



Original article

## Precollege Sexual Violence Perpetration and Associated Risk and Protective Factors Among Male College Freshmen in Georgia



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Sexual violence (SV) perpetration on college campuses is a serious and prevalent public health issue in the U.S. In response, incoming male freshmen are mandated to receive SV prevention programming. To provide a more effective response, however, we need to understand the SV behaviors of male freshmen *before* they arrive on campus and the associated factors that contribute to risk and that afford protection, areas that have received limited attention.

**Methods:** Male freshmen (N = 1,133) across 30 selected 4-year colleges and universities throughout the state of Georgia were recruited for a longitudinal study on SV perpetration. Levels of precollege SV as well as a range of covariates were assessed at baseline. Self-reported SV perpetrators were compared with nonperpetrators on demographic and hypothesized covariates deemed either risk or protective; then risk and protective models were analyzed using binary logistic regression.

**Results:** Weighted analyses revealed that 19.3% self-reported perpetrating SV before college. Before starting college, young men who reported more sexual media consumption, heavy episodic drinking, hypermasculine beliefs, and peers who endorsed SV were more likely to have a history of SV perpetration at college matriculation. Alternatively, men with more knowledge of effective sexual consent and stronger family functioning were less likely to arrive to college with an SV perpetration history.

**Conclusions:** A significant proportion of incoming male freshmen have perpetrated SV previously. Colleges and universities need to assess incoming freshmen for risk behaviors and negative beliefs and to offer both primary and secondary preventions to more effectively reduce further perpetration.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

A substantial subgroup of incoming male freshmen perpetrate precollege sexual violence (SV) and may require more tailored prevention efforts to address SV perpetration during college and the associated factors that may increase risk or afford protection. These results should be used to inform guidelines for adolescent health-care providers, as well as college policies that could result in more effective primary and secondary SV prevention efforts.

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Sexual violence (SV) encompasses a range of nonconsensual sexual activity, from unwanted sexual contact and verbally coerced sex to attempted rape and rape facilitated by threats, physical force, or incapacitation because of alcohol or drugs [1–3]. SV against college women is a serious and complex public health problem where 6%–18% of college women report severe forms of SV (i.e., forced penetration) each year [4–6]. SV rates are

typically higher during the freshman and sophomore years [7], and women state that, in most cases, they knew their attacker [7]. Prevalence estimates of college men's SV perpetration mirror women's victimization rates and range from 10% to 30% by the end of college [1,8–12].

There have been important updates in the U.S. to federal policy to address SV on college campuses, such as the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act. The Campus SaVE Act was passed in 2013 and mandated colleges and universities that participate in federal student aid programs to provide campus-wide primary prevention programming for SV [13]. However, these policies do not take into consideration that many college freshmen already may have engaged in SV before matriculation. For these policies and programming to be effective, more tailored prevention efforts, which incorporate assessments of incoming freshmen's precollege SV experiences along with associated risk and protective behaviors and attitudes, are needed.

Several studies have documented the rate of SV perpetration among college male freshmen *before* beginning college [1,8–10,14–17]. Zinzow and Thompson, for instance, reported that, of those male students who had committed sexual assault during college, 33% of the single offenders and 55% of the repeat offenders had committed an assault before college [10]. By expanding this analysis prospectively, Thompson et al. found that 9% of the full sample of male college students committed precollege SV and subsequently maintained persistently high levels of SV throughout their college years, whereas 12% of the full sample committed precollege SV but showed decreasing patterns of SV [14]. In addition, Swartout et al. [18] found similar trajectories, beginning before and extending through college. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that some of these precollege perpetrators, once they enroll, will continue their trajectory and contribute to the high rates of SV victimization documented. Clearly, effective primary (i.e., before it starts) and secondary (i.e., recently begun) prevention programs are needed to more effectively reduce the rates of victimization and to break the perpetration pattern that may begin in high school [19].

Although these studies have been extremely informative in documenting precollege SV rates, most drew their samples from one university and none assessed a range of *modifiable* behavioral and attitudinal factors that may be categorized as either risk or protective, and that specifically relate to precollege SV perpetration among incoming freshmen. Protective factors, in particular, have not been examined to the same degree as risk factors; thus, the knowledge base in this area is extremely limited and hinders the development of resiliency approaches [20]. To be effective, prevention programming, both primary and secondary, should target both risk factors for engaging in SV, which are modifiable and empirically or theoretically derived, such as alcohol and drug use [11,21,22], pornography use [23,24], hypermasculinity [15,22,25,26], rape myth acceptance [20,27], and peer norms supportive of SV [11,20,28], and protective factors, such as knowledge of effective consent for sex [12,20,29], negative outcome expectancies for perpetrating rape [12], and family factors [20]. We address some of these limitations in the literature with a sample of male freshmen recruited from 30 U.S. colleges and universities located throughout the state of Georgia; we then assessed their self-reported SV perpetration *before* matriculation, as well as a range of dynamic empirically and theoretically derived factors deemed to either increase risk for or protect against precollege perpetration [20].

## Methods

### *Participants and procedures*

We enrolled three cohorts of male college freshmen who were matriculating at 1 of 30 selected 4-year colleges or universities in the state of Georgia. Recruitment for the prospective study occurred during fall 2013, spring 2014, and fall 2014 semesters. Students were recruited using multiple strategies to increase the likelihood of reaching as many members of the targeted population of male freshmen at each of the 30 colleges: Facebook advertisements, campus tabling events, classroom announcements, e-mail blasts to freshmen professors asking them to announce the study, and peer referrals. Students were directed to a Web site that provided information about the study (e.g., "We are interested in finding about your experiences and opinions related to being a new freshman") and instructions. Interested students completed a brief screening survey, and eligible students (i.e., male, 18–24 years, newly enrolled freshmen at 1 of the 30 universities) were provided with informed consent materials. Students who agreed to participate were asked to provide their institutional e-mail address. Confirmation e-mails were sent, and students who confirmed their institutional e-mail were enrolled in the study and were sent a link to the survey questionnaire. Participants were compensated \$25 for completing the Wave 1 baseline survey and could earn up to \$150 total across assessments. The results presented here are based on baseline survey data. The institutional review board at Georgia State University approved the study protocols.

### *Measures*

*SV perpetration* was measured using the revised version of the Sexual Experiences Survey for perpetration (SES-R-P) [30], which assesses 7 different SV acts paired with 5 different SV tactics, for a total of 35 items. A sample act measured by this survey is "I had oral sex with someone or had someone perform oral sex on me without their consent by:" and a sample tactic is "Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening"; this sample pairing constitutes rape. Men reported the number of times they engaged in each behavior during the time period between their 14th birthday and starting college. Responses were coded binary (yes/no) to represent that they either did or did not perpetrate precollege SV. Responses were summed across the 35 items and then dichotomized into "no SV" or "one or more acts of SV."

*Sociodemographic characteristics.* Age, race/ethnicity, high school grade point average (GPA), previous religious service attendance, whether they participated in collegiate varsity athletics, and whether they were in a fraternity were assessed.

### *Covariates that contribute to risk*

*Heavy episodic drinking* was assessed using the National Institute on Drug Abuse Modified Alcohol, Smoking, and Substance Involvement Screening Test (NMASSIST) [31]. The participants were asked, "thinking back over the last thirty days before you began college, how many times, if any, have you had five or more

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