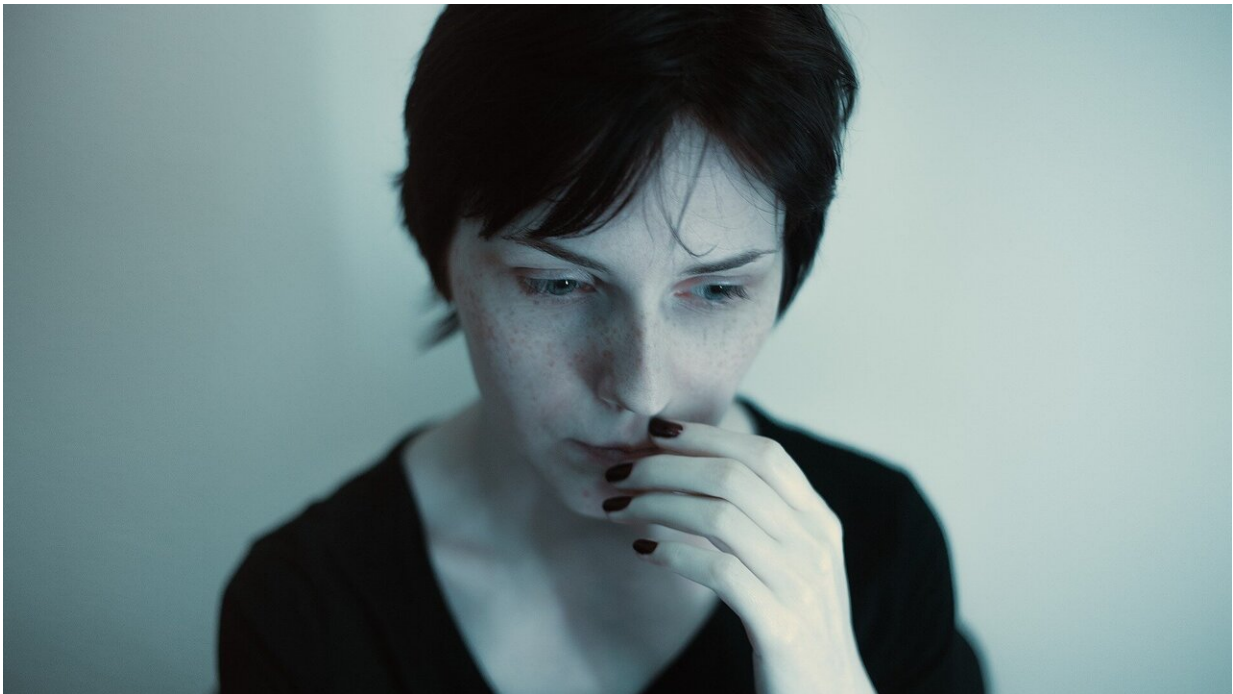


Study explores why women decide not to tell anyone about being sexually assaulted

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Despite greater cultural awareness about the prevalence of sexual assault in recent years, many victims are reluctant to talk about what happened to them.

Not only do a large percentage of rapes go unreported to authorities, nearly a third of victims, according to one analysis, don't share their

experiences with anyone, not even a close friend or family member. A new study by two University of Maine researchers looks at the reasons why this hard-to-reach population decides to stay quiet.

Sandra Caron, a professor of family relations and human sexuality, and Deborah Mitchell, a retired UMaine police sergeant, interviewed 15 college [women](#) ages 19–24 about the reasons why they didn't share details of being sexually assaulted with anyone. The study, published in the journal *Violence Against Women*, offers insights for individuals and institutions to support victims, as well as to develop programs that embolden survivors to discuss their experiences.

"These women are difficult to identify, and no previous studies have been published on this group of [sexual assault](#) survivors," Caron and Mitchell write. "Their silence persists despite current efforts by the #MeToo movement, as well as decades of work by sexual [assault](#) organizations to destigmatize rape and encourage women to not only tell someone but also to report their assault to authorities."

The women agreed to share their stories for the first time with the researchers, who identified common themes in the reasons given for not sharing the experiences previously. Caron, a licensed therapist, and Mitchell, a former police investigator, assigned each of the interviewees a pseudonym, and took other steps to protect their identities. The researchers also provided information about sexual assault and rape response services.

The two most common reasons given for not telling anyone about being assaulted were internal blame, shame and guilt, and external blame and/or [fear](#) of humiliation.

"I felt it was my fault and I asked for it by being flirtatious and wearing a short dress," one participant told the researchers.

"I think by staying silent I spared myself all the pain and humiliation that would have come from others," said another.

Other reasons included wanting to pretend it never happened, fear of losing control of the situation, fear of not being believed, concern about getting in trouble, not wanting to be stigmatized or labeled, not wanting to get others in trouble, fear of losing someone, and fear of being hurt or for their safety.

"I feared on some level there would be retaliation—that I would suffer the consequences if I spoke out and reported this or told anyone," a third participant said.

Nearly all the women said they would have told someone under the right circumstances, and more than half said another person's initial response made them decide to keep silent. One participant considered telling some of her sorority sisters, but was afraid she would not be believed.

"We had recently had an educational program and the speaker talked about sexual assault and many of the girls rolled their eyes and talked about all those girls who falsely accuse guys," she said.

"I considered telling my mom at one point. She would have been devastated and might have made me come home and quit college," reported another.

Caron and Mitchell say their findings parallel previous research on why victims of sexual assault opt not to report their attacks to authorities—self-blame or fear of others blaming them, as well as fear of not being believed, getting in trouble, or being stigmatized. Two of the reasons—wanting to pretend it never happened and fear of losing control of the situation—have not been reported in previous research. Overall, the researchers note that victims have many complex and interlocking

reasons for not telling anyone about an assault, not one major reason.

"It was evident they put a great amount of thought into whether or not to tell anyone; they weighed the consequences and chose to stay silent," Caron and Mitchell write.

Although there's been progress in recent years in terms of awareness and tolerance of sexual assault on college campuses and beyond, Caron and Mitchell say the results of their study provide evidence of the need for more resources and education. In particular, they point to the persistent belief by victims that they will be blamed and that their attackers will not be held accountable as reasons to involve more men in efforts to prevent sexual assault.

"Institutions of higher education need to provide ways to educate young men about their roles and responsibilities to ensure safe and respectful behavior toward others," they write.

They also highlight the need for colleges and universities to find ways to encourage women to speak about their experiences and, in the process, find support. More than half the women interviewed for the study said sharing their stories with the researchers had been helpful and healing.

"By saying it out loud, it released the shame I have carried for so long ... a shame that I never should have owned to begin with," said one woman.

More information: Sandra L. Caron et al, "I've Never Told Anyone": A Qualitative Analysis of Interviews With College Women Who Experienced Sexual Assault and Remained Silent, *Violence Against Women* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/10778012211022766](https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012211022766)

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