

College Rape Prevention Program Proves a Rare Success

Photo



Lindsey Boyes, a student at the University of Calgary, attended a college sexual assault prevention program that helped her feel less shame about being assaulted in high school. Credit Todd Korol for The New York Times

A program that trained first-year female college students to avoid rape **substantially lowered their risk of being sexually assaulted**, a rare success against a problem that has been resistant to many prevention efforts, researchers reported Wednesday.

Sexual violence is a serious hazard on college campuses. By some estimates, one in five female students are raped, and women tend to be at the greatest risk during their first year on campus. In the aftermath of several highly publicized campus rapes, the White House last spring **issued guidelines** directing colleges to address sexual assault.

In a randomized trial, published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, first-year students at three Canadian campuses attended sessions on assessing risk, learning self-defense and defining personal sexual boundaries. The students were surveyed a year after they completed the intervention.

The risk of rape for 451 women randomly assigned to the program was about 5 percent, compared with nearly 10 percent among 442 women in a control

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group who were given brochures and a brief information session.

“Only 22 women would need to take the program in order to prevent one additional rape from occurring within one year,” the authors concluded.

The risk of attempted rape was even lower — 3.4 percent among women who received the training, compared with 9.3 percent among those who did not.

“It’s an important, rigorous study that shows that resistance and self-defense training needs to be part of college sexual assault prevention,” said Sarah E. Ullman, a professor of criminology, law and justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who was not involved in the research.

“This won’t solve the problem, but it’s an important piece that has been overlooked.”

Other researchers praised the trial as one of the largest and most promising efforts in a field pocked by equivocal or dismal results. But some took issue with the philosophy underlying the program’s focus: training women who could potentially be victims, rather than dealing with the behavior and attitudes of men who could potentially be perpetrators.

Such a strategy could reduce risk for some victims, said Sarah DeGue, a behavioral scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who [reviewed](#) evaluations of prevention programs for the White House Task Force on campus sexual assault.

But, she added, “It’s possible that potential perpetrators could encounter individuals who have received training and just move on to more vulnerable individuals.”

To address sexual assault comprehensively, she and other experts said, colleges as well as high schools and middle schools should [take multifaceted approaches](#) that considered root causes of violence against women and men, compelled bystanders to intervene and gave guidance on healthy relationships.

Charlene Y. Senn, the lead author of the Canadian study and a social psychologist at the University of Windsor, did not disagree. “It gives women the knowledge and skills they need right now, but the long-term solution is to reduce their need to defend themselves,” said Dr. Senn, who also supervises a campus bystander program.

The two-year trial at universities in Calgary, Alberta, and Windsor and Guelph in Ontario, expanded on

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components of other resistance programs and added a training session on sexuality and relationships.

Students, largely recruited in psychology classes, could take all four three-hour sessions over a weekend or in weekly classes. The structure was purposely dynamic, and included role-playing, discussion and problem-solving.

One major hurdle, Dr. Senn said, was that the young women had been taught just to be on guard against the stranger rapist — to fear the shadowy campus at night, the deserted parking lots. Rape by an acquaintance or a romantic partner, far more common, is not a concept they had considered, she said.

At a session Lindsey Boyes attended at the University of Calgary, she said she was startled to learn that if someone had sex with a person who was intoxicated, the act could be defined as sexual assault: A person who is mentally incapacitated because of alcohol or drugs cannot legally give consent.

“I felt an adrenaline rush and some shock,” Ms. Boyes, 22, said. “It was eye-opening to realize that I had been raped in high school.”

At 16, she had been at a party, drinking alcohol for the first time, and was very drunk. A boy offered to take her home — and then assaulted her. She was devastated, for years thinking of herself as “damaged goods.”

But the resistance program brought some relief, she said. “I no longer felt shame and guilt about it being my fault,” Ms. Boyes said.

During the program, students learn strategies to protect themselves at social gatherings, such as buddy systems. Ms. Boyes said that now when she went to bars, she covered her glass to protect against date-rape drugs.

The Canadian program was also effective for women who, like Ms. Boyes, had been victimized before they went to college.

A study about sexual assaults of first-year college women, published this month in *The Journal of Adolescent Health*, noted that women who had been previously assaulted may be up to six times more likely to be revictimized during that first year than women who had never faced sexual violence.

The acquaintance rape theme was continued in the self-defense session. Women may be better prepared psychologically to be physically aggressive against a stranger, Dr. Senn said, “but if the attacker is your friend’s boyfriend, you’re not going to push your keys against his eyes.”

Most women who are assaulted by acquaintances, she added, “use pleading and crying.”

“That’s natural and makes sense, but it’s not effective,” Dr. Senn said.

And so the students were taught how to break wrist holds and chokeholds and yell. The class presented attacks in different social contexts, offering women the confidence to choose the most effective strategies.

The final unit asked women to articulate consensual and nonconsensual sexual activities, and how well they would have to know someone to participate.

“The women said this was the first time they’d reflected about sexual situations when it wasn’t proposed to them,” Dr. Senn said. By clarifying their sexual desires, the women could internalize a defined baseline.

Dr. Senn wrote the manual for the program, which is on hiatus, pending additional training.

In an editorial accompanying the study, Kathleen C. Basile, a lead behavioral scientist in violence prevention at the C.D.C., [noted that there were no easy solutions to sexual violence](#), stressing that a comprehensive approach is essential.

This study, she wrote, described an effective intervention for individual women.

But, she added, “it places the onus for prevention on potential victims, possibly obscuring the responsibility of perpetrators and others.”