

The American Way: Cultural Influences on Sexual Assault Reporting

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Abstract

Rape and sexual assault are seriously underreported crimes in America. Research has suggested that while 1 out of 6 American women has been raped, only around 19 percent of victims reported the rape to law enforcement. What factors contribute to this gap between assaults and reports? After reviewing crime statistics, data from polls and surveys, journal articles, academic texts, and testimony from experts, I assert that American culture plays an important role in both the act of sexual assault and the reporting thereof. Through my research I hope to provide an understanding of key social influences on sexual assault and ways in which these influences can impact one's likelihood of reporting sexual assault.

The perpetuation of traditional gender roles fosters values conducive to gender inequality and sexual assault, particularly in certain subcultures. The process of socialization imparts values that can hinder or skew a full understanding of what constitutes sexual assault. Rape myths and the Just World Theory precipitate a social climate in which victims of sexual assault are blamed for their attack, a belief often shared by the victim and by society at large. The criminal justice system often fails to achieve justice for victims of sexual assault, whether through the handling of those who do report or the sentencing of their attackers. Considering the available data, my research suggests that society itself greatly impacts both the prevalence of rape and the likelihood of reporting. I propose that three important factors—a poor societal understanding of rape, the perception of blame in rape cases, and a general lack of faith in the criminal justice system—culminate in a high prevalence of rape and a low rate of rape reporting.