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New Report Details Unwanted Sexual Experiences At University

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DURHAM, N.H. - A new study conducted by the University of New Hampshire about the unwanted sexual experiences of students shows the vast majority of incidents at the university are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, which is in direct contrast to the stereotype of the perpetrator being a stranger.

"Unwanted Sexual Experiences at UNH: The Context of Unwanted Sexual Experiences, 2006" is the third wave of ongoing research at UNH about unwanted sexual experiences of students. More than 2,400 undergraduate students were surveyed in the 2005 academic year. Previous student surveys were conducted in 1988 and 2000.

"The college experience is a time of excitement and exploration for our undergraduates, most of whom are living away from home for the first time. This latest report demonstrates that we need, however, to continue to educate our students and the university community about the potential dangers that they may face," UNH President Mark Huddleston said.

Overall, unwanted sexual contact occurs where students live, in the context of social events, and often alcohol is involved. The vast majority of incidents occur between UNH students and a perpetrator who is an acquaintance. Of the female victims surveyed, 85 percent report that someone they know committed the unwanted sexual intercourse.

"Colleges and universities around the country find this same percentage, yet the stereotype remains that the perpetrator is a stranger. We need to continue to educate the campus community that acquaintances are most likely to be the perpetrators against women," the report said.

Seven percent of the women surveyed reported an experience of unwanted sexual intercourse during the six-month survey period from September to February. Based on the responses, the researchers estimate that about half of these incidents involved force or the threat of force.

"Unwanted sexual experiences are not solely the result of lack of knowledge of consent or problems with miscommunication," according to report co-author Sally Ward, professor of sociology.

While there are similarities in the unwanted sexual experiences for men and women, the report authors note a number of contrasts:

- The association of alcohol to an unwanted sexual experience is higher for women.
- Women tend to be victimized by an acquaintance or friend while men are victimized by a date or romantic partner.

- Male victims are more likely than females to be victimized by a same-sex perpetrator.

Although incidents of both unwanted contact and unwanted intercourse declined from 1988 to 2000, since 2000 there has been little change in the percentage of students reporting these experiences. This calls for new and creative solutions across the community, according to the researchers.

"Unwanted sexual experiences occur in a variety of contexts across campus, so efforts to continue to address the problem must be directed at this variety of contexts. There is no simple answer," Ward said.

The study was funded by the UNH Office of the President and supported by the UNH Violence Against Women Committee and UNH President's Commission on the Status of Women. Research was conducted by UNH faculty Ellen Cohn, Wendy Walsh, Sally Ward, Mary M. Moynihan, and Victoria Banyard. Copies of the study are available online at <http://www.unh.edu/news/docs/2006unwantedsexualexperiences.pdf>.

-30-

