

Young people are overwhelmingly the victims of sexual assaults

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Sexual assault has almost as much to do with age as it does with gender, according to Penn State criminologists.

Young people—both male and female—are the most likely targets of rape and other sexual assaults, said Richard Felson, professor of criminology and sociology. The most frequent victims of those assaults are 15 years old, regardless of gender, or the age of the offender, he said. Older people and women rarely commit the crime, but when they do, their most frequent victims are still 15 years old.

"People tend to look at sexual assault almost exclusively as a crime against women, but this study shows that there is a different way of looking at the crime," said Felson.

[Females](#) who are 15 years old are about nine times more likely than 35-year-old females to be raped, and about 4.75 times more likely to be raped than 25-year-old females, according to the researchers. A 15-year-old boy is more likely to be a victim of a sexual assault than a 40-year-old woman.

Felson said that male behavior during [robberies](#) tends to reinforce the findings that age influences sexual assault.

The researchers, who report their findings in the online edition of *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, said that the sexual attractiveness of young people, as well as their vulnerability and active social lives, are important

factors in placing them at high risk for sexual assaults.

Sexual attractiveness is the leading explanation for the age of sexual assault victims, said Felson, who worked with Patrick Cundiff, a doctoral student in [criminology](#) and sociology. Male attraction to younger females can be seen in the high number of young women in modeling, prostitution and the [adult entertainment industry](#), the researchers said. Prior studies also show that compensation for [female sex workers](#) declines as women age.

Evidence on sexual assaults that occur during robberies suggests that [sexual attractiveness](#) is an important element explaining the victimization of young people.

"During a robbery, a man is much more likely to also engage in a rape if the age of the victim is between 15 and 29," Felson said.

Studying male behavior during robberies is a way of controlling for vulnerability and contact with potential offenders. Male robbers still show a strong preference for young people in their decisions to rape, even when controlling for these opportunity factors.

While criminal offenders tend to be young, men who commit sexual assault tend to be older than men who commit physical assault. According to Felson, their relatively high rate of sexual assault reflects the fact that their sexual attraction to young people is not reciprocated.

Many scholars believe that men's negative attitudes toward women are the primary motivation for sexual assault. However, the researchers said the relative similarity between the sexual assault rates of gay and straight men suggest that negative attitudes toward women are not likely a primary factor in the crime.

"If sexual assault was motivated primarily by attitudes toward women, the sexual assault rate of straight men would be higher than the rates of gay men," Felson said. "However, gay men are just as likely to commit [sexual assault](#) as straight men and they are just as likely to target [young people](#)."

The researchers examined the 300,000 sexual assaults reported from 2000 to 2007 in the National Incident-Based Reporting System administered by the FBI. The results also took into account that sexual assaults are often unreported, Felson said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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