

Sexual objectification increases women's fear of crime

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A study to be published in *Sex Roles*, published by Springer, offers an explanation for why women fear face-to-face crime more than men, despite being less likely to experience most crimes. The findings by Laurel Watson from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, support the theory that women may have a greater fear of crime due to the potential of also being raped during these encounters.

The researchers also found that [sexual objectification](#) plays a role in the ever-present perceived risk and fear of crime in both white and African American [women](#).

"Our research supports previous findings that the rampant sexual objectification of women, an act of sexual terrorism, can heighten women's fears of incurring physical and sexual harm," says Watson.

All forms of sexual objectification share a common thread: a woman's body or body parts are separated from the rest of her person for another's consumption or enjoyment. The effect on appearance anxiety is well-known, but the current study is one of only a few to examine the impact on physical safety anxiety.

Some racial differences were observed. African American women reported more sexual objectification experiences and fear of crime than white women, and were affected by greater links to psychological distress. The authors suggest further research with larger sample sizes to explore [racial differences](#) further.

The study involved 133 African American and 95 white female undergraduates. Women at college experience rates of rape five-to-seven times higher than women of comparable age outside college. One in five American women are raped in their lifetime.

"Women bear the scar tissue of a sociocultural context where rape is epidemic," says Professor Watson. "Challenging and eradicating the widespread acceptance of sexual terrorism, in its many forms, is key to increasing women's sense of safety, freedom and movement in the world," she says.

Many measures, such as avoiding walking alone at night or carrying a method of protection - a sharp object or pepper spray - place the onus of maintaining safety on women rather than on the perpetrators of violence.

The authors suggest that initiatives aimed at changing the social acceptance of sexual objectification are needed, for example <http://www.ihollaback.org> and <http://www.stopstreetharrassment.org>

"Partnerships with men in stopping violence may help transform unequal power distributions between men and women - a chief reason why violence against women occurs in the first place," says Watson.

More information: Watson L et al (2015). Understanding the Relationships Among White and African American Women's Sexual Objectification Experiences, Physical Safety Anxiety and Psychological Distress. *Sex Roles*. [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-014-0444-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0444-y)

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