Informing Prevention & Intervention Measures:

12 Risk Factors for Sexual Violence on College Campuses

A NaBITA Publication By
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the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association

INTRODUCTION

CONTENT WARNING: Contains descriptions of sexual assault and/or violence that may be triggering to some individuals.

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The problem of sexual assaults on college and university campuses can no longer be minimized or ignored amidst regular media coverage of incidents and criticism of resulting institutional actions; legislative attempts to tackle the problem, sometimes in misdirected ways that could ultimately harm both students and higher education institutions as a whole; increasing concern from college and university constituents; and the ever-present threat of litigation. Yet it's a dilemma that, despite campus leaders' best intentions, remains difficult to address effectively.

Regardless of all the noise and discussion about how campus sexual violence can be best addressed, the fact remains that institutions have a legal obligation to provide targeted prevention programming that addresses sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking. Doing so should begin with an understanding of the motivations and risk factors associated with those who engage in such sexual misconduct. However, it's not just those charged with developing and/or implementing prevention programming that would benefit from this. By ensuring that administrators, student conduct staff, law enforcement officers, prevention advocates, and counselors understand the motivations and risk factors associated with sexual misconduct, you can help create a campuswide environment where policies, procedures, and individual interactions all work synergistically to curb sexual violence.

Unfortunately, campus practitioners often operate from a vantage point of assumptions and several commonly cited, albeit vague, statistics. That is why we set out to create a summary of risk factors for sexual violence based on our breadth of experience with this problem; conversations with experts and with campus practitioners in this area; and extensive review of existing literature and research on the topic from the criminology, psychology, and prevention standpoints. This process led to the identification of 12 risk factors (DD-12) that can contribute to campus sexual violence. That list was then reviewed by experts in the fields of prevention, law enforcement, and sexual violence. Examples for each risk factor were found in the national media and culled from our experiences.

Law enforcement has a focus on the criminal and predatory actions of individuals and is primarily charged with investigating and building a case that can move forward in court. Psychologists and counselors have developed various assessments to evaluate the risk for recidivism, sexual assault, stalking, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence. Those in the prevention and advocacy field have first-hand experience helping those who have survived gender-based violence. Our goal with the DD-12 was to pull together each of these fields and present the risk factors for sexual assault violence in a more accessible format.

While these factors are not meant as a guide in the prediction of sexual violence, they are useful in understanding the kinds of behaviors and attitudes often present in individuals and groups perpetrating sexual violence. It is our hope that the DD-12 risk factors can start to better inform those charged with the early identification and intervention of those who may be at-risk to commit sexual violence on campus. While there has been increased training for those investigating Title IX cases on campus,

the prevention of sexual violence has been a more allusive topic. It is our hope that the DD-12 provides a catalyst for more in-depth programming and intervention with those who are at a heightened risk for perpetrating sexual violence on campus.

FACTOR 1: OBJECTIFICATION AND DEPERSONALIZATION

This risk factor refers to a pervasive tendency to focus on the differences of others, rather than recognize shared individual characteristics, and to characterize others as lesser than in some way. Individuals and groups who display this risk factor tend to undervalue others as unique individuals and are unwilling to see their own thoughts behaviors, and characteristics reflected in others. If asked to make an attempt to understand others, that attempt will likely be superficial, and based largely on preexisting expectations of how those others should think or behave. One observable sign of this factor is the use of remarks made to diminish or undermine some aspect of others, including intelligence level, personality, or appearance. Those being objectified and depersonalized are not seen as complex and unique individuals, but rather simplistic stereotypes.

An obvious example is someone who embraces pornography's depiction of women as commodities to be used and tossed aside. Given the proliferation of porn in today's society, it's easy to see how this risk factor can become ingrained among young adults whose attitudes and behaviors are easily shaped. More dangerous than seeing this risk factor in individuals is its presence in groups, such as fraternities, because peers in such groups can reinforce objectifying and depersonalizing views of their members. Consider as an example parties that promote anonymous sex and groups engaging in the so-called practice of "hogging," where groups of men at bars target women based on their weight or appearance.

FACTOR 2: OBSESSIVE OR ADDICTIVE PORNOGRAPHY/ SEX FOCUS

This factor overlaps with the first because an individual who objectifies and depersonalizes the opposite sex or gender is likely to consume media that treats those others similarly. Inversely, using pornography obsessively could establish and reinforce objectifying viewpoints. While the circularity of this factor makes it difficult to distinguish the initial cause from the effect, a positive correlation between the use of sexually explicit materials with various negative outcomes, including increased sexual perpetration and the endorsement of popular rape myths, is well established.

While it's unfair to say that consuming violent pornography causes rape, it's likely that viewing pornography that objectifies individuals based on sex or gender can reinforce those unhealthy beliefs. It's also important to note that not all pornography is created equal; pornography in which humiliation, rape, and other forms of sexual violence are depicted should create more concern than pornographic media lacking such portrayals.

A student who frequently consumes violent pornography may be obsessed with the idea of committing sexual violence or may even be at the fantasy rehearsal stage. Within a group dynamic, using pornography to diminish an individual's or group's humanity, for example as part of an activity or event, should raise some major red flags. Athletic teams for which strippers are used as a recruiting tool have come under fire in the past over this practice, which essentially sends the message that women are the reward for joining.

FACTOR 3: THREATS AND ULTIMATUMS

Individuals and groups who make threats and demands may view their own needs as being more important than those of others. They often use if/then ultimatums and coercion as a problem-solving approach. Given that coercion is often a factor in sexual misconduct, it's easy to see just how important it is to identify and address this risk factor.

Consider the prevalence of this factor in intimate partner violence. An abusive partner may threaten self-harm if the other individual attempts to leave the relationship, or may threaten to harm the other individual if abuse is reported to authorities. Isolating the victim from support and/or assistance, and creating a sense of fear if the abuser's demands are not met, are also common strategies.

In a group setting, this risk factor may take the form of coercion to participate in hazing activities (e.g., telling pledges that they will not be chosen if they do not participate in hazing). In this scenario, pledges who acquiesce to pressure and participate in hazing become members who then exert the same pressure on future pledges. You may also see it as a strategy to prevent others from reporting misconduct. Individuals may threaten, for example, to "out" someone's sexuality or perpetrate further physical harm if misconduct is reported to campus or law enforcement authorities.

FACTOR 4: MISOGYNISTIC IDEOLOGY

This factor refers to the belief that the female gender deserves less respect or consideration than the male gender; a position that women should be relegated to antiquated, unequal roles; or a lack of consideration for the opinions, needs, and desires of the female gender. Many factors can promote misogynistic ideology, including media portrayals of men, culture, religious ideology, and attitudes among family members. Rejection by women can also reinforce such ideology. When women are seen as lesser than, it becomes easier to belittle and denigrate them. From there, it can be a slippery slope toward outright hostility, a need to exert control over what may be seen as the "inferior" gender, and even an acceptance of gender violence. While misogyny is most often aimed at the female gender, males who are seen as being "effeminate" can also be the recipients of others' misogyny.

As with other factors, it's not uncommon to see such beliefs supported and magnified in group settings such as fraternities and athletic groups through songs, chants, and party themes. Among the better-known examples of group misogyny is the Texas Tech University fraternity that employed messaging stating: "No means yes, yes means anal." Here, the message is that the sexual desires of men trump the objections of women.

FACTOR 5: GROOMING BEHAVIORS

This factor refers to a wide range or behaviors designed to increase others' vulnerability, disempower them, or lessen their ability to self-advocate for their personal safety and/or wellbeing. Sometimes, grooming behaviors are simply socially inappropriate, but other times, they cross over into violations of campus policy, making it easier to formally address them.

Because grooming behaviors are often thought about in the context of pedophilia (a man giving children candy), it may be more difficult to identify grooming within the college setting. Some common examples include preventing targeted individuals from removing themselves from a situation, either by physically blocking egress or by threatening harm; tracking someone's movements; isolating a person from family and friends; and embarrassing, belittling, and/or infantilizing a target. Sometimes, grooming behaviors can be seen after a relationship has ended by a partner who is not ready to let go of the other person. Within a group dynamic, grooming behaviors may be seen in parties with an intentionally disproportionate gender mix, and in the luring of individuals who seem particularly vulnerable into isolated areas, where they may be more easily taken advantage of.

FACTOR 6: USING SUBSTANCES TO OBTAIN SEX

Students often engage in drinking games and other high-risk drinking practices and drug use of their own accord for recreational purposes. However, this factor refers to instances in which individuals are encouraged or pressured into such consumption for the purpose of making them more likely to consent to sex or to lessen their defenses. Using substances to obtain sex is a grooming behavior; however, it was broken into a separate, standalone risk factor due to the alarming frequency with which this occurs in the college setting and the level of harm this particular behavior causes.

Consider individuals at a bar who continue buying drinks for other patrons with whom they want to sleep. In a group setting, you may see events in which organizers devise drinking games with the intention of making certain individuals less likely to resist advances, or spike communal alcoholic mixes with illicit substances to induce incapacitation. Because incapacitation plays such a large role in campus sexual assaults, this strategy is, unfortunately, particularly effective.

FACTOR 7: HARDENED OR INFLEXIBLE POINT OF VIEW

Many individuals have opinions and beliefs to which they hold steadfast. However, such views that are intractable, cannot be swayed by rational discussion and factual information, and are staunchly and overly defensively protected, should cause concern. In the context of sexual violence, the hardened or inflexible viewpoints are often misogynistic and/or objectifying in their nature.

Elliot Rodger, who killed six people and injured 14 more before committing suicide near the University of Santa Barbara in 2014, is an extreme example of an individual with hardened point of view related to sexual violence. His manifesto, shared just as he prepared to drive to the sorority where he planned to perpetrate violence against women, demonstrated

a disconnect from his targets, frustration over sexual rejection, and rigid and simplistic beliefs about the sorority members he targeted. "They are all spoiled, heartless, wicked bitches. They think they are superior to me, and if I ever tried to ask one out on a date, they would reject me cruelly," he wrote. To him, these women seemed not so much as human beings, but more as a symbol of what he saw as the source of his discontent.

Hardening can escalate as individuals choose to surround themselves only with materials and/or individuals who support those beliefs, filtering out those that contradict their views. Membership in groups that share the same rigid views can reinforce individuals' hardened perspectives. Often, these groups exist only online in forums and social media.

FACTOR 8: PATTERN OF ESCALATING THREAT STRATEGIES

This factor relates to ways of thinking and behaving consistent with previous risk factors that seem to be increasing. Frustration with, hostility towards, and desire to cause harm may be increasing, as evidenced by statements and actions. It's not just a repetition of statements or actions consistent with other risk factors, but an intensification, either in frequency or in severity.

In a stalking situation, for instance, an escalation of behavior may consist of surveillance that leads to pursuit that in turn leads to invasion of private space. Similarly, harassing comments may increase in frequency or offensiveness, or may lead to physical harassment. Groups may go from threatening someone to prevent reporting of sexual harassment or violence to vandalizing personal property, or from attempting to ply potential targets with free alcohol to using Rohypnol to facilitate sexual assault. Both in individuals and groups, you may see actions designed to "test the waters," as they move from predatory thinking to rehearsing.

FACTOR 9: LACK OF EMPATHY

An individual or group displaying this risk factor usually has a narcissistic world view. The needs and/or desires of this individual or group come first, and the harm to others or to society that may result from fulfilling those needs and/or desires is not considered. Further, the impact of their behavior on others may be justified and minimized, often by blaming the victim(s). A lack of empathy may also manifest itself in a paternalistic perspective; in other words, "knowing" what another individual or group needs or wants and thus imposing actions on those others based on that belief. Often, there is a sense of entitlement, which can lead to surprise when asked to take responsibility for their actions.

A student who says, "She came to my room half-naked," may feel that because women dress a certain way, the student is entitled to sexually assault them. Such a student may be surprised when a report is made because of a lack of ability to see the situation from the reporting party's standpoint. Likewise, groups who engage in grooming behavior may do so without any regard of consequences because they believe they are entitled to take what they want however they want, and do not stop to consider how others are affected.

FACTOR 10: SENSATION-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

This factor refers to a focus on finding pleasure in the here and now. The pleasure achieved is never quite enough, and more and more is risked for new sensations and/or experiences. Often, pleasure comes at the expense of finances, academics, or moral code. There may be sexual impulsivity and even aggression, with little thought to possible consequences.

A student may become excited at the idea of having anonymous sex, and after engaging in such an encounter at a party, begins seeking out such experiences multiple times a week. A group example is an athletic team that, after going to strip clubs, hires a prostitute to come to its party to provide sex for its members. The key here is that behavior is not a one-time occurrence, but rather has become habitual and is on an upward trajectory.

FACTOR 11: OBSESSIVE AND/OR ADDICTIVE THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIORS

This factor refers to a fanatical focus on seeking sexual gratification. It's unique from other factors (i.e., obsessive pornography addiction, inflexible thoughts, and hedonistic pleasure seeking) in that it rises to the level of addiction. These individuals have repetitive thoughts and problems redirecting attention. Hypersexuality and/or a history of impersonal sexual encounters may be present, accompanied by a lack of satisfaction. Consider whether paraphilic tendencies — abnormal and/or extreme sexual actions and/or impulses — are present, as this, combined with recurring fantasies and urges, can significantly increase the risk of violence.

A student with escalating stalking behavior who feels "addicted" to the individual being stalked and cannot stop himself is an example. In a group setting, you might see this illustrated by a fraternity that, because of its extreme preoccupation with sex, sends emails to its members educating new ones about how to have sex with women by getting them drunk.

FACTOR 12: PAST EXPERIENCE

A personal history of experiencing or witnessing physical or sexual abuse, past struggles with addiction, exposure to negative attitudes, and experience with intimate partner violence can increase the risk of future perpetration. Individuals in leadership positions within student groups who display this factor can influence those groups negatively, potentially increasing the whole group's likelihood of engaging in sexual violence.

An individual example might be a student who was raised in a family that sees and treats women as if they are inferior to men and thus has the same view. A group example is a circle of friends who all have experienced sexual addiction, and this shared experience drives their behavior at parties.

When a history of sexual misconduct begins at the college setting and the institution

learns of it and fails to address it, not only is it allowing the likelihood of future perpetration to exist, but it is opening itself to legal liability. Consider the case of the Wesleyan University chapter of Beta Theta Pi fraternity, called "the Rape Factory." Administrators warned students about the group in 2010, but did not issue the same warning two years later. The institution had to defend against a lawsuit in which a student claimed that the institution failed to protect her from harassment when it knew of the danger posed by the group.

CONCLUSION

All of the risk factors described here exist on a wide spectrum, and severity should be considered along with the presence of the factors themselves. Further, many of these factors overlap with one or more others. A visual representation might look like a very complicated Venn diagram because of this overlap. As a result, it's important to see the DD-12 as a lens through which one can more clearly see potential risk of sexual violence, rather than as an assessment tool, where checking off items on a list leads to a hard and fast prediction. None of the factors described in this paper, either alone or in combination with others, can accurately point to future perpetration. They are meant to be taken together in context to help in the development of prevention education and deployment of intervention measures and sanctioning, both for individuals and groups, to lessen risk.

With a better idea of where risk for potential violence may exist on campus, the next step is mitigating it. We suggest the following six possible starting points: 1) developing bystander intervention efforts; 2) teaching otherness and empathy; 3) addressing microaggressions; 4) training conduct staff and hearing boards; 5) monitoring campus climates; and 6) teaching affirmative consent and relationship health.

Given legislative requirements to engage in prevention, increasing pressure to effect change on campus "rape culture," and the core mission of helping students succeed, it's imperative that institutions recognize the need to increase focus and dedicate adequate resources to the prevention of sexual assault, but that can be done effectively only through an informed approach that includes an understanding of these factors.

ABOUT NaBITA

NaBITA, the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, is an organization dedicated to the support and professional development of Behavioral Intervention Team members at colleges, universities, schools, and workplaces. NaBITA is committed to providing education, resources, and support to professionals in educational settings and in the workplace who endeavor every day to make their organizations safer through caring prevention and intervention. NaBITA brings together professionals from multiple disciplines who are engaged in the essential function of behavioral intervention for mutual support and shared learning.

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