

ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE ATHLETES AND COLLEGE NON-
ATHLETES ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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Attitudes and Experiences of College Athletes and College Non-Athletes on Domestic Violence

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Abstract

Recent public perception of "widespread domestic violence has captured the attention of many Americans. Domestic violence is found across ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic class. Studies show approximately 1 in 10 high school students has experienced physical violence in dating relationships; along with approximately one-third of college students report experiencing relationship aggression. Athletes frequently appear on television and in the news headlines because of their involvement in instances of aggression and domestic violence. Although much of the documented violence takes place in the context of sports competition, not all athlete aggression is restricted to sports opponents. The information suggested a need to investigate the attitudes and experiences of college student athletes and college student non-athletes in domestic violence; and specifically to determine if college student athletes are more often involved in domestic violence than non-athletes. A questionnaire concerning domestic violent behaviors was administered to 252 college student athletes and 432 college student non-athletes. The data was analyzed statistically by frequency and chi-square. The study findings yield (1) males reported that family members were more physically aggressive and verbally abusive than females; (2) males reported that they have physically and verbally abused someone more often than females; African American college student athletes and non-athletes reported getting along better with family members than did the white college student athletes and non athletes; and college student non-athletes were more likely than college student athletes to encounter abuse and negative

relationships with family members. College and university campuses traditionally have provided a special environment in which young people can explore new ideas and learn about the world. One of the most important lessons that institutions of higher education can communicate to all students is that violence will not be tolerated. In the aftermath of this study, an important challenge lingers: Taking the information and developing programs and policies may reduce college students' risk of victimization. More urgently, how can the lives of college students males and females--whether on, close to, or off campus--be made safer and this free from the costs imposed by the experience of domestic violence?

Introduction

Recent public perception of “widespread” domestic violence has captured the attention of many Americans. Domestic violence is found across ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic classes (Hotaling and Sugarman, 1990). Domestic violence challenges society today. Studies show approximately 1 in 10 high school students has experienced physical violence in dating relationships; among college students, the figure rises to 22% (Gamache, 1991). Violence also seems to be widespread within the context of dating relationships. Approximately one-third of college students report experiencing relationship aggression (Arias, Samios, and O'Leary, 1987; Bernard and Bernard 1983; Breslin et al. 1990; Rouse, Breen, and Howell 1988; White and Koss, 1991).

There is a growing demand for more research and violence prevention programs to reduce aggression and victimization. A report from the National Crime Survey by the U.S. Bureau of the Census reported that approximately 3,000,000 incidents of crime and violence are reported

annually for grades K-12 (Stephens, 1991). An estimation of approximately 1 million teenagers between 12 and 19 are raped, robbed, or assaulted annually (Kantrowitz, 1993). In 1992, a report from the National Association of School Security Directors stated that approximately 9,000 rapes, 12,000 armed robberies, 270,000 burglaries, and 204,000 aggravated assaults occurred in the U.S. schools (Rich, 1992).

College and university campuses traditionally have provided a special environment in which young people can explore new ideas and learn about the world. One of the most important lessons that institutions of higher education can communicate to all students is that domestic violence against women and/or any violence will not be tolerated. Creating a safe and supportive campus community is both an obligation and a challenge for college and university administrators, faculty and staff, other campus personnel, and students. Sexual assault, dating and domestic violence, and stalking are serious problems on college and university campuses.

The Stalking and Domestic Violence: The Third Annual Report to Congress Under the Violence Against Women Act (1998) found that college-age women are at high risk for all forms of violence against women. More than one-half of all stalking victims are between 18 and 29 years old and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1998) found the highest rate of intimate partner violence is among women ages 16 to 24. Sexual assault is the second most common violent crime committed on college campuses; most perpetrators are students' known by the victim. One-half of these sexual assaults occur in the victim's residence and an additional one-third takes place in off-campus student housing such as fraternities (Fisher, 1995).

Many researchers have established that domestic violence and sexual assault are problems that exist on contemporary college and university campuses (Aizenman & Kelley, 1988; Koss,

Gidycez, & Wisniewski, 1989; Douglas, Collins & Warren, 1997). Depending on the studies being examined, the prevalence of domestic violence can range from 10 to 20% of the sample surveyed. For example, data from the National College Health Risk Behavior Survey collected from 136 institutions estimated that 20% of college women had at some point in their lives been forced to have sexual intercourse (Douglas, Collins & Warren, 1997). However in a separate study, 45% of the student population sampled reported either knowing someone who had been raped or had himself or herself been a victim of rape (Chng & Burke, 1999).

Women college students are at a particularly high risk for being a victim of domestic violence, particularly date rape or acquaintance rape. The peak age of victimization for women being 16-19 years, while the second highest age-range for victimization is 20-24 years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995). Most studies of the frequency of domestic violence among college students indicate that from 25% to 60% of college men have engaged in some form of sexually coercive behavior (Berkowitz, 1992), and that men who grow up in an environment that supports the objectification of women, encourages them to behave in ways that are sometimes violent and coercive, and who also subscribe to traditional sex roles of male sexual dominance are more likely than other men to engage in domestic violence, sexual coercion, sexual assault and rape (Muehlenhard & Falcon, 1990; Berkowitz, 1992).

Among college women, it has been estimated that one in five female college students will experience some form of domestic violence during her college years (Koss, 1985). Koss, Gidycez, and Wisniewski (1987) found that 27.5% of their sample of college women reported being raped or experiencing an attempted rape, while 53.7% (including those reporting attempted rape or rape) endorsed being subjected to unwanted sexual contact or domestic violence. Surveys of

college males indicate that 7-25% report involvement in domestic violence on a female (Koss, 1989; Koss & Oros, 1982; Miller & Marshall, 1987; Mills & Granoff, 1992; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984).

Although perpetrators of domestic violence can come from any part of the college community, two campus populations have been identified as possibly being "high risk" with regard to perpetrating sexual violence—non-athletes-fraternity members and athletes. Although these two communities have been associated with sexual violence, there is a very limited amount of published research on this connection. In a synthesis of sexual assault research, O'Sullivan indicated that of all the gang rapes reported on college campuses between 1980-1990, fraternity members were believed to have committed 55% of these crimes (O'Sullivan, 1991). In another campus-based study, although only 25% of the male students were fraternity members, they accounted for 63% of the sexual assaults, with 24% of all sexual assaults having occurred in fraternity housing (O'Shaughnessy & Plamer, 1990).

Among college athletes, domestic violence is one of the most controversial and troubling issues on college campuses today (Sawyer, 1994). As a specific college population, athletes are often exposed to beliefs and patterns of behavior conducive to physical abuse, which can become an integral part of their collegiate experience. For many men athletes in particular, these beliefs and behaviors are reinforced by training in aggression, their high social status on campus, behavior of women fans, alcohol and other drug use, and the peer pressure inherent in most all male groups (Parrot et al., 1994). While the extent to which men athletes endorse these beliefs varies, it has been suggested that men athletes who tend to do so are more likely to consider domestic violence as acceptable behavior (O'Sullivan, 1991; Berkowitz, 1992).

Although there are few studies that document domestic violence of athletes, a Massachusetts study of 107 rapes, attempted rapes, and fondling incidents at 30 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institutions between 1990-1993 found that male athletes made up 3.3 percent of the male study body at ten of the institutions. Those athletes, however, were involved in 10 percent of the assaults (O'Keefe, 1995). Thomas Jackson at the University of Arkansas found that 165 athletes from NCAA programs in the southern United States in 1990, four percent reported physically forcing a date to have sex, 27 percent stated they coerced a woman into sex, and 11 percent reported physically assaulting a woman while on a date. The results were similar to other non-athletic males in college (Burnette, 1996).

Although much of the research on domestic violence does not specifically target a particular group of people, attitudes and experiences of college student athletes and college student non-athletes was the focus of this study. The general purpose of the study was to synthesize, and study the abundance of theoretical, and empirical literature of domestic violence. In addition, survey college student athletes and non-athletes attitudes and experiences on domestic violence.

A survey was conducted using undergraduate college student athletes and non-athletes from four state universities in the southeast region of the United States. The same consisted of 685 college student athletes and non-athletes from a cross section of academic disciplines and a majority of the participants were from middle socioeconomic backgrounds within the four universities. The subjects were randomly selected volunteers consisting of both males and females. Each student participant was asked to complete a 40-item questionnaire that focused on areas such as childhood and familial relationships, sexual relationships, family socioeconomic status, experiences in forced sex and fondling, verbal and physical abuse, athletic participation in

high school and college; and other forms of domestic violence experienced during and/or before entering college.

Methods

Undergraduate college student athletes and non-athletes from four state universities in the southeast region of the United States were recruited. The researcher administered a 40-item questionnaire completed voluntarily and anonymously by 685 students randomly selected by research assistants at each institution from randomly selected undergraduate core courses. 432 college student non-athletes and 253 college student athletes completed the questionnaire. The college student athletes represented their respective institutions in one of seven sports: football, basketball, soccer, baseball, volleyball, track, and golf. The college non-athletes did not participate in any sport at the varsity level but could have participated in intramural sports, engaged in recreational activity, or may not have engaged in sport activity at all. All responses answered on the questionnaire were input into a database, the data was analyzed to determine descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, and chi-square analysis.

The researcher constructed the questionnaire. It consisted of 40 items which include 4 demographic questions: gender, age, ethnicity, and marital status, 7 items relating to sport participation, and 28 items relating to experience with verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. The abuse related items utilized Likert-type response formats. Items requiring “yes” and “no” responses and items relating to the affiliation of the abused or abuser with organizations such as athletic teams, sororities, or fraternities were also included. Written instructions for completing the questionnaire, and a written statement assuring anonymity and confidentiality of responses

were given to each participant before the questionnaire was administered. No names were attached to the questionnaires assuring confidentiality.

Results

The demographic characteristics were reflective of the institutions populations. The majority of participants 96 percent were between 18 and 26 years old. Fifty percent of the participants were white, 35 percent were African-American, 10 percent Latino, and 5 percent were other ethnic groups not identified. Of the participants, 174 were male athletes and 79 female athletes, with 204 female non-athletes and 228 male non-athletes.

Table 1 compares rates of performing various types of abuse. Females used verbal abuse more frequently than males and abused other females significantly more often than they did males. Verbal abuse was followed in frequency by physical abuse and sexual abuse, respectively. Males used physical abuse more frequently than females, and they physically abused other males significantly more often than they did females, males admitted performing some form of sexual abuse significantly more often than females.

Table 1 Chi-square Analysis of Performing Types of Abuse by Gender

Type of Abuse	Rate of Abuse		Chi-Square	df	p
	Males N = 402	Females N = 282			
VERBAL ABUSE					
Same Sex	45%	49%	15.80	4	.01 (*)
Opposite Sex	31%	37%	.92	4	.92
PHYSICAL ABUSE					
Same Sex	59%	10%	33.41	4	.01 (*)
Opposite Sex	30%	26%	2.66	4	.61
SEXUAL ABUSE					
Same Sex	2%	2%	.24	1	.62
Opposite Sex	13%	4%	10.59	1	.01 (*)

(*) $p < .01$

Table 2 illustrates the rates of sexually abusive behaviors observed by participants. Sexual abuse was reportedly experienced at higher rates than it was performed with 30% responding they had been fondled against their will by the opposite sex, 14% forced to have sex by the opposite sex, 2% fondled by the same sex against their will, and 1% forced to have sex with someone of the same sex.

Table 2 Rate of Performing Sexually Abusive Behaviors

	YES	NO
Fondled Opposite Sex	8%	87%
Fondled Same Sex	1%	96%
Forced Sex with Opposite Sex	4%	94%
Forced Sex with Same Sex	1%	97%
Fondled by Opposite Sex	30%	70%
Fondled by Same Sex	2%	98%
Forced Sex by Opposite Sex	14%	91%
Forced Sex by Same Sex	1%	94%

Table 3 illustrates differences in rates of abusive behaviors by athletes and non-athletes. No difference was observed in the rate of verbal abuse between athletes and non-athletes. Athletes reported higher rates of physical abuse of someone of the same sex than non-athletes but no difference was observed in physical abuse of the opposite sex. Non-athletes were more likely to have fondled someone of the opposite sex against his or her will (11%) than athletes (6%). Non-athletes were also more likely to have forced sex with someone of the opposite sex (8%) than athletes (2%).

Table 3 Rates of Performing Verbal, Physical, and Sexual Abuse for Non-athletes and Athletes

Types of Abuse

Rates of Abuse

	Athletes N = 432	Non Athletes N = 252	Chi – Square	df	p
VERBAL ABUSE					
Same Sex	65%	69%	7.86	4	.09
Opposite Sex	58%	65%	4.15	4	.39
PHYSICAL ABUSE					
Same Sex	50%	38%	13.85	4	.01 (*)
Opposite Sex	32%	25%	4.80	3	.19
SEXUAL ABUSE					
Fondled	6%	11%	9.35	1	.01 (*)
Forced Sex	2%	8%	5.35	1	.05 (**)

(*) $p < .01$

(**) $12 < .05$

Table 4 Chi-Square illustrates of Sexual Activity of Non-Athletes and Athletes

	Non Athletes	Athletes
Very Active	20%	27%
Active	27%	32%
Moderately Active	25%	27%
Rarely Active	19%	8%
Not Active	21%	11%

Chi-square = 11.02,
df = 4
p < .05

Table 5 illustrates more athletes than non-athletes responded that the family in which they were raised as physically abusive but no difference was indicated for verbal abuse. Athletes also responded that the K-12 school experiences were more physically abusive than non-athletes. A history of verbal or physical abuse in the family or school environment was associated with exhibiting verbal, physical, and sexual abuse in college. A history of prior verbal abuse in the family, verbal abuse in K-12 school experiences, physical abuse in the family, and physical abuse in K-12 school experiences were associated with being the victim of domestic violence in college.

Table 5 History of Abuse and Subsequent Abuse

History of Family Abuse	Performing Abuse	Chi-square	df	P
Verbal Abuse				
Verbal	N = 240	49.57	16	.01 (*)
Physical	N = 240	47.82	16	.01 (*)
Sexual	N = 205	23.60	4	.01 (*)
Physical Abuse				
Verbal	N = 330	38.90	16	.01 (*)
Physical	N = 330	27.10	16	.05 (**)
Sexual	N = 220	14.50	4	.01 (*)

History of K-12 Abuse				
Verbal Abuse				
Verbal	N = 160	46.40	16	.01 (*)
Physical	N = 160	50.03	16	.01 (*)
Sexual	N = 160	81.53	4	.01 (*)
Physical Abuse				
Verbal	N = 71	35.33	16	.01 (*)
Physical	N = 71	81.02	16	.01 (*)
Sexual	N = 69	14.99	4	.01 (*)

P < .01

(**) p < .05

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study disagree with other researchers (Benedict, 1998; Ekenazi, 1990 and Frintner & Rubinson, 1993) that male athletes are more sexually active and involved in an inordinate amount of sexually abusive behavior than non-athletes. Koss and Gaines (1993) postulated that differences in socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds of some college student athletes and college student non-athletes might be the underlying cause of the observed differences in domestic violence. The rate of sexual abuse by college student athletes reported here is significantly lower than that reported by college student non-athletes.

One could conjecture that in a society, which has for years socialized men to be athletically aggressive and competitive, the resulting cultural norm has simply transcended the varying levels of athletic endeavor, that is, males are equally competitive regardless of their athletic participation or non-athletic participation.

Attention to domestic violence on the college campus has been prompted by the rising fear that college campuses are not ivory towers. Researchers have shown that college campuses and

their students are not free from the risk of domestic violence. Large concentrations of young women come into contact with young men in a variety of public and private settings at various times on college campuses.

Finally, in the aftermath of this study, an important challenge remains: Taking the information found and developing programs and policies that may reduce the college students' risk of domestic violence. Minor forms of sexual victimization--sexist statements, harassing catcalls, sexually tainted whistles--appear to be commonplace. How can a more civil environment be achieved without compromising free speech? Much is known about the circumstances under which domestic violence, including rape, most often occurs. How can this information be used in domestic violence prevention programs, including rape awareness seminars designed for women or rape prevention seminars designed for men? More generally, how can the lives of college students men, and women--whether on, close to, or off campus--be made safer and thus free from the costs imposed by the experience of domestic violence?

In closing, college populations are in need of being targeted for domestic violence prevention efforts, and because this population represents an accessible and receptive population to educational intervention, every effort to implement programming at a greater rate than is currently happening is essential.

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