



# Unwanted Sexual Experiences, Stalking, and Physical Relationship Violence:

## Six-Month Incidences Among University and College Students in New England

• 2012 •

### Introduction

National studies have found that college-age women are the highest risk group for sexual assault, and that the incidences of sexual violence, relationship violence, and stalking are high, if not the highest among college-age students (e. g., Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000, 2002; Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000). There has been variability in these figures, and men also have reported unwanted sexual, relationship and stalking experiences. Thus, there is a need for estimates of the extent of these problems to inform prevention and policy initiatives on university campuses. This current study, encompassing eight universities across the northeastern U.S., was an extended version of an earlier research collaboration at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) funded by the UNH Office of the President and conducted in 1988, 2000, and 2006. The original three panels of the study focused on unwanted sexual experiences at UNH. For the current study researchers gathered data on a wider range of unwanted experiences (sexual contact and intercourse, stalking, and physical relationship violence) among undergraduates on the eight campuses sampled. The main aim of this study was to examine the incidences of these unwanted experiences among undergraduate students at the participating universities. Incidence was defined as the number of individuals who self-reported unwanted experiences during a six-month period. Data were reported for the 2011-2012 academic year from the start of the fall term to the end of February.

### Methods

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the institutional review boards at all the participating universities. In February 2012, students at each of these campuses received an invitation to participate through an email message sent internally by the computer information center, an administrator, or another similar method, requesting that students go to the website with the survey. Students were told that the study was being conducted by researchers at UNH. After linking to the survey, students were first presented with a brief statement informing them about the survey on incidence of certain types of sexual and physical experiences in relationships on campus, about informed consent, and about the guarantee of anonymity of their answers. Students were also told that their participation was voluntary and that after they completed the survey they would be directed to a separate webpage to register their name into a lottery drawing for one of five \$100 amazon.com gift cards.

### Sample

Students ( $N=4,349$ ) from eight New England colleges and universities, ranging from small private to large public, participated in the study. The size of the undergraduate populations at participating institutions varied from under 1000 to over 10,000. The sample was 69% women and 31% men; given that less than 0.03% of the sample identified as transgendered, sex at birth was used to compare incidence rates between



men and women. First year students made up 28% of the sample, sophomores, 24%, juniors, 24%, and seniors, 24%. At all the institutions, respondents primarily identified as White (93% for total sample).

## Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Experiences

For the purposes of the study, participants were given the following definitions of unwanted sexual experiences:

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.

Using these definitions, participants were asked to answer the following two questions:

During this school year, how many times has someone had SEXUAL CONTACT with you WHEN YOU DIDN'T WANT to?

During this school year, how many times have you had SEXUAL INTERCOURSE with someone WHEN YOU DIDN'T WANT to?

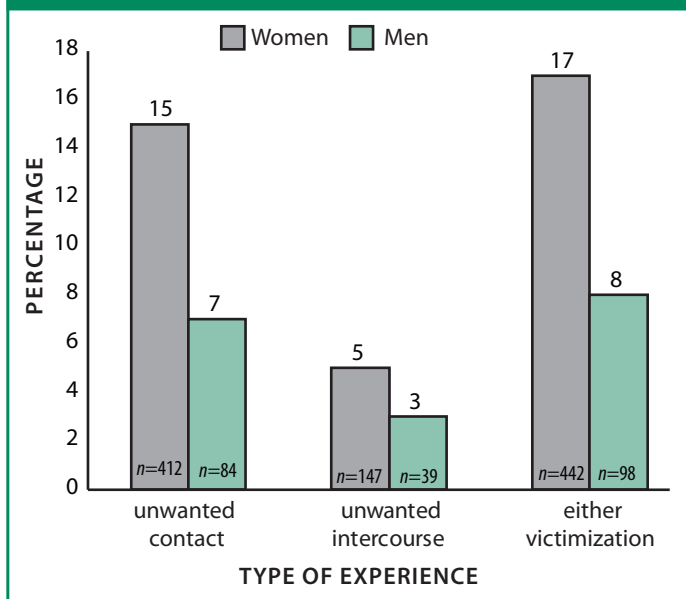
Figures 1, 2A, and 2B present the data from these questions, which were developed by UNH researchers for past studies.

In addition to the two questions described above, we also assessed unwanted sexual experiences using the Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) Sexual Experiences Survey, which is a widely used measure of sexual victimization. The Koss et al. scale included five items, and data obtained from these questions are presented in Figures 3A and 3B.

1. Since the beginning of the school year, how many times have you ever had sexual intercourse against your wishes *because someone used force?*
2. Apart from the previous question, since the beginning of the school year, how many times have you had sexual intercourse against your wishes *because someone threatened to harm you?*
3. Apart from the previous two questions, since the beginning of the school year, how many times have you had sexual intercourse *when you were so intoxicated that you were unable to consent?*
4. Apart from the previous three questions, since the beginning of this school year, how many times have you given into sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because you were *overwhelmed by the person's continual arguments and pressures?*
5. Apart from the previous four questions, since the beginning of the school year, how many times have you given into sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because a person *used his or her position of authority* (boss, teacher, counselor, supervisor)?

The data from the UNH questions measuring the incidence of unwanted sexual contact and intercourse are presented for all web respondents in Figure 1. A greater number of women reported unwanted sexual experiences, especially unwanted sexual contact. Over 15% of women reported at least one unwanted contact; for men the percentage was less than half of that

**FIGURE 1. Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Experiences, 2012**

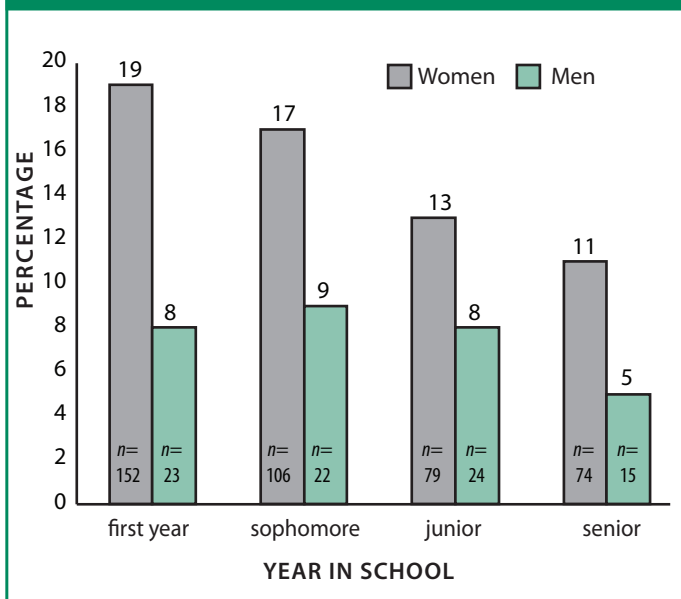


(7%). For unwanted sexual intercourse, the incidence was lower for both women and men (5% and 3% respectively).

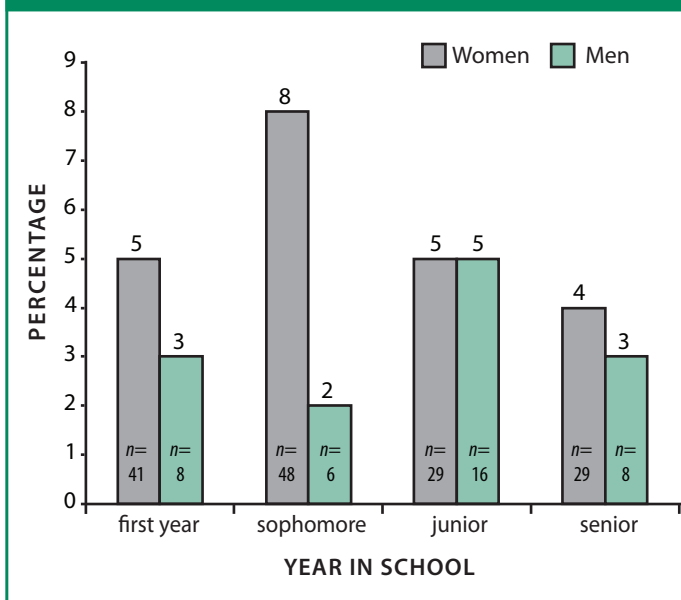
Figures 2a and 2b present the incidence by year in school. Figure 2a shows the incidence of unwanted sexual contact by year in school for women and men. There were different trends. Women's unwanted sexual contact incidence decreased consistently from first year until senior year. Men's unwanted sexual contact incidence was fairly consistent for first year, sophomore and junior year; only in senior year did it decrease. Figure 2b shows the incidence of unwanted sexual intercourse by year in school for men and women. With the exception of junior year, the incidence of unwanted sexual intercourse was higher for women. The highest incidence for women occurred during the first year; the highest incidence for men occurred during sophomore year.

Figures 3a and 3b present the incidence of unwanted sexual intercourse using the Koss et al. scale. Figure 3a presents data from a scale using items 1, 2, 4, and 5 from the Koss et al. scale: unwanted sexual intercourse when the perpetrator used force, threat, pressure, and/

**FIGURE 2A. Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Contact by Year in School 2012**



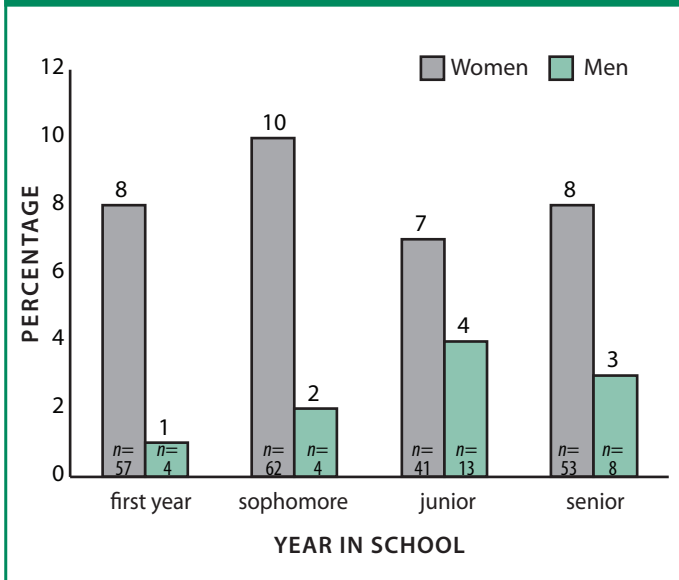
**FIGURE 2B. Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Intercourse by Year in School, 2012**



or authority position. Among women, the highest incidence was reported by sophomores, followed by first year then senior students. The variations by year in school were not substantial however. Among men, the highest incidence was for juniors, but the variations by year in school were slight. The incidences using

the items from the Koss et al. scale were somewhat higher for women and somewhat lower for men as compared to the incidences using the data from the two unwanted sexual experiences questions previously mentioned (see Figures 1 and 2b). This could be because the Koss et al. scale includes specific situations, such as the use of force or pressure.

**FIGURE 3A. Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Intercourse by Year in School**  
Koss Measures (Force, Threat, Pressure, Authority)



**FIGURE 3B. Incidence of Unwanted Sexual Intercourse by Year in School**  
Koss Measure (Victim Unable to Consent)

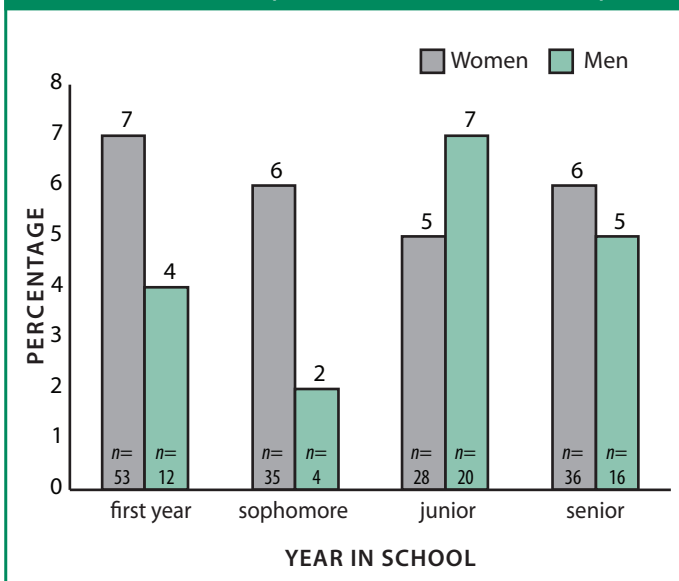


Figure 3b presents the incidence of unwanted sexual intercourse using item 3 of the Koss et al. scale: the victim was unable to consent due to alcohol. Among women, the highest incidence occurred among first year students, followed closely by sophomore, senior and then junior year students. Among men, the highest incidence occurred among juniors.

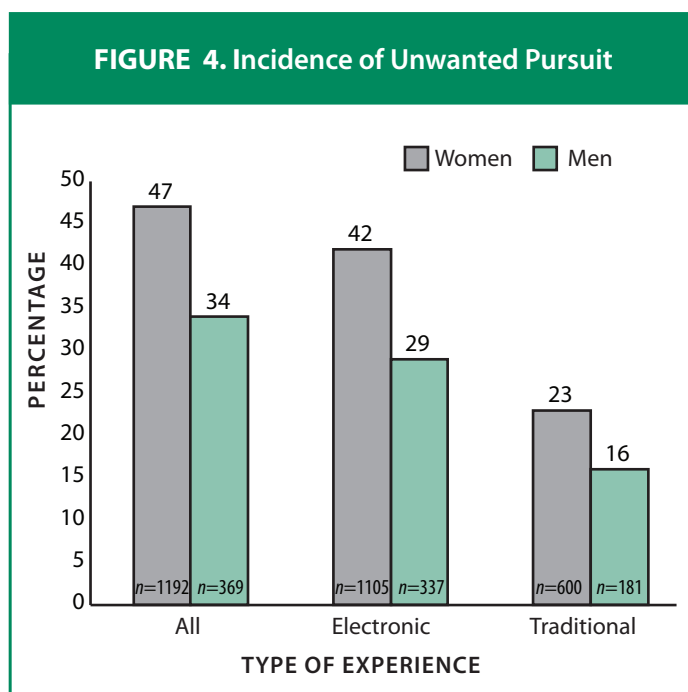
### Incidence of Unwanted Pursuit Experiences

Stalking is defined as “a course of conduct directed at a specific person involving repeated visual or physical proximity; nonconsensual communication; verbal, written, or implied threats; or a combination thereof that would cause fear in a reasonable person, with ‘repeated’ meaning on two or more occasions” (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, p. 2). A number of other terms—unwanted pursuit behavior, obsessional following, obsessive relational intrusion, harassment—have been used to describe the constellation of stalking behaviors as well as other intrusive behaviors that may not meet legal definitions for stalking (see Mechanic, 2004 for a review). We chose to utilize a more inclusive measure of stalking and other intrusive behaviors, which we refer to as unwanted pursuit (UP). Participants were presented with the following instructions:

[This section] will ask about experiences of unwanted behaviors that you may have experienced on one or more occasions by strangers, friends, relatives, or partners, male or female. Not including bill collectors, telephone solicitors, or other sales people, how many times during this school year (since the start of the fall 2011 term) has someone...

Participants were presented with 14 items that measured both electronic (e.g., unwanted emails, voicemails, text messages, posting on social media websites) and traditional (e.g., being spied on or followed, receiving unwanted gifts or items) forms of UP during the past six months. The items were adapted from the National Violence against Women

Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998) and the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Black et al., 2011). For the purposes of analyses presented below, responses were dichotomized such that participants were scored as having experienced any of the UP or not. The results are presented in Figure 4.



Nearly half (47%) of women reported some type of UP during the past six months. The figure for men was lower (34%). These incidence rates were consistent across year in school, and women reported consistently higher rates of UP than men.

In addition to exploring overall incidence rates of UP, we also explored rates specific to electronic forms of UP and traditional, non-electronic forms of UP. Electronic forms of UP were reported more frequently [women: 42%; men: 29%] than traditional, non-electronic forms of UP [women: 23%; men: 16%]. Women reported consistently higher rates of both types of UP than men across all years in college. Of note, the percentages for electronic UP and traditional UP exceed the total rates of UP given that 35% of

students who experienced some type of UP, reported both electronic and traditional UP experiences within the past six months.

## Incidence of Physical Relationship Violence

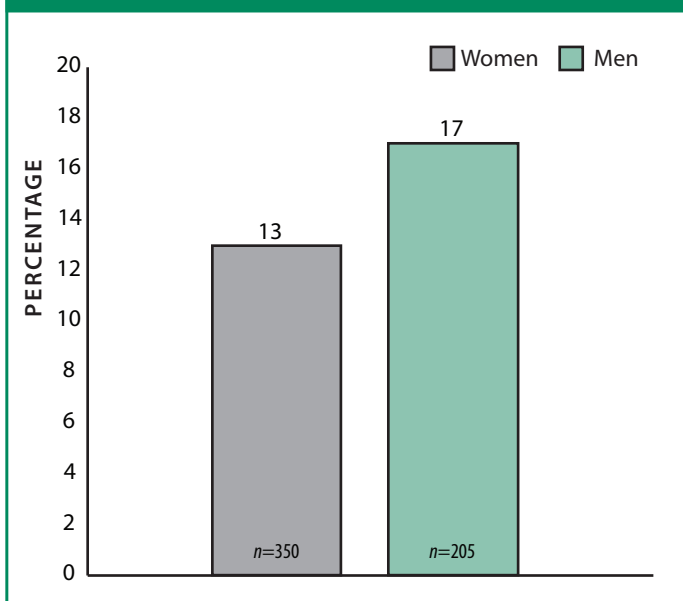
Relationship violence was introduced in the survey as follows:

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, want different things from each other, or just have spats or fights because they are in a bad mood, are tired, or for some other reason. Couples also have many different ways of trying to settle their differences. This is a list of things that might happen when you have differences. How many times has a casual, steady, or serious dating or intimate partner done the following to you this school year?

Participants were then asked to indicate how many times each of 14 behaviors ranging from slapped me to assaulted with a knife or gun had occurred. Items were adapted from Foshee et al. (1998). For the purposes of analyses presented below, responses were dichotomized such that participants were scored as having experienced any of the forms of violence or not. Results are presented in Figure 5.

During half of one academic year, a large number of men and women reported receiving physical relationship violence (PRV) from a partner. A greater percentage of men reported any PRV (17%) than women (13%). Experiences of relationship violence were consistent across years in school, about 14% across each year. This means that greater than one in ten undergraduate students had experienced physical relationship violence in the context of relationship arguments. More severe forms of abuse were also examined separately (6 items indicating being dumped out of a car, hit with fist or something hard, burned, beaten up, assaulted with knife or gun). Fifty

**FIGURE 5: Incidence of Physical Relationship Violence**



participants reported at least one of these incidents (2% of men in the sample and 1% of women).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

A minority but substantial number of students at these universities experienced unwanted sexual experiences during one academic term of the 2011-2012 academic year. For unwanted sexual contact and intercourse, women were more likely to have these experiences than men, the incidence of unwanted sexual contact tended to decline across year in school, especially among women, and the incidence of unwanted sexual intercourse did not vary much by year in school for either women or men. The observed incidence varied somewhat by question wording, but the results for both measures were similar. There was evidence of the important role of alcohol use in creating circumstances in which consent is not possible.

The incidence of unwanted pursuit (e.g., stalking) was substantially higher than that for unwanted sexual experiences, and women were significantly more likely than men to experience all types of unwanted pursuit.

The findings from this study are consistent with other research, providing further evidence of the endemic nature of unwanted pursuit experiences among college students, especially electronic forms of this type of victimization.

The incidence of experiences with physical relationship violence falls in-between unwanted sexual experiences and unwanted pursuit. This is an area of interpersonal experiences where men were more likely than women to report such experiences, which is consistent with other published research. It is important to note, however, that we only measured the actual act of PRV and not the outcomes associated with this type of victimization. This is important to keep in mind given that research demonstrates that although men report equal or higher rates of PRV than women, women report greater injury, fear, and psychological consequences associated with PRV than do men (Archer, 2000; Foshee, 1996). It should also be noted that variables related to psychological abuse or coercive control were not measured in the current study; these are facets of relationship abuse that can have particularly detrimental effects on victims.

Whereas much attention has been devoted to unwanted sexual experiences, less has been paid to unwanted pursuit and physical relationship violence on campuses. The results of this study are a reminder of the importance of campus based safety nets for victims of all forms of interpersonal violence. These safety nets include confidential crisis and advocacy services that victims can contact, safety and academic intervention protocols, and coordinated communication among all campus professionals whose offices come in contact with victims.

The results reported here point to the need for a broad and comprehensive approach to promoting healthy interpersonal relationships among young adults. While true primary prevention must happen before the onset of adolescence and young adulthood, which are

particularly high risk periods, there is still much that can be done to improve college communities. College campuses are encouraged to continue and expand efforts to reduce students' likelihood to perpetrate these acts and to enhance risk-reduction programs. Finding mechanisms for effectively delivering prevention messages on campus should be a priority. This could include peer-to-peer educational campaigns about interpersonal violence and monitoring as well as enforcing alcohol-related policies on campus. In addition, training for administrators, staff, students and faculty who may have the chance to help as active bystanders in risky situations and to support victims after an unwanted experience will also improve campus climates. Finally, campuses should initiate or continue collaboration with local law enforcement agencies to implement judicial processes that are fair and yet sensitive to the complexity of these experiences and victims' needs.

Local data like those obtained in the current study can help in the allocation of resources for the above needed efforts and they are a powerful source of information to raise community awareness of the importance of these problems for campuses.

### Project Collaborators

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