

Sexual victimization among Auckland University students: How much and who does it?¹

Nicola J. Gavey

Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag,
Auckland.

In a survey of Auckland University undergraduate students, Gavey (1991) reported that 52% of 347 women revealed that they had experienced some form of sexual victimization, and 25% had either been raped or experienced attempted rape. These prevalence data were almost identical to those found in a comparable U.S. study (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). It was also found that most of the sexual victimization was perpetrated within legitimate heterosexual relationships. The current article presents more detail on the forms of sexual victimization experienced by women and perpetrated by men. Additional data are also presented on what categories of men (e.g., strangers, acquaintances, lovers, husbands, and so on) were the perpetrators of the reported incidents of abuse.

Sexual victimization in New Zealand is probably more widespread than previous research has indicated. In an earlier article published in the United States (Gavey, 1991), I noted that more than fifty percent of a sample of Auckland University undergraduate women reported, on the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982), having experienced some form of sexual victimization. These experiences included unwanted sexual contact (for example, kissing or touching) as well as rape. Twenty-five percent of the women reported either having been raped or having experienced attempted rape. The present article provides

an expanded presentation of these data and presents additional data on the categories of men perpetrating the victimization.

Background

It is now generally recognized that all forms of sexual victimization² are far more common than was previously thought. North American studies specifically designed to investigate the extent of rape and sexual abuse in various populations have highlighted the gross inadequacy of the traditional reliance on police and crisis centre information for prevalence and incidence data. Victims of sexual assault who report to the police or seek crisis centre services represent only a small proportion of all women who have been sexually assaulted — perhaps less than 10%³ of all women who have been raped (e.g., Koss, 1985; Russell, 1984).

Data on rape prevalence from research sampling more general populations of women in the United States include estimates such as 24% of a random sample of San Francisco women (Russell, 1982, 1984), 15% of a national sample of United States university women (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) and 5% of a representative sample of women from one area of South Carolina (Kilpatrick, Best, Veronen, Amick, Villepontoux, & Ruff, 1985). For the purpose of these studies, rape tends to be defined in largely similar ways to be consistent with legal definitions. That is, rape

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²In the literature in this area, many terms such as, sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual aggression, sexual violence, sexual victimization, sexual coercion, sexual exploitation, are used. While these terms all imply subtly different meanings, they are sometimes used seemingly interchangeably, with some authors tending to prefer a particular term for no stated reason. I will use the term *sexual victimization* to refer to the broadest category of all the sorts of experiences this study was concerned with. Other terms will also be used, either to be consistent with previous literature, or because the particular implications are appropriate in the particular context.

³All percentage data cited and reported in this article have been rounded to whole numbers.

is sexual intercourse that occurs against a woman's will, as a result of a man's use of force or threat of force, or (in some cases, also) when a woman is unable to consent because she is unconscious, drunk, drugged, or asleep. The highest of these estimates (Russell, 1982, 1984) was obtained from research using in depth face to face interviews in women's own homes. For Russell's study, interviewers were specially trained women who asked questions which described particular coercive activities in relatively neutral language, in the context of lots of questions about personal experiences of victimization (Russell, 1984). The lowest of these estimates (Kilpatrick et al., 1985) was obtained from research in which women were asked during telephone interviews about their experiences of criminal victimization. It seems that variations in such estimates are closely related to methodological differences among studies. Research which is adequately funded and so can be carefully designed to minimize underdisclosure tends to yield higher reported rates of sexual victimization.

While some studies have largely restricted their focus to rape and attempted rape, others (e.g. Koss and her colleagues) have also looked at other forms of sexual aggression and victimization. This wider focus has, perhaps, stemmed from the recognition, in recent research and theoretical developments, that rape and sexual aggression can be more satisfactorily conceptualized along a continuum of sexual victimization rather than as dichotomously opposed to just "sex". This broader focus is consistent with feminist theoretical approaches which emphasize the relationship between rape and more normative forms of sexual coercion or, in some cases, heterosexual practice in general (e.g., Clark & Lewis, 1977; Jackson, 1978; MacKinnon, 1983;

Russell, 1984). Using this dimensional approach, Koss et al. (1987) found that 54% of a national U.S. sample of women university students had experienced some form of sexual victimization, and 28% had experienced either rape or attempted rape.

Looking at the prevalence of sexually aggressive behaviour among men, Koss et al. (1987) found that 25% of men admitted to having perpetrated some form of sexual victimization, and 8% admitted having perpetrated rape or attempted rape. Similarly, Rapaport and Burkhart (1984) found that when United States male university psychology students were asked about their experiences of forcing sex on a woman, 28% reported having used a "directly coercive method" (p.220) at least once in the past, and 15% reported having forced a woman to have sexual intercourse against her will. Also, Kanin (1967) found that 26% of unmarried United States male university students reported having perpetrated at least one episode of sexual aggression since starting university.

Within New Zealand, comparatively little research has been conducted on the prevalence of sexual victimization.⁴ We know from overseas research that data based on reports of rape and sexual assault to the police seriously underestimate the extent, and misrepresent the nature, of the problem. There have been only two reported studies which provide any data on the prevalence of sexual victimization among particular groups of New Zealand women in the general population.

Mullen, Romans-Clarkson, Walton and Herbison (1988) interviewed a subsample of 314 women randomly chosen from a larger randomly selected sample of 2000 women from five electoral rolls in the province of Otago. Of the women interviewed, 5% identified themselves as having experienced sexual abuse as adults (since the age of sixteen). The researchers note that when weighted back to the original random sample, the rate is 4%. This prevalence figure is extremely low compared with some of those obtained overseas. At least in part this can be seen to have arisen from the use of only one broad screening question relating to women's experiences of sexual victimization as adults: "Have you been sexually abused as an adult?" (Sarah Romans-Clarkson, personal communication, 2

⁴Nevertheless, a good deal of research has documented New Zealand women's experiences of rape and sexual abuse (e.g., Auckland Rape Crisis Centre, 1983; Cox & Irwin, 1989; Saphira, 1985, 1987; Stone, Barrington, & Bevan 1983), details of rapes reported to the police, and police and criminal justice system handling of rape complaints (e.g., Barrington & Stace, 1983; Lee, 1983; Scott, 1983; Stace, 1983), New Zealanders' attitudes toward sexual violence (e.g., Synergy Applied Research Ltd., McNeill, von Dadelszen, Gray, Duituturaga, Good, & Ash, 1988), as well as an examination of the extent and nature of sexual abuse among young women in Department of Social Welfare care (von Dadelszen, 1987).

November 1989). In order to affirm this, women would be required to understand and accept their experiences as appropriately labelled "sexual abuse". It has been demonstrated, however, that a large number of women who report having had experiences consistent with legal definitions of rape, do not acknowledge that they have been victims of rape (Koss, 1985). Furthermore, women who had been raped or sexually assaulted in a physically violent manner may not have thought of this as sexual *abuse*. Thus it is likely that there was considerable underdisclosure from the women in Mullen et al.'s (1988) study that is attributable to methodological factors.

The other reported New Zealand study involved a survey of 1156 senior high school students by Wellington Rape Crisis workers. They found that, of the 77% of students who completed the relevant section of the questionnaire, 36% of the young women responded "yes" to the question "Has another person touched you in a sexual way when you didn't want them to?" Five per cent of the young women responded yes to the question "Have you ever been forced to have sexual intercourse when you didn't want to?" (unpublished, cited in Haines, no date; and Haines, 1987).

Gavey (1991) surveyed a group of university students in order to assess the prevalence of various forms of sexual victimization — as experienced by women and perpetrated by men. This study was specifically designed to provide some indication of the extent of rape and sexual aggression in a New Zealand sample. Such basic data, obtained from research specifically designed to investigate sexual victimization prevalence, have not previously been available in New Zealand. Of particular interest also, was an investigation of how much abuse occurs across the continuum of sexual victimization. For this reason, the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Oros, 1982; Koss & Gidycz, 1985) was used. The SES is "a self-report instrument that is designed to reflect various degrees of sexual aggression and victimization and is capable of identifying hidden rape victims and undetected offenders" (Koss & Gidycz, 1985, p. 422). Gavey (1991) provided comparative data on the extent of sexual victimization amongst New Zealand and United States higher education students (c.f. Koss et al., 1987). The present

report provides an expanded version of this previously reported New Zealand prevalence data, as well as data on the extent of various forms of sexual victimization within various types of "legitimate" (Gavey, 1988) or "potentially appropriate" (Estrich, 1987) heterosexual relationships.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 347 women and 176 men enrolled in a stage one psychology paper "Introduction to General Psychology" at Auckland University in 1987. The women ranged in age from 17 to 60 years ($M = 22.0$ years), with 57% of them aged 18 or 19 years. The men ranged in age from 16 to 50 years ($M = 20.5$ years), with 56% aged 18 or 19 years. Most of the respondents (87% of the women and 83% of the men) were Pakeha. The next largest ethnic group for both women (5%) and men (5%) was Chinese. Maori, Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Tokelauan, and Indian students were all represented in very small numbers. Of the women, 83% were single, 13% were either married or living in a de facto relationship, and 3% were either separated or divorced. Of the men, 90% were single, 8% either married or living in a de facto relationship, and 1% separated or divorced. Most of the respondents (81% of the women and 91% of the men) were full-time students, with 70% of the women and 60% of the men in their first year at university. Just over half of the respondents (61% of the women and 60% of the men) reported that they were currently not religious. In terms of (recent) heterosexual experience, 63% of the men and 67% of the women said they had had "mutually consenting sexual intercourse" with someone of the other sex in the past three years. In response to the question "Would you call yourself heterosexual?", 95% of the men and 96% of the women answered yes.

Instruments

Separate forms of a questionnaire were developed for women and men. The main part of the questionnaire consisted of the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Oros, 1982; Koss & Gidycz, 1985), with the addition of questions to assess the perpetrator's relationship to the woman, and her age at the time of any recorded incident of victimization. The version of the SES that was used was the same as that used by Koss et al. (1987); it differs from that originally published (Koss & Oros, 1982). Men received a form of the SES which asked them about their experiences of having sexually victimized women.

Two direct questions which asked women whether they had ever been raped or sexually abused, and men whether they had ever raped or sexually abused

a woman, were also included in the questionnaire after the SES. Self-reports of the perceived accuracy of respondents' answers were also obtained. They were asked to estimate how much the following factors may have reduced the accuracy of their answers on five-point likert scales ranging from *didn't reduce accuracy at all* (1) to *reduced accuracy considerably* (5): (1) "difficulty in remembering", (2) "insufficient time", (3) "concerns about confidentiality", (4) "concerns that people around you would see your answers", (5) "the particular wordings of the questions". Respondents were asked to make an overall estimate about how accurate their answers had been, using a five-point likert scale ranging from *not at all accurate* (1) to *very accurate* (5). They were also asked to rate how comfortable they had felt answering the SES questions, using a five-point likert scale ranging from *not at all comfortable* (1) to *very comfortable* (5). Demographic data were also collected. An open-ended question was included at the end inviting respondents' comments on the questionnaire and the research.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered during class time, at the beginning of a lecture, to students in two streams of the same introductory psychology class. Completed questionnaires were received from a total of 523 students (377 of the 420 students in the morning session and 146 of the 162 students in the afternoon session), yielding a response rate of 90%. Although there were no negative consequences for students who did not wish to take part in the study, and although the questionnaire had to be completed in relatively crowded conditions (not allowing for optimal privacy), this is a reasonably high return rate.

Due to the sensitive nature of the questionnaire, care was taken to emphasize that participation in the research was entirely voluntary. Students were also requested to fill in the questionnaires on their own, and to keep their answers private. At the end of the lecture women and men were given (different) half-page long information hand-outs. This information described some overseas findings on the extensiveness of sexual abuse and rape, and stated the purposes of the current study. It was also noted that the process of filling out such questionnaires can sometimes bring back painful feelings, and that this was a normal reaction. Information was included about free counselling services for women and men sexual abuse survivors and contacts for men wanting to change sexually abusive behaviour. Respondents were invited to contact the researcher at any time in the future for further information or to discuss the research.

Results

Response frequencies for women and men to the ten SES items and the two direct questions

about experiences of sexual victimization are presented in Table 1. The frequencies of having experienced these various forms of victimization ranged from 38% of women who reported having experienced unwanted sexual contact as a result of verbal coercion to 1% of women who reported having experienced sexual intercourse as a result of a man misusing his authority. Overall, 52% of the women reported having experienced some form of sexual aggression or victimization. The most serious form of sexual victimization ever experienced involved unwanted sexual contact (SES items 1,2,3) for 16% of the women (c.f. Koss et al., 1987; 14%); sexual coercion (SES items 6,7) for 11% of the women (c.f. Koss et al., 1987; 12%); attempted rape (SES items 4,5) for 11% (c.f. Koss et al., 1987; 12%); and rape (SES items 8,9,10) for 14% (c.f. Koss et al., 1987; 15%).

The frequencies for having perpetrated victimization ranged from no men who reported misusing authority to have sexual contact or sexual intercourse with a woman, to 10% of the men who reported having sexual contact with a woman as a result of his verbal coercion. Overall 14% of men reported perpetrating some form of sexual aggression or victimization (c.f. Koss et al., 1987; 25%).

It is interesting to compare the prevalence rates obtained using multiple, specific questions with those obtained using the two general, direct questions (see Table 1). Because these general questions followed the multiple SES questions, it is likely that the percentage of affirmative responses is higher than it would have been if these questions had been given to respondents in isolation or in the context of unrelated material.

Table 2 shows which groups of men were responsible for perpetrating the various forms of victimization reported by women. Overall, men who were in legitimate heterosexual relationships with the woman (boyfriends, husbands, de facto partners, "dates", lovers) perpetrated 63% of all incidents of sexual victimization, and they were responsible for 83% of all incidents of intercourse achieved by verbal coercion. When acquaintances, and ex-husbands, ex-boyfriends, and ex-lovers are included, these groups of men accounted for 83% of reported incidents of sexual

Table 1: Percentages of Women who had Experienced and Men who had Perpetrated Various Forms of Sexual Victimization

	Women (N = 347)	Men (N = 171)
<i>Responses to the SES questions</i>		
1. Sexual contact by verbal coercion	38	10
2. Sexual contact by misuse of authority	4	0
3. Sexual contact by threat or force	14	2
4. Attempted intercourse by force	15	0
5. Attempted intercourse by alcohol or drugs	8	2
6. Intercourse by verbal coercion	21	5
7. Intercourse by misuse of authority	1	0
8. Intercourse by alcohol or drugs	6	2
9. Intercourse by threat or force	6	2
10. Oral or anal penetration by threat or force	5	1
<i>Responses to the direct questions</i>		
1. "Sexual abuse"	20	3
2. "Rape"	7	1

Table 2: Percentage of Incidents, Reported by Women, of Various Forms of Sexual Victimization, as Perpetrated by Various Groups of Men¹.

	Sexual Contact (N = 283)	Sexual Coercion (N = 92)	Attempted rape (N = 93)	Rape (N = 64)
Stranger	7	3	12	9
Acquaintance ²	15	3	18	17
"Date" ³	23	14	23	20
Boyfriend, etc. ⁴	28	43	26	30
Husband, etc. ⁵	9	23	6	11
Ex-husband, etc. ⁶	6	7	5	8
Relative ⁷	8	2	9	3
Authority ⁸	2	3	0	0
Other	1	0	1	0

Notes: ¹Not all columns add up to 100, due to missing data where a few respondents did not provide information about the perpetrator of a particular incident.

Full wordings given to respondents were:
²Nonromantic acquaintance (friend, neighbour,

workmate, etc.), ³A man you were going out with casually or for the first time, ⁴Romantic acquaintance (boyfriend, lover, etc.), ⁵Husband or de facto partner, ⁶Ex-husband, ex-lover, or ex-boyfriend, ⁷Relative (father, step-father, uncle, brother, etc.), ⁸Authority (teacher, boss, etc).

victimization. Strangers were responsible for only 8% of all incidents.

Of the 231 women in the sample who had experienced mutually consenting heterosexual intercourse in the past three years, 48% had experienced some form of sexual victimization by either a "date", boyfriend, lover, husband or de facto partner. Only 16% of the women in the sample were married, living in de facto relationships, separated or divorced, yet husbands and de facto partners had perpetrated 11% of all reported (by women) incidents of sexual victimization; 9% of all reported incidents of unwanted sexual contact; 23% of

incidents of sexual coercion; 7% of attempted rapes; and 11% of rapes. (This excludes ex-husbands, who were categorized with ex-lovers and ex-boyfriends in the questionnaire.) Of the 54 women who were married, in de facto relationships, separated, or divorced, 37% reported having experienced some form of sexual victimization by a man who was their husband or de facto partner at the time.

Despite the relative lack of privacy in which the questionnaire was administered, 85% of the women, and 91% of the men, reported having felt moderately to very comfortable in answering the SES questions – although most

reported having felt less than very comfortable, and almost one-third of women and one-fifth of men felt only moderately comfortable. In terms of the self-perceived accuracy of their answers, 95% of the women and 97% of the men rated their answers as moderately to very accurate (and 67% of the women and 84% of the men rated their answers as "very accurate"). Insufficient time was not generally perceived to affect accuracy for men (93% rated it as not affecting accuracy at all). Similarly, difficulty in remembering was regarded by 90% of men to not affect accuracy at all, as was the particular wordings of the questions by 87% of the men. Concerns about confidentiality were not considered to affect accuracy at all by 83% of the men. Concerns that people around them would see their answers were not considered to affect accuracy at all by 81% of men. For the women, 66% considered that difficulty in remembering did not affect accuracy at all (3% thought this may have reduced accuracy considerably); 83% said insufficient time did not affect accuracy at all; 82% said concerns about confidentiality did not affect accuracy at all; 78% said concerns that people around them would see their answers did not affect accuracy at all; and 74% thought the particular wordings of the questions did not affect accuracy at all. These data provide a fairly general indication of how respondents perceived their participation in the research. However, the specific reasons why someone would have, for example, felt uncomfortable responding to the SES questions would be many and varied.

Discussion

In this study (see also Gavey, 1991) a sample of Auckland University undergraduate students was surveyed with regard to their experiences of sexual victimization (women) or of perpetrating sexual victimization (men). It should be emphasized that these women and men are not representative of the New Zealand population, particularly in terms of ethnicity/culture, geographical location, age and educational level. These results should be understood in the context of these limitations. Data obtained from the women indicated that a total of 52% had experienced some form of sexual aggression or victimization; that 11% had experienced attempted rape and another 14% had been raped at some time in their lives.

These prevalence data correspond closely with data obtained by Mary Koss and her colleagues using the same instrument with a North American national sample of university students (Koss et al., 1987).

The data reported in this article (and by Gavey, 1991) indicate that rape and other forms of sexual abuse of New Zealand women as adults are far more common than suggested by previous research on post-secondary school women (Mullen et al., 1988). These data do not rely on women perceiving themselves to have been rape or sexual abuse victims, but rather on their affirming questions about more specific behaviourally-defined events which are consistent with usual definitions of rape. Hence these data are less likely to exclude unacknowledged rape victims. Nevertheless, even when direct questions were asked following the SES, 7% of the women said they had been raped, and 20% said they had been sexually abused by a man. It is suggested that Mullen et al.'s (1988) data, which were obtained incidentally in the context of a large study on women's health, should not be regarded as serious estimates of sexual abuse prevalence in New Zealand, due to methodological shortfalls associated with under-disclosure of abuse.

Data obtained from the male respondents showed less similarity to the American data. In the present study 14% of men reported having perpetrated some form of sexual victimization, compared to 25% of men in Koss et al.'s (1987) sample. This lower percentage of men acknowledging the perpetration of any form of sexual victimization in a sample where a large number of their female peers report experiences of sexual victimization, is open to a number of interpretations, which have been discussed by Gavey (1991).

The SES is based on a dimensional rather than typological concept of sexual victimization. Thus, for example, while rape is an extreme act, it is regarded as being on a continuum with more normative coercive heterosexuality. However, despite representing an attempt to survey a range of forms and degrees of sexual aggression and victimization, the SES does have limitations. It does not register some of the presumably common forms of social and interpersonal heterosexual coercion — for example, when women "consent" to sexual activity because they believe

it's their duty, or they don't want to appear "uptight" or "frigid", and so on (see Finkelhor & Yllo, 1983; Gavey 1988, 1989, 1990). The SES also does not survey other forms of sexual victimization such as sexual harassment. Interestingly, feedback obtained from respondents on the questionnaire indicated that some had had experiences in mind which did not correspond to any of the specific questions asked. Additionally, it could be expected that many women would not conceptualize their experiences of more normative forms of coercion in the terms provided — for example, not only not as rape or sexual abuse, but also not in terms of having been forced or "against my will" (see Gavey, 1989). As well as this, women sometimes forget and/or minimize their experiences of sexual victimization, even quite serious incidents, over time (e.g., see Kelly 1988). Interestingly, about one third of the women in the current study thought that "difficulty in remembering" may have affected the accuracy of their answers to some extent.

One in four women in this unrepresentatively young sample had been subjected to rape or attempted rape. The striking similarity of these data to those obtained by Koss et al. (1987) suggests that similar proportions of women university students in New Zealand and the United States may experience rape and sexual victimization. This comparison is important given that it is unlikely that the resources will ever be made available for large-scale, in depth research which could adequately investigate rape and sexual abuse prevalence and incidence among a more representative community sample in New Zealand. When such purpose-designed and well-funded research has been conducted with a more widely representative sample in the United States, it has been possible to employ methods which minimize underdisclosure in this sensitive area (i.e., Russell, 1982, 1984). As a result, the prevalence rates of rape and attempted rape have been considerably higher (Russell, 1982, 1984) than those obtained with methods such as those used in this study with university students (e.g., Koss et al., 1987). It is not unreasonable to assume that the same pattern would be found in this country, leading me to suggest that the data described in this paper are likely to underestimate the extent of rape and sexual victimization within New Zealand.

Nearly two-thirds of all incidents of victimization reported by women in the current study occurred within apparently legitimate heterosexual relationships. When acquaintances, ex-husbands, ex-lovers and ex-boyfriends were included, these groups of men, all known to the women and all potentially appropriate heterosexual partners, accounted for over four-fifths of the reported incidents of abuse. Almost half of the women who had engaged in mutually consenting heterosexual intercourse in the past three years had experienced some form of abuse by either a "date", boyfriend, lover, husband or de facto partner. This compares with Muehlenhard and Linton's (1987) North American research which found that 78% of single women university students who engage in heterosexual dating had experienced sexual aggression within a dating situation. Over one third of all women in the present study who were married, separated, or in de facto relationships had experienced some form of sexual victimization by a man who was their husband or de facto partner at the time. This study, then, highlights the high proportion of all sexual victimization that is perpetrated within legitimate heterosexual relationships, including marriage.

There are at least two implications, of applied relevance, of the data from this study. Firstly, clinical psychologists need to recognize that it is common for women to have experienced rape and other forms of sexual victimization. As such experiences are most often perpetrated within heterosexual relationships, and are often not recognized by women as "rape" or "sexual abuse", they may sometimes be hidden sources of distress. Secondly, education and prevention programmes must be designed with an understanding that sexual victimization is most commonly perpetrated by men known to the women they abuse.

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