

Study shows attitudes toward women key in higher rates of sexual assault by athletes

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Credit: Seabamirum

An online study of male undergraduates shows that more than half of study participants on intercollegiate and recreational athletic teams – and more than a third of non-athletes – reported engaging in sexual coercion,

including rape. The increased risk of sexual coercion by athletes was linked to "traditional" beliefs about women and a higher belief in rape "myths," which are used to justify sexual assault.

Previous research has shown that male college athletes are more likely than college students in general to commit sexual violence or engage in sexual coercion. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education called for colleges and universities to institute efforts to educate athletes and address [sexual violence](#).

"We wanted to know what these programs need to address," says Sarah Desmarais, an associate professor of psychology at North Carolina State University and co-author of a paper on the recent study. "What are the factors that contribute to these higher rates of [sexual assault](#)? And are these issues confined to intercollegiate athletes, or do they extend to club and intramural athletes?"

For this study, the researchers surveyed online 379 male undergraduates: 191 non-athletes, 29 intercollegiate athletes and 159 recreational athletes. The study was conducted by researchers at NC State, the University of South Florida, Northern Arizona University and Emory University.

Study participants were asked about their sexual behavior, their attitudes toward women, and the degree to which they believed in rape myths.

"We found that 54.3 percent of the intercollegiate and recreational athletes and 37.9 percent of non-athletes had engaged in sexually coercive behaviors – almost all of which met the legal definition of rape," Desmarais says.

"As high as these numbers are, they may actually under-represent the rates of [sexual coercion](#), since the study relied on self-reported

behavior," Desmarais says.

Non-athletes were much less likely to believe in rape myths, such as that if a woman is drunk or doesn't fight back, it isn't rape. And non-athletes were less likely to harbor more traditional, and frequently negative, beliefs about women, such as that "Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers."

In addition, the researchers found that there was no difference between recreational and intercollegiate athletes in regard to their views toward women, belief in rape myths or sexual behavior.

After analyzing the data, researchers found that belief in rape myths, and more traditional beliefs about [women](#), played a key role in the increased likelihood that [athletes](#) would commit sexual assault.

"This study shows how important it is to change these attitudes," Desmarais says. "The 'Attitudes Toward Women Scale' used in the study was created in the 1970s, and includes some truly archaic, sexist items – and we still see these results today. That shows you how far we still have to go."

More information: B.-R. Young et al. Sexual Coercion Practices Among Undergraduate Male Recreational Athletes, Intercollegiate Athletes, and Non-Athletes, *Violence Against Women* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/1077801216651339](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801216651339)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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