



Unwanted Sexual Experiences at UNH:

Incidence and Prevalence

• 2006 •

Introduction

National studies find that college-aged women are the highest risk group for sexual assault and that about one in four or five college women report a rape or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). There is significant variability in these figures and men also report unwanted sexual experiences. Thus, there is a need for local and specific community estimates of the extent of this problem to inform prevention and policy initiatives. This study is the result of an ongoing research collaboration at the University of New Hampshire funded by the Office of the President. It presents findings from the most recent study conducted in 2006 on a range of unwanted sexual experiences among undergraduates on the UNH campus. The first wave or panel of this study was conducted in 1988 (when detailed victimization data were collected only on women), followed twelve years later in 2000 with a study using the same measures but collecting data on victimizations reported by women and men. The main aim of the study has been to examine the incidence and prevalence of unwanted sexual experiences among undergraduate students at UNH. Subsequent reports will be forthcoming over the next 12 months presenting additional data on related topics.

The current report describes new data on the incidence and prevalence of unwanted sexual experiences among UNH undergraduates for the 2005-2006 academic year from September to the end of February and compares these figures with previous studies at UNH. Incidence is defined as the number of new cases of unwanted sexual experiences during a particular time or period, and prevalence is defined as the total number of cases of a particular problem that exist in a population at a given time regardless of when the experience occurred.

Methods

In each study year, students answered questions at the end of February about unwanted sexual contact or intercourse that had occurred since the beginning of the fall semester of that academic year. In 1988 and 2000 all participants completed paper surveys in academic classes. In 2006, approximately half the sample (N=1242) completed paper surveys in a random sample of UNH undergraduate courses across colleges. The other half (N=1163) completed a web-based survey.

Sample

The 2006 sample slightly over-represents women; the percentage of university undergraduates who are women is 58, compared with the sample percentage of 64. The sample also over-represents first-year students (24% university compared to 34% sample) and under-represents seniors (28% university compared to 21% sample). The sample is close to the university population with respect to distribution across colleges (e.g., College of Liberal Arts, College of Engineering and Physical Science, etc.).

Definition of Terms

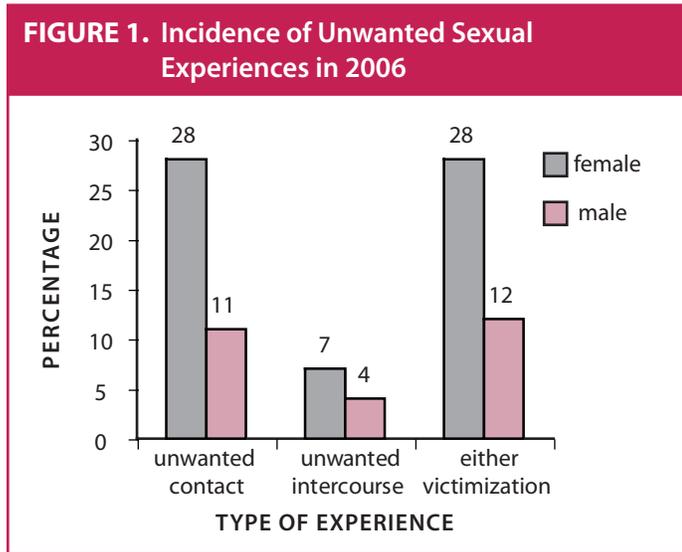
For the purposes of the study, the following definitions appeared on the surveys that participants filled out. "Unwanted sexual experiences are those situations in which you were certain at the time that you did not want to engage in the sexual experience and you either communicated this in some way (e.g., you said no; you protested; you said you didn't want to; you physically struggled; you cried; etc.), or you were intimidated or forced by someone or you were incapacitated (e.g., drunk, passed out, etc.). "Sexual contact includes attempting or actually kissing, fondling, or touching



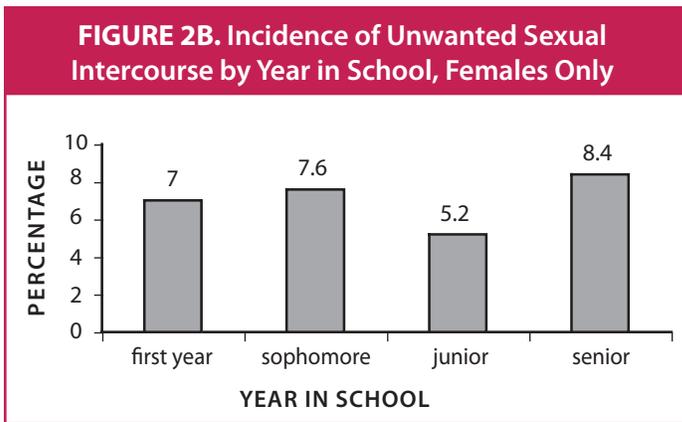
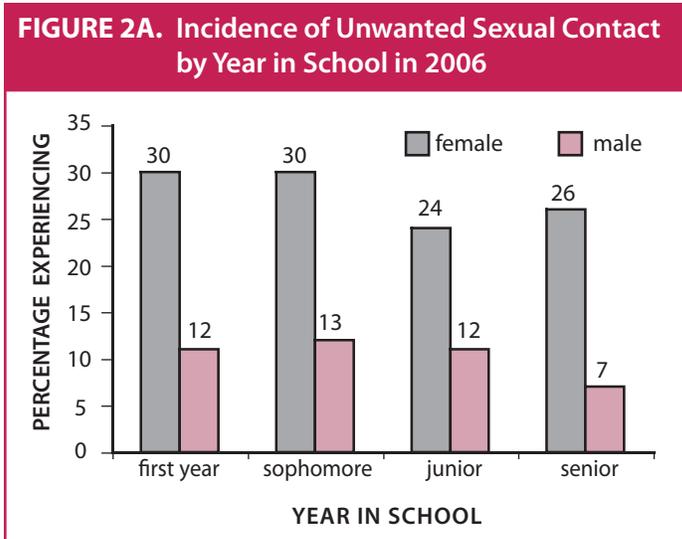
someone in a sexually intimate way, excluding sexual intercourse.” “Sexual intercourse refers to any form of sexual penetration including vaginal intercourse, oral sex, and anal intercourse.” These definitions and the specific questions used to assess victimization experiences were the same across all panels of the study.

Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Experiences

The incidence of unwanted sexual experiences was calculated using the combined data from web and paper surveys collected in 2006 and is summarized for all respondents in Figure 1. Women report greater incidence of unwanted sexual experiences, and the difference between men and women with regard to unwanted sexual contact is particularly marked. Over a quarter of the women students report at least one unwanted contact; the figure for men is just over 10%. For unwanted sexual intercourse, the incidence is lower for both women and men (7% and 4%, respectively).



Figures 2a and 2b break down the incidence by year in school. It is often assumed that unwanted sexual experiences are especially likely to occur among first year students; these data confirm this for unwanted contact but not for unwanted intercourse. Unwanted contact is highest for first- and second-year students, especially among women. Unwanted intercourse, in comparison, is highest for seniors among women students, followed closely by sophomore and first-year women. The unwanted intercourse numbers for men are too small to analyze by year in school.



The incidences of unwanted sexual contact and unwanted sexual intercourse do not vary much across colleges. These data are not included in this report but are available on request from the authors.

Changes Over Time

As mentioned above, we collected incidence of sexual experience data from women in 1988, 2000, and 2006 and from men in 2000 and 2006. Because the 1988 and 2000 surveys used paper versions, we will only use the data from the students who used paper surveys in 2006 for this section. Figures 3a and 3b present the comparison data for women and men respectively.

FIGURE 3A. Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Experiences by Year of Study, Females Only

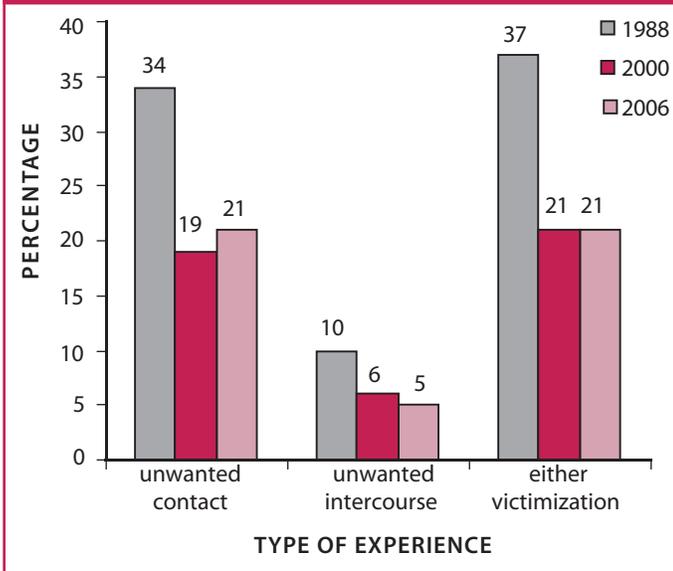


FIGURE 3B. Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Experiences by Year of Study, Males Only



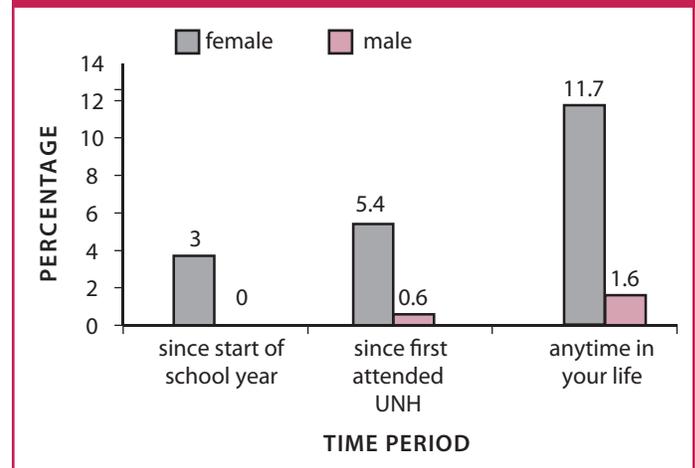
For women, there were significantly fewer incidents of unwanted sexual contact and either victimization in both 2000 and 2006 than 1988. Rates decreased significantly from 1988 to 2000 but there was no significant change from 2000 to 2006. For men, there were significantly fewer incidents of either victimization from 2000 to 2006. Neither unwanted sexual contact nor unwanted sexual intercourse changed significantly from 2000 to 2006.

Prevalence of Unwanted Sexual Experiences

In contrast to the incidence data presented above, the public health field also describes the importance of understanding prevalence. In this regard, students answered questions about unwanted sexual experiences over a broader scope of time, including a question about whether they have ever experienced an unwanted sexual experience regardless of when it took place. Specifically, participants were asked if they had had unwanted intercourse as a result of someone using force or the threat of harm against them. They were also asked how often they had sexual intercourse when they were too intoxicated to give consent. The data presented in this section are from 2006 only because these questions were not asked in either 1988 or 2000. For ease of interpretation, results of reports obtained on paper surveys and web-based surveys have been combined.

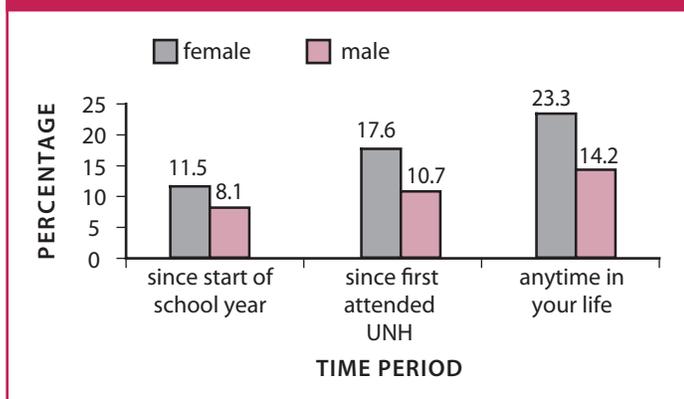
A substantial number of UNH students have past experiences with unwanted sexual experiences involving force or threat of harm (Figure 4A). Women were more likely than were men to report a history of unwanted sexual experiences no matter what period of time was used.

FIGURE 4A. Prevalence of Unwanted Sexual Intercourse: Perpetrator Using Force or Threat



Many UNH students also reported that they had sexual intercourse when they were too intoxicated to consent to the behavior (Figure 4B). Again, women reported these experiences more frequently than men did.

FIGURE 4B. Prevalence of Unwanted Sexual Intercourse: Victim Unable to Consent



Conclusions and Recommendations

- ▶ UNH statistics are in line with national statistics about college women. The data show that one in ten UNH undergraduate women has experienced the more severe forms of unwanted sexual experiences (e.g., force and threat of harm) in their lifetime. Three percent report this happening between September and February of that academic year. With an enrollment figure of 6014 female undergraduates during the semester in which the surveys were completed, we may estimate that 180 women undergraduates at UNH suffered these severe types of unwanted sexual experiences.
- ▶ While the decrease in incidence of unwanted sexual experiences since 1988 is encouraging and suggests that the many prevention and intervention services the community has put in place have made a difference, there now remains a relatively stable number of these incidents in our community each year. We need to continue to put additional time and resources into designing new forms of prevention and intervention to try to address this more stable if smaller subset of incidents.
- ▶ Looking across several questions in the survey, there is an indication that as many as half of the women who experience unwanted intercourse during the academic year report being the victim of force or threat of force. This reminds us that unwanted sexual experiences are not solely the result of lack of knowledge of consent or problems with miscommunication. Rather, many incidents involve one person using force to make another person be intimate against their will. Given the negative consequences for survivors across types of experiences, we should be including discussions of the full continuum of unwanted sexual experiences in our prevention and awareness efforts.

- ▶ Students in their first years at UNH should continue to be the focus of prevention efforts because they are at high risk for unwanted sexual contact. The community should find additional ways to bring prevention programs to this audience.
- ▶ Prevention needs to be ongoing throughout a student's years at UNH as women in their senior year are at high risk for unwanted sexual intercourse. Such efforts will require the commitment of many offices across our community to find creative ways to reach students throughout their UNH careers.
- ▶ Although only a small percentage of men report unwanted sexual experiences, it is still important to recognize that men are victims. Men need to have appropriate services available and efforts should include prevention of all types of unwanted sexual experiences.
- ▶ One in ten UNH students has had sexual intercourse when they were too intoxicated to give consent. Ongoing efforts to educate the community about what consent is and how to obtain it should be supported.

Project Collaborators

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References

Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2000). *The Sexual Victimization of College Women*. Research Report to National Institute of Justice (NIJ 182369), Washington, D.C.