

Study Finds Fewer Incidents of Nonconsensual Sex on Campus

UNH researchers present findings to the American Psychological Society

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DURHAM, N.H. -- The number of female students at the University of New Hampshire experiencing incidents of unwanted sexual contact has decreased significantly since the late 1980s, according to a study presented at a recent meeting of the American Psychological Society.

"While even one incident is unacceptable, I'm encouraged that the rate of nonconsensual sex is on the decline," says Ellen S. Cohn, a professor of psychology at UNH. "I'd like to think it's because the university has a strong sexual harassment prevention program and that we address issues of consent in our freshman orientation."

Based on the results of a survey of hundreds of UNH students conducted in 1988 and again in February 2000, the study found that in 1988, 37 percent of women interviewed said they had experienced either unwanted sexual intercourse or unwanted sexual contact. In 2000, that number had dropped to 21 percent.

There were some differences between the students sampled in 1988 and 2000, with the students sampled in 2000 more likely to report that they were in long-term relationships and to be evenly distributed across four years of college. These differences likely reduce the actual significance of the gap in reported experiences between 1988 and 2000, because first-year students and those who are not in long-term relationships are at higher risk for sexual experience. Future analyses will examine this in more detail.

In addition, researchers discovered that the rate of consensual sex for women increased. Nearly 77 percent of women reported that they had engaged in at least one act over the past semester compared to 61 percent in 1988.

Although data was not compiled on men in 1988, Cohn says that 8 percent of the men who participated in the study in 2000 reported they had experienced at least one act of unwanted sexual contact, and nearly 4 percent reported unwanted sexual intercourse.

Other findings include:

- Fewer incidents of unwanted sexual contact were reported to have occurred in a UNH residence hall. In 1988, 29 percent of the incidents were in a dorm, compared to 20 percent in 2000.
- Alcohol is less likely to be involved in unwanted sexual experiences than it was in 1988. The study found that alcohol use by the perpetrator was down from 80 percent to 67 percent and by the women from 56 percent to 43 percent.
- Women reported fewer perpetrators were UNH students, down from 70 percent in 1988 to 51 percent.
- The number of unwanted sexual experiences in fraternities decreased sharply, from 28 percent in 1988 to 16 percent in 2000.

The study was conducted by a team of faculty and staff concerned with unwanted sexual experiences on campus and funded by the UNH President's Office. Principal investigators were Victoria Banyard, assistant professor of psychology, and Elizabeth Plante, director of UNH's Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program. Other members of the team were Cohn, sociology professor Sally Ward, Whittemore School academic advisor Cari Moorhead, and sociology doctoral student Wendy Walsh.

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