

Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Wible, Elizabeth, "Investigating the Presence of a Red Zone for Unwanted Sexual Experiences among College Students: Class Year and Gender" (2013). *Inquiry Journal*. 10.

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Investigating the Presence of a Red Zone for Unwanted Sexual Experiences among College Students: Class Year and Gender

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Inquiry Journal

Undergraduate Research Journal : Spring 2013

Research Articles

Investigating the Presence of a Red Zone for Unwanted Sexual Experiences among College Students: Class Year and Gender

—Elizabeth Wible (Editor: Michael Pope, Jennifer Lee)

Upon entering the University of New Hampshire in the fall of 2010, I was offered the opportunity to join the McNair Scholars Program due to my status as a first-generation college student. This program promotes underrepresented college students to pursue research projects by providing academic, social, and financial support in the hopes that they will someday obtain their Ph.D. Knowing I wanted one day to achieve a Ph.D. in psychology, I immediately jumped at the opportunity before even fully understanding all of the dedication and challenging work this program entailed. Soon, I found myself immersed in what seemed a foreign world with its own language, time schedule, and coffee as its staple drink—a world more commonly known as research.

For my research study, I chose the subject of unwanted sexual experiences among college students. It is not a common subject of conversation due to its unsettling nature; however, some do not know how serious an issue it actually is on many college campuses (Banyard, Ward, Cohn, Plante, Moorhead & Walsh, 2007; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen & Turner, 2006; Fisher, Daigle & Cullen, 2010). Before I knew it, I had spent the spring semester of my sophomore year working with my mentors, Professors Victoria Banyard and Ellen Cohn of the Department of Psychology, to write my proposal. To my delight, it was accepted! This meant I would spend the summer and fall of 2012 working with my mentors and the Unwanted Sexual Experiences Survey (USES).

USES and the Red Zone

The USES is a quantitative panel study, which has investigated unwanted sexual experiences on a New England university campus in 1988, 2000, 2006, and 2012. Each panel, or separate year of the study, was made up of the same set of approximately 115 questions addressing unwanted sexual experiences on the campus. Undergraduate courses were randomly chosen from all enrolled courses in the spring semester of the panel year (excluding laboratory meetings and classes with enrollments less than twenty), and stratified to represent all colleges at the university. Professors of the chosen courses were contacted and asked to provide twenty minutes of class time for paper surveys to be administered by a trained group of faculty and students involved with the project. During that time period, the same survey was emailed to all undergraduates. In both the paper and online surveys, participants were assured that all answers would be kept completely anonymous and that if they did not wish to answer any questions, they did not have to do so.

Respondents to the USES varied somewhat over the four panel years. The 1988 panel contrasted with the three



The 2012-13 McNair Scholars with the author in the middle in red (Lisa Nugent, UNH Photographic Services).

other years in that it included only female participants. Both the 1988 and 2000 panels were administered only in classes, while in 2006 and 2012 the surveys were administered both in classes and via the Internet. In order to compare data among the panels, I used only responses from paper surveys.

Panel	N	First-year	Second-year	Third-year	Fourth-year
1988	510	210 (41.2%)	124 (24.3%)	78 (15.3%)	98 (19.2%)
2000	408	85 (20.8%)	101 (24.8%)	114 (27.9%)	108 (26.5%)
2006	1218	478 (39.2%)	281 (23.1%)	247 (20.3%)	212 (17.4%)
2012	2122	1346 (31.6%)	989 (23.2%)	951 (22.3%)	972 (22.8%)

Figure 1: A breakdown of how many first-year, second-year, third-year, and fourth-year participants were in each panel, with the total being 4258.

My study focused on what the effects of year in college and gender might be on the number of students reporting one or more incidences of unwanted sexual experiences in order to find out whether or not the campus had a *red zone*, that is, a time of danger for a greater number of these experiences. In general, research has suggested that the first semester of college, with its periods known for heavy drinking, is a red zone for first-year students regarding unwanted sexual experiences (Flack, Caron, Leinen, Breitenbach, Barber, Brown & Stein, 2008; Kimble, Neacsiu, Flack & Horner, 2008). This means that, on average, they have been found to endure a higher number of unwanted sexual experiences than students in other class years.

Although there is little empirical data regarding the red zone, colleges and universities across the United States are taking preventative measures based on the information they have. To name a few, University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, East Oregon University, Trinity College, and the University of Cincinnati have red zone information on their websites (Kimble et al., 2008). In fact, Utah State University holds a "Red Zone Awareness Day" to increase their students' knowledge regarding these periods of high risk and who is most at risk (Utah State University, 2011-2012).

In this study, my mentors and I investigated whether or not first-year college students were at a higher risk for enduring unwanted sexual experiences compared to all other students (second-year, third-year, and fourth-year). We hypothesized that 1) more first-year students would report one or more unwanted sexual experiences than students in the following class years, and 2) more women would report these incidences than men. Knowing whether these hypotheses were supported would alert the campus to the danger of unwanted sexual experiences among not only first-year students but students in the other years as well.

I used responses to two questions out of the approximately 115 in the USES. Question one asked, "During this school year, how many times has someone had SEXUAL CONTACT with you WHEN YOU DIDN'T WANT to?" Question two asked, "During this school year, how many times have you had SEXUAL INTERCOURSE with someone WHEN YOU DIDN'T WANT to?"

In the survey, *sexual contact* was defined as "attempting or actually kissing, fondling, or touching someone in a sexual intimate way, EXCLUDING SEXUAL INTERCOURSE," while *unwanted sexual contact* was defined as "those situations in which you were certain at the time that you did not want to engage in the sexual experience and you either communicated this in some way (e.g., you said no; you protested; you said you didn't want to; you physically struggled; you cried; etc.), or you were intimidated or forced by someone or you were incapacitated (e.g., drunk, passed out, etc.)." *Sexual intercourse* was defined as "any form of sexual penetration including vaginal intercourse, oral sex, and anal intercourse," while *unwanted sexual intercourse* was defined as "those situations in which you

were certain at the time that you did not want to engage in the sexual experience and you either communicated this in some way (e.g., you said no; you protested; you said you didn't want to; you physically struggled; you cried; etc.), or you were intimidated or forced by someone or you were incapacitated (e.g., drunk, passed out, etc.)." Participants were provided with a scale from 0 to 10+ for each question to indicate how many times either of these experiences had occurred during that academic year.

The Effect of Year in College

Since a possible red zone for first-year students was being investigated, the four panels were split into two variables: "first-year" and "other-years," meaning the second, third and fourth college years combined. In our first analysis, in order to see changes over the four panel years, only surveys given to the 2940 female participants were used. This is because no men or not a significant number were included in the survey year, or men were not asked the two questions used in this study. We used a type of statistical analysis (Chi-Square) to examine our data.

Figures 2 and 3 deal with question one, about unwanted sexual contact. Figure 2 shows that a quarter (25%) of the four-year total of first-year female students reported having experienced unwanted sexual contact in the first part of the academic year compared to less than 20% of the total other-years (second-year, third-year, and fourth-year combined). Figure 3 shows the percentages of women reporting unwanted sexual contact in each of the four panel years. A general decrease in incidence rates over the years can be observed, possibly indicating that growth in the support offered by sexual assault prevention programs over the years has had a positive impact. It can also be seen that, in every panel year, more first-year female students reported unwanted sexual contact than those in the other-years. This indicates that the phenomenon of a red zone is not something new.

Figures 4 and 5 deal with responses to question two, about unwanted sexual intercourse. Figure 4 shows that, as in Figure 2, the percentage of the four-year total of first-year female students reporting an incidence is noticeably higher than that of the other-years. The numbers, however, are much lower for unwanted sexual intercourse than unwanted sexual contact. This is perhaps because sexual contact is more easily made than is sexual intercourse, and intercourse is something less likely to be reported. Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of those reporting unwanted sexual intercourse for both groups in each of the four panel years. Similar to Figure 3, a decrease of incidence rates over the years can be observed; however, the percentage of first-year reports drops dramatically in 2006 and then remains the same in 2012. For the other-years, the percentage drops in 2000, remains the same in 2006 and then drops in 2012.

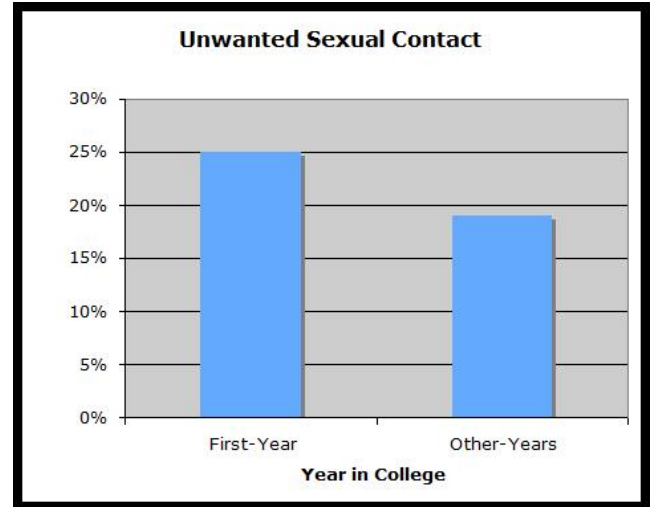


Figure 2: Percentages of total number of female students, first-year and other-years, of all four panels who reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact.

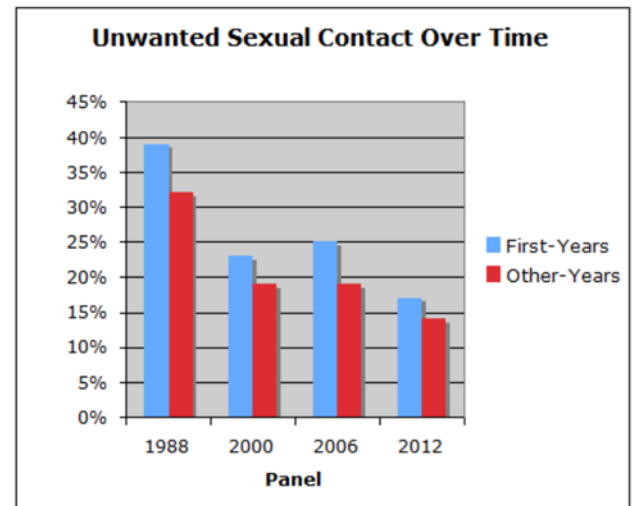


Figure 3: Percentages of first-year and other-years female students who reported unwanted sexual contact in each of the four panel years.

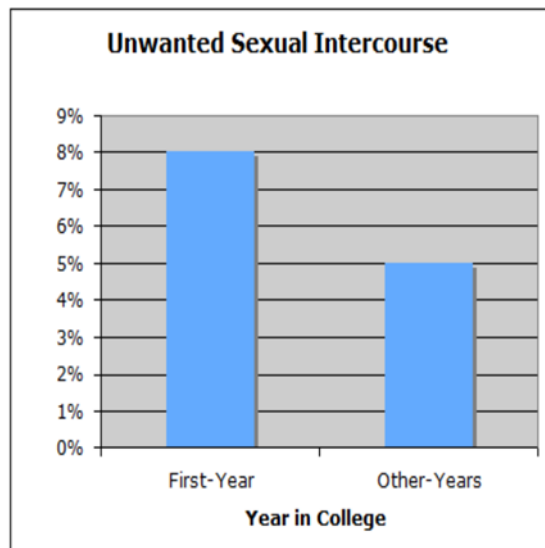


Figure 4: Percentages of total number of female students, first-year and other-years, of all four panels who reported experiencing unwanted sexual intercourse

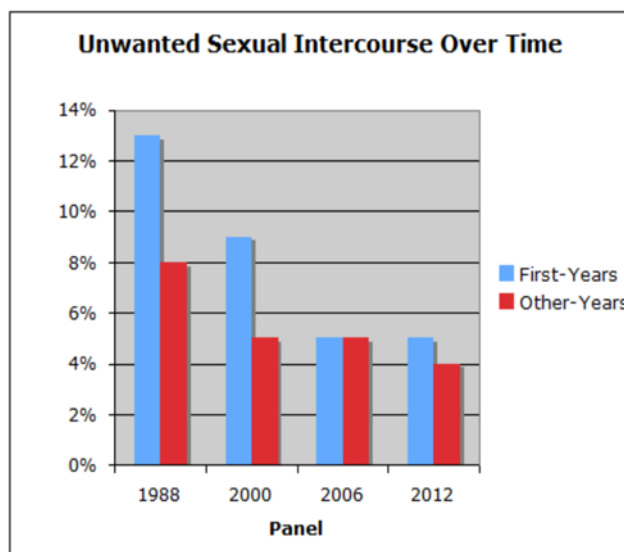


Figure 5: Percentages of first-year and other-years female students who reported unwanted sexual intercourse in each of the four panel years.

The results of this analysis supported our first hypothesis (specific to women) that more first-year female students than other-years female students would report one or more incidences of both unwanted sexual contact and unwanted sexual intercourse. In fact, our data shows that, in four-year totals and in each panel year, more first-year female students reported unwanted sexual experiences than the three other years combined. [The only exception is 2006 where numbers for unwanted sexual intercourse are about even (see Figure 5.)] I found this to be the most startling result from this study. The first months of college certainly seem to be a red zone for first-year female students on this New England campus.

The Effect of Gender

Data for the effect of gender on unwanted sexual experiences came from the last two panel years, 2006 and 2012. In these years, male students were asked to respond to the two questions of this study. Statistical analysis showed that 7.7% of men and 19.4% of women reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact, and 3.4% of men and 5.6% of women reported experiencing unwanted sexual intercourse. These findings support the second hypothesis that more women would report one or more incidences of unwanted sexual experiences than would men.

It has often been thought that men involved in unwanted sexual experiences are primarily the perpetrators while women are primarily the victims (Larimer, Lydum, Anderson & Turner, 1999). This is partly why research studies comparing men and women's unwanted sexual experiences are few in number (Banyard et al., 2007). However, the responses above illustrate that males are victims too. Since the studies that have been conducted up to this date generally focus on women, including males in the study of unwanted sexual experiences could help expand the knowledge we have of these experiences in both sexes.

Conclusions, Limitations and Benefits

In this study of unwanted sexual contact and unwanted sexual intercourse, my two hypotheses were supported: 1) that more first-year female students would report one or more such incidences than would other-years students; and 2) that more women would report such incidences than would men. This suggests that a red zone exists and means that first-year female students can be at higher risk for unwanted sexual experiences than students in other years.

This study accomplished its goal of investigating the existence of a red zone. However, like all studies, it has its limitations. For one thing, it did not enable my mentors and me to explain why this red zone exists. This study was limited to two questions in the USES. Perhaps in future studies, including questions about the circumstances under

which the unwanted sexual experiences occur would help to explain why they did. A second limitation was that this study was conducted on a campus with a very limited racial diversity. Administering USES on more diverse campuses in the future could broaden the applicability of this research.

A third possible limitation in this study was that some survivors of unwanted sexual experiences might have felt apprehensive about answering the questions. There are a number of potential reasons that could explain this, such as fear of someone finding out, denial that it happened, being afraid to admit it, or not wanting to relive the experience. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know whether or not someone put false information down even though the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

If there is one thing I have learned as a researcher, it is that more often than not, things progress differently than planned. In the beginning, my research topic was focused on the academic consequences of unwanted sexual experiences on college students. Later it developed into researching the reasons for different rates of unwanted sexual experiences and the way researchers inquire about them. Finally, my research evolved into my current topic, which examined the existence of a red zone among first-year students, while also viewing the changes in unwanted sexual experience incidence rates over the four panel years.

Although these changes were unforeseen, I view them as beneficial to my development as a researcher. They taught me that it is okay to let go and allow my work to evolve into something unexpected, for research is constantly changing and progressing. In graduate school, I will be faced with these same challenges. Having these experiences along with working one-on-one with passionate professors, who have achieved one of my primary goals of reaching a Ph.D., are yet more reasons I am grateful to have participated in undergraduate research in the McNair Scholars Program.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to both of my mentors, Professor Victoria Banyard and Professor Ellen Cohn, for lending me their focused time and effort to guide me through this journey. I cannot thank you enough for all I have learned. I would also like to wholeheartedly thank the staff of the McNair Scholars Program at UNH for motivating and inspiring me to be the best graduate school applicant I can be, while not letting my status as an underrepresented college student hold me back. Lastly, I would also like to thank members of the USES team, including Professor Katie Edwards and Professor Mary Moynihan among others, whose dedication to ending sexual violence among college students has truly had a positive impact within our campus community and beyond. Without this program, my mentors, and the passionate women of the USES team, this research would not have been possible and I would not be where I am academically or as a person today.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Elizabeth Wible, a junior majoring in psychology and minoring in family studies, comes to the University of New Hampshire from Concord, New Hampshire. She is a member of the University Honors Program and a McNair scholar. Her research into unwanted sexual experiences was part of her work with the McNair Undergraduate Research Program. She learned that research can be tedious and demanding but found that, when the results were finally achieved, she had a "rewarding, satisfying feeling. In that moment, everything paid off." Professor Banyard suggested that in order to publish she submit to *Inquiry*. Elizabeth agreed because "it would be the perfect balance of sharing not only my research but my experiences as well." After graduation in 2014, she plans to go to graduate school to obtain her doctorate in clinical psychology.

Professor **Victoria Banyard** is a member of the University of New Hampshire's Department of Psychology, where she has been for eighteen years. She specializes in clinical and community psychology with a focus on interpersonal violence and has been a member of the Unwanted Sexual Experiences Survey (USES) project since 2000. Professor Banyard has mentored many students and feels that "collaborating with students is a wonderful learning experience because each student brings his/her own perspective and ideas to the table and can help me think about new research questions." About writing for *Inquiry*, she said, "Writing for a broader audience is something I have been learning to do in my own career—great for students to start learning this early."

Professor **Ellen Cohn** is the coordinator of the Justice Studies Program and a professor of psychology and justice studies at the University of New Hampshire. Her specialization is the social psychology of law, specifically legal socialization. Along with Professor Sally Ward and others, Professor Cohn was part of the original faculty group which started the Unwanted Sexual Experiences Survey (USES) project in 1988 and has been involved in the three subsequent USES panels. Elizabeth's project, she said, was "interesting and challenging" because of the amount of data collected (over 2300 paper surveys). Writing for *Inquiry's* broad audience, Professor Cohn feels, is "useful as a beginning process to publication," and she hopes her students will go on to publish in scholarly journals in their fields.

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