

PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMIZATION
AMONG HETEROSEXUAL AND GAY/LESBIAN
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Summary.—The prevalence of being a victim of forced sex was examined in a sample of 412 university students. Sexual victimization was significantly more common among female than male and among gay and lesbian than heterosexual students.

The prevalence of sexual-assault victimization (child sexual abuse and/or rape) has been the subject of numerous recent studies. Most of these studies have surveyed women and have focused on heterosexual assaults. A comparison of prevalence in heterosexual and gay/lesbian subgroups of the same population has not been made previously.

Sexual orientation and “forced-sex” experiences were surveyed among students in a multisection health education course of the undergraduate liberal arts core curriculum at a midwestern university. Over the course of two semesters 427 students gave informed consent and participated. The responses of 15 subjects were unusable which left a sample of 412 students. Of these 80% subjects were freshmen or sophomores. Their mean age was 21.2 yr.

In response to the question, “What is your sexual orientation?” 16.9% of the subjects (36 women and 34 men) reported that they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, while the remainder (168 men and 174 women) reported heterosexual orientations. In response to the question, “Have you ever been forced to have sex against your will?” 12.6% of the sample (20% of the women and 4.9% of the men) answered yes ($p < .001$, $\chi_1^2 = 20.57$). As can be seen in Table 1, gay, lesbian, and bisexual subjects reported significantly higher ($p < .001$, $\chi_1^2 = 26.05$) lifetime prevalences of sexual victimization than did heterosexual subjects.

TABLE 1
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF VICTIMS OF FORCED SEX AMONG HETEROSEXUAL AND
HOMOSEXUAL, MALE AND FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ($N = 412$)

	Men		Women	
	Heterosexual	Gay	Heterosexual	Lesbian
No. of Victims	6	4	31	11
% Victims	3.6	11.8	17.8	30.6
<i>n</i>	168	34	174	36

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The lifetime prevalence of sexual victimization in this study is considerably lower than the 34.8% of women and 20.9% of men reported by Sigelman, Berry, and Wiles (1984) for a similar population, possibly due to a broader operationalization of the variable in their study. The results for women are closer to the 16.7% lifetime prevalence reported in a recent survey of the Los Angeles general population (Siegel, *et al.*, 1987; Sorenson, *et al.*, 1987) while that study gave a prevalence of 9.4% among men, compared to 4.9% in the present study.

Present results seem to indicate that gay and lesbian students are at higher risk for sexual victimization than the heterosexual students. It is possible, however, that gay/lesbian students differ from heterosexual students in their openness in reporting experiences of sexual victimization rather than in the frequency with which they have been victimized. In either case, this analysis has indicated that gay and lesbian students report rates of sexual victimization high enough to indicate that rape prevention and education programs on college campuses should not continue to overlook the needs of this population.

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