The Under-Reporting of College Sexual Assault: Victims, Perpetrators, and Perceived Social Norms*

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- NOT FOR CIRCULATION -

Abstract

This project investigates the causes of under-reporting for college sexual assault by: 1) quantifying (mis-)perceptions of social norms relevant to sexual assault reporting, and 2) testing whether a survey technique offering plausible deniability increases self-reports of victimization among women and perpetration among men. I conduct a 2x1 online survey experiment in which subjects complete a social norm exercise and answer binary questions on sexual assault experiences. In the social norm exercise, subjects indicate their own agreement with two statements on victim-blaming and accusations of lying, then predict the agreement of others. In the experience task, subjects are randomly assigned to answer two binary questions on rape and other types of unwanted sexual contact using either direct elicitation or "hard-garbling" (HG). In the HG treatment, a subset of responses to the binary questions are randomly recorded as "Yes" responses, regardless of the true response. Women are asked about victimization, and men about perpetration. Preliminary analysis shows that while participants were relatively accurate about the "lying" norm, there were significant misperceptions of the "victim-blaming" norm. Preliminary findings also show that the hard-garbling survey technique increased women's reports of sexual assault victimization (other than rape) by approximately 20% and men's reports of rape perpetration by over 100%.

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1 Long Abstract

Sexual assault has significant repercussions for survivors, from long-lasting mental health consequences (Campbell et al. 2009) to substantial economic impacts (Nix et al. 2024). For students, it negatively impacts educational outcomes, leading to higher dropout rates and lower GPAs (Molstad et al. 2023). Despite its prevalence, sexual assault is widely under-reported. A 2020 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that nearly two thirds of all sexual assault cases will go unreported (Morgan and Thompson 2021). While college students are a particularly at-risk group for victimization, they tend to report assaults less often than their similarly aged non-student peers (Sinozich and Langton 2014). This widespread under-reporting allows most perpetrators to go undetected, offering potential offenders little to no deterrent from the criminal justice system. Under-reporting is likely driven by the large expected costs associated with reporting. These costs include the risk of retaliation and expectations of social disapproval and reputational damage—which could be especially important on college campuses, where strong social ties may make reputational concerns and social norms more salient.

In this study, I employ an online experiment involving 1,639 college students and recent college graduates, to: 1) quantify men and women's (mis-)perceptions of social norms relevant to the sexual assault reporting decision, and 2) test whether a survey technique designed to provide plausible deniability increases self-reports of victimization among women and perpetration among men. In the social norm elicitation exercise, participants first state their agreement or disagreement with two statements related to women's reporting of campus sexual assault; they then guess the percentage of previous male and female respondents who agreed with each statement, earning bonuses for correct guesses.[1] The two statements focus on victim-blaming and accusations that survivors are lying.[2]

Subjects were also randomly assigned to answer two binary questions on rape and other types of unwanted sexual contact using either direct elicitation or "hard-garbling" (HG).

[1] Subjects were randomly assigned to answer regarding either men's or women's agreement first.

[2] The victim-blaming and lying statements are: "If a woman experiences unwanted sexual contact, she may be at least somewhat responsible for what happened," and "Women who say they were sexually assaulted sometimes lie. For instance, they may just regret otherwise consensual encounters," respectively. The order in which subjects saw these statements was randomized.

In the HG treatment, a subset of responses to the binary questions are randomly recorded as "Yes," regardless of the true response. This randomization provides respondents with plausible deniability, as researchers – or anyone else viewing the data – cannot know for sure whether a "Yes" response was truly a "Yes" or an intended "No" randomly switched by the system. Women are asked about victimization, and men about perpetration.

Preliminary analysis reveals that 50% of men and 28% of women agreed that women who say they were sexually assaulted may be lying. Additionally, 17% of men and 8% of women believe that women who were sexually assaulted may be to blame. While men and women accurately guessed others' agreement with the lying statement, they both drastically overestimated the rates of agreement with the victim-blaming statement. Preliminary findings also show that the hard-garbling technique increased women's reports of sexual assault victimization (other than rape) by approximately 20% (a 9.6 percentage point increase, from a baseline reporting rate of 45.6%) and men's reports of rape perpetration by over 100% (a 6.5 percentage point increase over a baseline of 6.2%). These findings highlight the prevalence of misperceptions of social norms relevant to the reporting decision and demonstrate the potential of hard-garbling to improve disclosure rates.

This study contributes to the limited literature on social norms and sexual assault reporting. Two previous studies have found that the #MeToo social movement increased the propensity to report sex crimes like sexual assault (Levy and Mattsson 2024; Gauthier 2024), suggesting that social norms influence reporting decisions, though these studies did not directly measure perceptions of such norms. Most research on violence against women emphasizes incidence rather than reporting decisions. For example, two studies document the relationship between alcohol and college sexual assault, finding that D1 football games increase reports of rape among college-aged victims by 28% (Lindo et al. 2018), and that bans on fraternity events with alcohol decrease sexual assault reports by 29% (Topper 2023). Both studies argue that their results are driven by actual changes in incidence, rather than changes in willingness to report. The hard-garbling survey technique has been used in only one other study to measure violence against women. Specifically, Boudreau et al. (2023) examine workplace harassment among Bangladeshi garment factory workers, finding that hard-garbling increased sexual harassment reports by 269% compared to standard survey

techniques. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to apply the hard-garbling technique to both women's reports of experienced sexual assault and men's reports of perpetrated sexual assault.

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