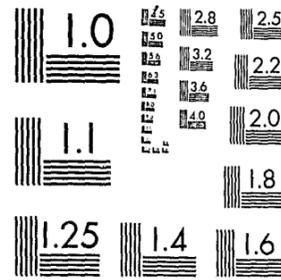


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What Newspapers Tell Us (And Don't Tell Us) About Rape

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ABSTRACT

What Newspapers Tell Us (And Don't Tell Us) About Rape

This paper examines the presentation of rape in eight metropolitan newspapers, focusing on the presence of stereotypes and risk cues in all articles about crime published within a six month period. When details about a rape were present, they reflected the rapes "founded" by police and therefore under-represented rapes which either are seldom reported to police or viewed suspiciously by police. For example, rapes by acquaintances or family members were not generally included in the media picture of rape. Further, the details about rape were found to be less frequent than details about either murder or robbery. Additionally, risk cues or comments which indicate high crime danger were more frequent in rape articles than in articles about other violent crimes. Implications for women's perceptions of rape and fear of rape were discussed.

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What Newspapers Tell Us (And Don't Tell Us) About Rape

Rape is a crime surrounded by myths and misperceptions. Police data,¹ interviews with rape victims,² and studies of rapists and rape victims³ indicate that many commonly held beliefs about the relationship between rapists and victim, attributes of the victim, and the situation surrounding rapes were erroneous.

Since many people don't know, or aren't aware they know, a rape victim, typical impressions of rape are formed through media presentations about the subject. Newspaper presentation of rape could therefore greatly affect the public's view of rape, fear of rape, and attitude toward both rapists and rape victims. This research examines newspapers in three major cities to assess whether the media portrayal of rape confirms, refutes, or is noncommittal in regard to myths and stereotypes about rape.

Through common misperceptions, people often consider the typical rape situation to be one in which a stranger accosts a young, attractive woman on the street late at night. By extension, this implies that rapes happen only to women who aren't being careful enough, who are "asking for it," and who entice men through their appearance or behavior. In reality, interviews⁴ and surveys⁵ indicate that the rapist is often someone known at least casually by the victim, that rapes occur at all hours and to women of all ages, and that a large percentage of rapes occur in the victim's home rather than on the street.

Beyond the implications of rape stereotypes for public matters, people's assessments of their own risk and consequently their fear of rape and the types of behavior they engage in to avoid rape are directly affected by rape stereotypes.

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Selected issues⁶ of the eight major metropolitan newspapers in San Francisco, Chicago, and Philadelphia were content analyzed and assessments were made for 82 variables for every crime article in every issue. The 82 variables included space devoted to article, accompanying headlines and graphics; factual content of the article (such as information about the victim, suspect, and crime); and general information about the newspaper issue (such as overall length, page size, and lead stories of the day). Rape articles analyzed included both specific incidents as well as more generalized articles (such as discussions of rape law or rape prevention). Also included were articles dealing with general crime prevention, of either an individual or a group nature. The data⁷ on these 82 variables for the crime stories in the Chicago Tribune, Sun Times, and Daily News, the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, Inquirer, and Daily News, and the San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle constitute the basis for the following analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As can be seen from Table 1, different sources of information about rape give vastly different pictures of the overall frequency and relative frequency of this crime. While the Uniform Crime Reports (1976) indicate only fifty-two rapes per 100,000 women per year, the LEAA victimization data⁸ show 315 rapes per 100,000 women. Several explanations exist for the discrepancy between these figures. First, the UCR are rates based only on rapes reported to the police, and rape is known to be one of the most underreported crimes.⁹ However, about 75% of the women interviewed in the victimization survey said that they had reported their rapes to the police,

indicating that the discrepancy cannot be explained solely in terms of under-reporting to authorities. Another potential explanation for this discrepancy is the telescoping¹⁰ or including in the time frame events which had actually preceded the time limits for the victimization survey. A third explanation for these differences is that rapes reported to police are subject to "unfounding" or being declared invalid by police. Estimates of the rate of unfounding for rape is 18% according to the Uniform Crime Reports (1976).

The media, though not giving actual rates for rape (except those quoted from other authorities) do not give an indication of the relative frequency of rape. While the ratio of rape to murder in the Uniform Crime Reports is 3:1, the ratio presented by the newspapers we examined was 1:11. Most murders are news; most rapes are not. This differential reporting of rapes (deciding some are newsworthy and others are not) exacerbates the possibility that the media will distort its presentation of rape in order to present rape accounts which will grab the reader's interest. This contention is supported by the ratio of attempted to completed rapes reported by the press. While the UCR ratio (taken from the same statistics which reporters can access in the police blotter) for completed to attempted rapes is 3 to 1, the media ratio is 13 to 1. Completed rapes are evidently more often judged to be newsworthy than rape attempts. The consequences of presenting such an inexorable view of the rape situation needs to be considered.

In comparing the facts about rape presented by the media with the facts of rape from victimization data, the overall picture is one of a surprising degree of agreement. (See Table 2.) But the areas of disagreement are precisely those we would expect given the media's reliance on

police blotters for their information. That is, the facts of rape which are distorted by the press are those which are highly correlated with either a) not reporting the rape to authorities, or b) having the rape declared "unfounded" by authorities. For example, the age distribution of the media reports is skewed toward the higher ages. While women aged 15 to 19 have a three times higher rate of rape than the average woman, their rapes are often either hidden by the family or declared unfounded. Similarly, the amount of rape by acquaintances or relatives is greatly under-represented by the media, again because family pressures and police unfounding practices often keep these rapes from official statistics. Further, whereas 50% of the rapes reported to the LEAA victimization survey were reported to have occurred between 6 p.m. and midnight, only 5% of the rapes reported in the newspapers were assigned to this time slot. Date rapes, acquaintance rapes, and rapes occurring in quasi-social settings are most likely to fall in this time frame and are also quite likely to be underreported or declared unfounded. Consequently, this whole category of rape is systematically excluded from the media picture of rape.

Table 3 presented another disturbing facet of the media depiction of rape. Not only are categories of rape systematically excluded by the media, but the rape stories which appear have many fewer details than do stories about murder or assault, the two crimes which bracket rape in terms of severity and fear generated. Readers are more often left uninformed about the race, age, occupation, condition of victim, use of weapons, and exact location of the crime for rape than for either murder or assaults. The reader is then left to extrapolate from the details which do appear (a sort of creative reading) or to rely on her/his own version of the "typical rape" to fill in missing details.

Next we examined the "risk cues" which newspaper articles give regarding crime. For example, rates, frequencies, and other statistics give readers information with which to assess their own risks of victimization. We found such statistics to be missing in almost all of the articles in our sample. Fewer statistical indications of crime danger appeared for rape stories than for stories about murder or assault. Information about crime trends also appears most often for rape stories, with over eight percent for murder, four percent for robbery, and two percent for crime in general. And what does such crime trend information tell us? Serious crime is increasing, especially rape.

When confronted with newspaper portrayals of rape containing few details, a reader may react in one of three ways. She may form her impression of rape based on the details which are present in the articles, if any. Alternatively, she may attend to the lack of details in most rape articles and be unable to establish social distance between herself and the victim. This inability to differentiate between herself and the victim could result in increased fear of rape and more restrictive self-protective behaviors, since being unable to establish any one place as particularly dangerous also establishes no one place as particularly safe.

A third way a woman could react to the lack of details in most rape stories is to maintain whatever stereotype of rape she had before reading the story. Since her original views of rape cannot be refuted by conflicting information if the articles present no real details about rape, a reader

can continue to operate on the basis of whatever stereotype she previously held.

If a woman reacts by adopting the view of rape presented by the few details available, she comes away with a somewhat biased view of rape. If she attends to the lack of details and concludes that no place is safe, she limits her life more than a more informed view of rape would dictate. If she perceives the lack of conflicting information as confirmation (or at least not disconfirmation) of her previously held stereotypes, she quite likely continues in her misperceptions of rape. Consequently, we must inform women about the true nature of rape, allowing them to assess their own risk and replace misperceptions of rape with more accurate information.

TABLE 1
Rape Statistics by Source

	UCR	Media	LEAA/Census
Rate	52/100,000 Women	_____	315/100,000 Women over 12
Ratio Completed: attempted	3:1	13:1	1:3
Ratio Rape: Murder	3:1	1:11	

TABLE II

Rape Facts By Source

WHO	Media	Victimization Survey (LEAA/Census) ¹	Social Worker Interview ²	Mail Questionnaire (College Population)
Race of Victim	black + white- equal frequency	white frequency- 1.8 x black frequency black rate - 1/3 higher than white rate		
Age of Victim	0-12 yr. - 5.3% 13-17 yr. - 12.0% 18-21 yr. - 8.0% 22-25 yr. - 5.0% 26-35 yr. - 9.0% 36-65 yr. - 8.0% 65 + - 1.6% No Mention- 50%	16-19 yr. - 3 x average rate	Adult - 56% Adolescent (13-17 yr.)	
Victim Occupation	1. Student 2. Professional 3. Skilled and non-skilled	1. Seeking employment 2. Student 3. Working 4. Housewife		
Victim Alone Prior to Attack	57% Alone	95% Alone		
Relationship of Victim & Suspect	Strangers - 17% Acquaintances - 10% Relatives - 2.1% Friends - 1.4% No Mention - 68%	Strangers - 17%	Adult Victim - Strangers - 80% Adolescent Victim - Casual acquaint- tance - 45% Friend - 20% Child Victim - Family or Family Friend - 60%	Slight Acquain- tance - 23% Close Acquain- tance - 23% Friend - 5% Boyfriend - 24% Ex-boyfriend - 5% Family Friend - 3% Relative - 5%

TABLE II

(Continued)

	Media	Victimization Survey ¹ (LEAA/Census)	Social Worker Interview ²	Mail Questionnaire (College Population)
Age of Suspect	13-21 yr. - 17% 22-25 yr. - 10% 26-35 yr. - 17% 36-65 yr. - 11% 66 + - 15% No Mention - 38%	Over 21 yr. - 70%		
<u>WHAT</u>				
Weapon	Weapon Used - 75% Knife - 14.7% Gun - 9.4% No Mention - 67.8%	Weapon Used - 33% No Weapon Used - 50% Unsure - 17% White Victim - Knife - 71% Gun - 33% Black Victim - Knife - 40% Gun - 60%	Weapon Used - 50% Gun - 50% Knife - 30% Other - 20%	
Victim Responses	Submission - 9.9% Resistance - 11.2% No Mention - 77%	Resisted (completed rape) - 50% (attempted rape) - 80%		
Hospitalization of Victim	Hospitalized - 5.5% Treated + released - 5.7% Minor injury - 11% No Mention - 66%	Medical Attention - 50% Overnight Hospitalization - 7%		

TABLE II
(continued)

	Media	Victimization Survey (LEAA/Census) ¹	Social Worker Interview ²	Mail Questionnaire (College Population)
<u>WHEN</u>				
Hour of Attack	Midnight - 6AM - 9%	Midnight - 6AM - 17%		
	6AM - Noon - 3%	6AM - 6PM - 33%		
	Noon - 6PM - 3%	6PM - Midnight - 50%		
	6PM - Midnight - 5%			
	No Mention - 77%			
<u>WHERE</u>				
Crime Site	Victim's Home - 25.5%	Victim's Home - 20%		Victim's Home - 15%
	Near Victim's Home - 4.0%	Near Victim's Home - 14%		
	Suspect's Home - 4.4%	Outdoors - 65%		
	Street - 6.0%			
	Car - 5.3%			
<u>REPORTED TO POLICE</u>				
		Blacks - Yes - 84%		
		Whites - Yes - 65%		

1. Hindelang, M.J. and Davis, B.J., 1977.
2. Peters, J.J., 1975.
3. Byers, E.S.; Eastman; A.M.; and Nilson, B.G., 1977.

TABLE III

Percent of Stories with Pertinent
Facts Omitted by Crime Type

Who	Murder % No Mention	Rape % No Mention	Assault % No Mention
Victim Name	20.6	80.7	36.8
Victim Address	77.4	92.6	89.3
Victim Age	48.8	49.9	33.9
Victim Race	77.4	92.2	82.6
Victim/Suspect Relationship	59.2	67.6	56.5
Victim Occupation	50.3	69.4	44.6
Condition of Victim	7.0	66.2	41.7
Status of Suspect	12.8	16.6	15.7
Suspect Name	33.4	40.9	33.4
Suspect Address	84.1	77.0	85.1
Suspect Age	43.0	37.5	52.5
Suspect Race	77.9	80.7	78.2
<u>What</u>			
Details of Crime	57.3	53.8	37.3
Weapons	35.9	67.8	44.3
<u>When</u>			
Time	78.2	77.0	77.9
<u>Where</u>			
Crime Neighborhood	14.5	19.1	17.6
Site of Crime	30.5	34.7	23.6
Distance of Crime from Victim's Home	66.8	65.5	80.8
<u>Why</u>			
Why this Victim?	44.5	60.2	37.3

TABLE IV

Percent of Danger Cues
By Crime Type

	Murder	Rape	Assault
<u>Court Evaluation</u>			
No Mention	96.3	90.3	96.6
Doing Good Job	.8	.9	1.2
Doing Bad Job	1.9	7.1	1.8
Mixed Evaluation	.9	1.4	.4
<u>Crime Danger</u>			
Serious Crime Up	1.8	5.1	1.9
Serious Crime Down	.3	.2	.4
Crime Stable	.2	.2	.3
All Crime Up	—	.2	.1
No Mention	97.3	93.6	96.3
<u>Crime Rate</u>			
High	1.4	2.5	2.1
Medium	.1	.5	.3
Low	.3	.7	.1
No Mention	97.8	96.3	97.2

FOOTNOTES

1. Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States. Issued by Clarence Kelley, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1976.
2. Russell, D. The Politics of Rape. Stein and Day, New York. 1975.
3. Kruelewitz, J. and J. Nash. Attributions about rape victim resistance. Paper presented at the 1977 meetings of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco.
4. Russell, D. The Politics of Rape. Stein and Day, New York. 1975
5. L.E.A.A. Victimization Studies.
6. Every issue of each of the eight papers published between November 1, 1977 and April 30, 1978, a time period which coincides with telephone and in-person interviews reported elsewhere.
7. Of approximately 11,000 stories about violent crimes which appeared in the specified newspapers, about 3,000 were about crimes occurring outside the boundaries of the United States. The analyses reported here are based on the remaining 8,015 stories.
8. Hindelang, M.J. and B.J. Davis. "Forcible Rape in the United States: A Statistical Profile." In Forcible Rape: The Crime, The Victim and the Offender. Chappell, D.; Geis, R.; and Geise, G. (eds.) Columbia University Press: New York, 1977.
9. Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States. Issued by Clarence Kelley, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1976.
10. Biderman, Albert D. Notes on Immunization Effects of Exposure to "Risk in Victimization" Surveys. Bureau of Social Science Research, Washington, D.C.: 1975.

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