peeping Tom); intentional exposure of an individual to exhibitionism (flashing); exposure to pornography; verbal or behavioral sexual harassment; threats of sexual violence; and taking nude photographs of a sexual nature of another person without their consent.

Sexual assault occurs along a continuum of power and control ranging from noncontact sexual assault to forced sexual intercourse. Sexual assault includes acts such as nonconsensual sexual intercourse (rape),⁵ nonconsensual sodomy (oral or anal sexual acts), child molestation, incest, fondling, exposure, voyeurism, or attempts to commit these acts.

Using these categories of sexual acts and behaviors, some examples of sexual assault include:

- Unwanted vaginal, anal, or oral penetration with any object
- Forcing an individual to perform or receive oral sex
- Forcing an individual to masturbate, or to masturbate someone else
- Forcing an individual to look at sexually explicit material or forcing an individual to pose for sexually explicit pictures
- Touching, fondling, kissing, and any other unwanted sexual contact with an individual's body
- Unwanted contact between the mouth and genitals
- Voyeurism: spying on someone engaged in intimate behavior, sexual activity, or other activity usually considered to be of a private nature; also includes the abuser watching while the victim is made to perform sexual acts
- Exhibitionism: also known as flashing, a behavior by a person that involves exposure of private parts of their body to another person in a situation in which they would not normally be exposed; also includes making the victim watch while the abuser performs sexual acts
- Putting a finger, tongue, mouth, penis, or any object in or on an individual's vagina, penis, or anus when they do not want them to
- Touching an individual's intimate parts (defined as genitalia, groin, breast, or buttocks, or clothing covering them), or compelling them to touch his or her own or another person's intimate parts without consent
- Forcing an individual to look at sexually explicit material or forcing them to pose for sexually explicit pictures or video recordings
- A doctor, nurse, or other health care professional giving the victim an unnecessary internal examination or touching their sexual organs in an unprofessional, unwarranted, and inappropriate manner

Consent

In addition to the wide scope of sexual behaviors and contact that are included in the definition of sexual assault, another key issue is consent. Consent is when an individual is freely able to make a choice based upon respect and equal power, and with the understanding that there is the freedom to change her or his mind at any point.

There are three main considerations in judging whether a sexual act is consensual or an assault. First, are both people old enough to consent? Second, do both people have the capacity to consent? Third, did

both agree to the sexual contact? If any of these are answered “no,” it is likely that sexual assault has occurred.

Consent requires communicating “yes” to engaging in a particular act. Consent is not given when one person says “no,” says nothing, is coerced, is physically forced, is mentally or physically helpless, is intoxicated, is under the influence of drugs, or is unconscious. Nor does it occur any time that consent is not explicitly given. Having given consent on a previous occasion does not mean that a person has consented for any future sexual encounter. The law generally assumes that a person does not consent to sexual conduct if he or she is forced, threatened, or is unconscious, drugged, a minor, developmentally disabled, chronically mentally ill, or believes they are undergoing a medical procedure.

Methods

There are varying methods perpetrators use to violate victims. In some cases, sexual assault may involve the use of force, which may include but is not limited to physical violence, use or display of a weapon, or immobilization of the victim. Sexual assault may also involve psychological coercion and taking advantage of an individual who is incapacitated or under duress and, therefore, is incapable of making a decision on her or his own.

Sexual assault occurs when a nonconsensual sexual act or behavior is committed either by 1) physical force, violence, threat, manipulation, or intimidation; 2) ignoring the objections of another person; 3) causing another’s intoxication or impairment through the use of drugs or alcohol; or 4) taking advantage of another person’s incapacitation, state of intimidation, helplessness, or other inability to consent.

Prevalence

Victims

Sexual assault affects millions of women, men, and children worldwide. The prevalence of sexual assault in the United States is difficult to determine because the crime is vastly underreported, yet the statistics are still overwhelmingly high: One in four women⁶ and one in six men⁷ will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetimes. These statistics are probably underestimates.

Some victims are sexually assaulted from when they are a few days old, and some are in their nineties. People can be assaulted regardless of their color, race, religion, nationality, lifestyle, sexual preference, education, class, occupation, ability, or disability. It is clear that sexual assault is a frequent phenomenon and is well within the range of being labeled a “common experience” for women, men, and children. According to most recent statistics, every two minutes someone in the United States is sexually assaulted.⁸

Most victims of sexual assault are female. According to numerous studies, between 88–92 percent of sexual assault victims are female and 8–12 percent are male.⁹ One out of six women in the United States has been raped at some time in her life.¹⁰ African-American women are assaulted at a higher rate than white women¹¹ and are much less likely to report it and get help.¹²

According to the Bureau of Justice, women sixteen to nineteen years old have the highest rate of sexual victimization of any age group.¹³ The National Center for Juvenile Justice reports that 14 percent of victims (girls and boys) are under age six and that 67 percent of females and 70 percent of male child sexual assault victims know their offender.¹⁴

Sexual assault can occur in marriage and between dates and friends. Researchers have estimated that sexual assault occurs in 10–14 percent of all marriages.¹⁵ Studies estimate that incest is experienced by 10 to 20 percent of children in the general population.¹⁶ Studies indicate different prevalence rates of incest for females and males. One study reported that as many as one-third of all girls and one-fifth of boys have experienced incest.¹⁷ Researchers agree that girls are much more often the victims of incest. Others report that the incidence for males is less than half of that for females because a higher proportion of males are sexually abused by adults outside the home.¹⁸ Male incest victims may also report less frequently because they are socialized to not express feelings of helplessness and vulnerability.

Research shows that there are differences between females and males with respect to the characteristics of sexual assault and the events surrounding it. When victimized, women are more likely than men to be injured, to use medical services, and to report the violence to the police.¹⁹ Men are more likely than women to have had multiple assailants during their attack.²⁰

Regarding the age breakdown of sexual assault, 15 percent of sexual assault victims are under age twelve, 29 percent are ages twelve to seventeen, and 80 percent are under age thirty.²¹ The highest risk years are ages twelve to thirty-four, and girls ages sixteen to nineteen are four times more likely than the general population to be victims of sexual assault.

Most victims of child sexual assault know their attacker; 34.2 percent of assailants were family members, 58.7 percent were acquaintances, and only 7 percent of the perpetrators were strangers to the victim.²² Of child sexual abuse victims, approximately 10 percent of victims are age three and under, 28 percent are between ages four and seven, 26 percent are between ages eight and eleven, and 36 percent are twelve and older.²³

Those who experienced childhood assault are at a higher risk of adult revictimization.²⁴ Childhood sexual assault is especially common among sexually assaulted women and men (59 percent and 61 percent respectively).²⁵ Women who had been sexually assaulted in childhood are at least twice as likely to be assaulted in adulthood.²⁶ It was found that the respondents with more physically and emotionally severe adolescent sexual assault experiences were at a significantly greater risk of revictimization. They are 4.4 times more likely to be revictimized than the respondents who had not experienced adolescent sexual assault.²⁷

The findings regarding male victims are even more dramatic. One study reports that 61 percent of men who report a sexual victimization during adulthood also report having been sexually assaulted as a child.²⁸ Men who experienced sexual assault as adults are five times more likely to have a history of childhood sexual assault than men with no adult sexual assault experience. Two major studies have shown a strong correlation between childhood sexual victimization and subsequent adult sexual victimization.²⁹

Perpetrators

Predominately, perpetrators responsible for sexual assaults are male³⁰ and are usually someone the victim knows.³¹ Although strangers are stereotyped as perpetrators of sexual assault, the evidence indicates that a high percentage of offenders are acquaintances of the victim.³² Most sexual assault perpetrators are white, educated, middle-class men.³³

With only 7 percent of the perpetrators armed, sexual assault is the least likely to involve a weapon of any other violent crime.³⁴

If individuals who commit sexual assault offenses are not apprehended and prosecuted, they will likely continue to commit sexual offenses. One widely recognized study found that 126 admitted perpetrators had committed 907 sexual assaults involving 882 different victims. The more sex offenders that are apprehended and prosecuted, the fewer victims there will be of sexual assault.³⁵

Reporting

With regard to the reporting of sexual assault, there are two major issues to consider—false reporting and under reporting. While under reporting is a major concern, false reporting is not. Actually, false reports are quite rare. The figure often used by sexual violence experts for estimating falsified reports is 2 percent, which is a slightly lower rate than other crimes.³⁶

Given the horrific nature of sexual assault and the shame it brings to victims, it is not shocking that it is one of the most underreported crimes. The fear of intrusive and revictimizing court procedures prevents many sexual assault survivors from reporting their assaults. Most sexual assault victims choose not to report their assaults. Factors that keep a victim from reporting the crime include shame and embarrassment, self-blame, fear of media exposure, fear of further injury or retaliation, fear of one's own family and community response, and fear of a legal system that often puts the victim's behavior and history on trial.

According to the FBI, sexual assault is “one of the most underreported crimes due primarily to fear and/or embarrassment on the part of the victim.”³⁷ One research report claims that only between 5 percent and 20 percent of sexual assaults may actually be reported.³⁸ At the most, less than 40 percent of all sexual assaults were reported to law enforcement.³⁹ Under reporting skews all recordable statistics. Therefore, statistics on the incidence of sexual assault vary greatly and are believed to underrepresent the prevalence of the crime. Despite the inability to paint a complete picture of the occurrence of sexual assault, statistics can provide victims with a greater understanding of the scope of the issue.

It is important to acknowledge that most researchers believe that

male sexual assault is severely underreported, perhaps even more so than sexual assaults of women. Male sexual assault victims are much less likely to disclose information regarding their experiences than are females.⁴⁰ Therefore, they constitute an extremely underidentified, underserved, and frequently misunderstood population.

Though sexual assault is underreported by both females and males, males are in a unique position. They are far less likely to disclose being sexually assaulted to anyone. Two trends are evident in the existing statistics on male victims of sexual abuse: 1) the more recent the research, the higher the incidence of assault, and 2) with growing awareness, more men seem willing to disclose their experiences of sexual assault.⁴¹

Acknowledgment

Naming and describing the evil done to you does not ensure automatic personal healing. However, it does provide clarity regarding sexual assault, and it allows for acknowledgment. If sexual assault is not defined, named, or described, then it remains hidden. Telling the truth about sexual assault by acknowledging the traumatic experience is one important aspect of healing, but it is not the whole picture. Further healing comes as you are able to interpret the effect of what happened to you within a larger pattern of meaning. The first step toward doing this is to look closely at the effects of sexual assault and the accompanying emotions.



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Grace Driscoll, *pastor's wife, mother of five, conference speaker, author*

"I praise God for the gospel that can heal and restore and for the Holcombs who had the courage and wisdom to write this book for us."

Matt Chandler, *Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, TX*

"Reminds victims of sexual assault that they are not alone and it is not the end of the story. From King David's daughter Tamar to the courageous survivors telling their stories today, the Holcombs take sexual assault out of the shadows of shame and isolation and into the light of the gospel."

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Rebecca St. James, *singer, author, actress*

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