

Male Survivors of Sexual Violence

Awareness of Male Sexual Assault

Awareness of male sexual assault is increasing and becoming more frequently studied and talked about. The general invisibility of the rape of boys and men is due in part to widespread homophobia and societal definitions of masculinity and maleness. Systems of dominance, homophobia and gender rigidity not only perpetuate sexual violence, these systems of power serve to silence male survivors who may fear appearing powerless, weak and unmasculine.

The rape of men and boys is an act of power used to reinforce the dominant status of the perpetrator through the use of sexual violence. Males perceived as powerless become targets of these assaults. Young boys, adolescent men, men in institutions and men with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to this form of violence. Contrary to the belief that homosexual men commit male-to-male sexual violence, research shows that men who identify as heterosexual are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of male sexual assault. Statistics show that heterosexual men commit 96-98% of all sexual violence against males and females.

Prevalence of Sexual Assault Perpetrated Against Boys and Men

Increased attention and awareness of sexual violence and the growing recognition of male victimization in particular have led to an increase in the number of studies being conducted on the prevalence of sexual assault of boys and men. Research suggests that sexual violence perpetrated against boys and men is widespread with estimates ranging from one in five to one in eight males reporting some form of sexual assault. A majority of studies confirm that an estimated 5-10% of boys and men will be raped in their lifetime. Using a definition of rape that includes forced vaginal, oral or anal sex, the National Violence Against Women Survey found that 1 of 33 U.S. men had experienced an attempted or completed rape as a child or an adult.¹

Perpetrators of Sexual Assault

The majority of perpetrators of sexual violence are men. Studies of sexual assault against children and young adolescents report that more than 97% of perpetrators were male. Despite popular belief, most male perpetrators identify themselves as heterosexual and often have consensual sexual relationships with women. One study notes that 98% of male perpetrators self-identify as heterosexual.² The vast majority (over 80%) of sexually abused boys never become adult perpetrators, while a majority of perpetrators (up to 80%) were abused as boys and young men. Perpetrators tend to be known by, but unrelated to, the victim.³ Females can also be perpetrators. Studies report that women commit 2-4% of reported sex offenses against children. A Bureau of Justice Statistics study reports that overall, 6% of offenders who sexually assaulted juveniles were female, compared with just 1% who sexually assaulted adults.⁴ Female perpetrators of sexual assault tend to use persuasion rather than force or the threat of force during their crimes.⁵

Boys and Adolescent Males

According to a report on the sexual assault of young children reported to law enforcement that used data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System, more than half of all juvenile victims of sexual assault were under age 12 and one of every seven victims of sexual assault were under the age of 6. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the year in a male's life when he is most likely to be a victim of sexual assault is the age of 4.⁶ Twenty six percent of sexual assault victims under the age of 12 and 8% of sexual assault victims aged 12 to 17 are boys.⁷

Interpersonal Relationships

Sexual assault in interpersonal relationships is an extremely prevalent form of violence, particularly when we consider that men involved in physically abusive relationships with other men may be especially vulnerable to sexual assaults by their partners. In a study of 162 gay men and 111 lesbian women, 52% reported at least one incident of sexual coercion by same-sex partners. Lesbian women experience 1.2 incidents per person while gay men experience 1.6 incidents per person.⁸ Nearly 7 million men are raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Each year, 834,000 men are sexually assaulted by their partners.⁹

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Rape and sexual assault of men and boys occurs in other all-male settings including military organizations, athletics, dormitories and fraternities. All-male environments cultivate the tendency for violence perpetrated by men against women and against other men.¹⁰ A sense of competition, violence as a rite of passage, an expression of dominant status or power, or an initiation or hazing are among the many reasons this culture of violence exists in these settings.

Boys and Men with Disabilities

Studies show that boys and men with disabilities are twice as likely than boys and men without disabilities to be sexually abused in their lifetime.¹¹ More than 90% of men and women with developmental disabilities will experience sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Forty-nine percent will experience 10 or more abusive incidents.¹² Reported rates of sexual violence range from 4-6% among adolescent boys with disabilities.¹³ Other studies suggest that 16-30% of boys with disabilities will be sexually abused before their eighteenth birthday.¹⁴

Sexual Assault in Prisons

The few studies that have been done on prison rape reveal astonishing rates of abuse. A recent study of prisons in four Midwestern states found that approximately 20% of male inmates reported a pressured or forced sex incident while incarcerated. About 9% of male inmates reported that they had been raped.¹⁵ Stop Prison Rape estimates that 360,000 men are sexually assaulted or raped in prisons in the United States each year. For at least two of the three inmates who are sexually assaulted, the assaults are not isolated incidents but a pattern repeated on a daily basis.¹⁶ Sexual assaults in prisons and other correctional institutions are perpetrated by corrections officers and staff as well as by other inmates. Sexual violence perpetrated in a prison setting is often committed by men who identify as heterosexual as a tool to establish and maintain power and control over other men. Shockingly, prison rape is often not included in the Bureau of Justice Statistics crime surveys or estimates of rape and sexual assault.

Impact on Male Survivors

Boys and men who are sexually assaulted may experience a wide range of post-traumatic symptoms including depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other emotional and physical problems as a result. Common reactions of men and boys after an assault can also include fear of appearing “unmasculine,” societal, peer or self-questioning of their sexuality, homophobia, sense of shame, and feelings of denial.

Help for Male Survivors

The sexual violence perpetrated against boys and men is severely underreported and this group of survivors is underserved. Boys and men who are sexually assaulted rarely see their reality reflected in articles, books or in direct service program outreach initiatives, which further isolates them and reinforces the devastating myths surrounding male survivors of sexual assault. Resources are becoming increasingly more available for male survivors, their friends and families, and professionals who work with them. Familiarize yourself and your organization with resources in the community so you will be prepared to help male survivors in their journey through healing.

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