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1-1-2011

### Sexual Assault in New Hampshire: A Report from the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

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#### Recommended Citation

Laflamme D, Mattern G, Moynihan MM, and Potter SJ. (Collaborators are listed alphabetically). (2011). Sexual Assault in New Hampshire: A Report from the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. Report released January, 2011.

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# Sexual Assault in New Hampshire

A report from the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence

Sexual assault is a crime that is difficult to discuss. The common public misconceptions about sexual assault contribute to the shame and stigma that victims experience, leading to low reporting rates, low prosecution rates, and few jury convictions of perpetrators. Most people would rather not think or talk about sexual assault, helping to hide the realities of sexual violence by believing that these crimes only happen to people who have somehow contributed to their own assaults. The silence about sexual assault also contributes to the belief that sexual assault rarely happens, reinforcing the lack of public recognition of the problem.

The New Hampshire Violence Against Women and Men Surveys, conducted over the last four years, help to provide a realistic assessment of the lifetime experience and characteristics of sexual assault among residents of our state. The full results from both Surveys have previously been published. This report focuses only on sexual assault,

in order to further explore the findings, and draw more attention to the prevalence and consequences of this crime. At a time when more victims than ever are seeking services for sexual assault, it is crucial that citizens across the state understand how they can contribute to communities that provide justice and support for victims, and accountability for perpetrators.

A significant finding of both Surveys is that although adults were surveyed, the majority of assaults reported happened to young women, girls and boys. The high prevalence of sexual assault in New Hampshire has serious consequences that affect the health and well-being of communities. Both New Hampshire Surveys and other research show that victims of sexual violence more often report poorer health, are at significantly increased risk for mental health and substance abuse problems, and are negatively affected economically.

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## The Surveys

A collaborative project of the University of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Division of Public Health Services, and the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (NHCADSV), the Violence Against Women and Violence Against Men Surveys found rates of sexual assault that were higher than those in a national survey. The New Hampshire surveys were conducted in 2006 and 2007 using questions and methods from the National Violence Against Women Survey, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Justice in 1996. Interviews were conducted with 508 adult women and 1,012 adult men in New Hampshire.

It is important to note that figures reported in the Surveys are conservative, since survey respondents were asked only about the most recent assaults. The number of total assaults, and the proportion of assaults committed against children, could be greater than those reported. If a victim was assaulted at age 24, any previous assaults of the same type at a younger age would not be included in this report.

**Nearly one in four women and one in twenty men in New Hampshire have been sexually assaulted.**

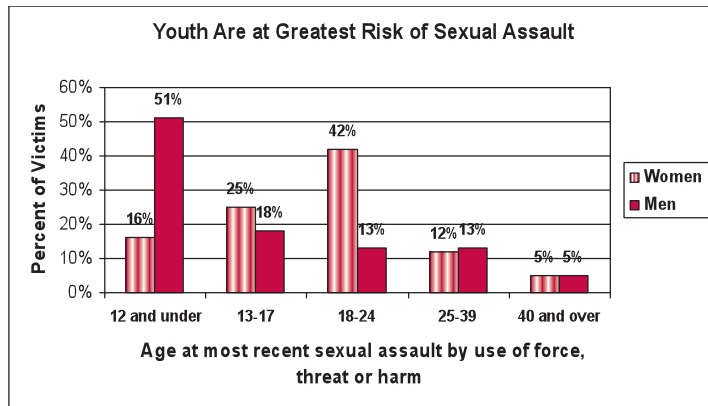
**The number of women and men combined who have been the victim of a sexual assault could fill Fenway Park almost three and a half times.**

The New Hampshire Violence Against Women Survey found that 22.7% of women have been the victim of a sexual assault, with 19.5% having been the victim of sexual assault with penetration. These figures represent 112,909 New Hampshire women who have ever experienced sexual assault. These rates of sexual assault are significantly higher than those found in the National Violence Against Women Survey, in which 17.6% of women reported having been sexually assaulted, and 14.8% reported being a victim of sexual assault including penetration.

The New Hampshire Violence Against Men Survey found that 4.9% of men have been sexually assaulted, including 3.7% who reported a sexual assault that included penetration. These figures represent 24,200 New Hampshire men. These sexual assault rates are higher than those found in the National Violence Against Women Survey (which also surveyed men), in which 3% of men reported having been sexually assaulted and 2.1% reported being penetrated.

**Sexual assault impacts men and women of all age groups, but young women and children of both genders are at greatest risk for sexual violence. The 62,990 individuals, who were sexually assaulted before the age of 18, would fill 875 school buses that would cover 6.6 miles if parked bumper to bumper.**

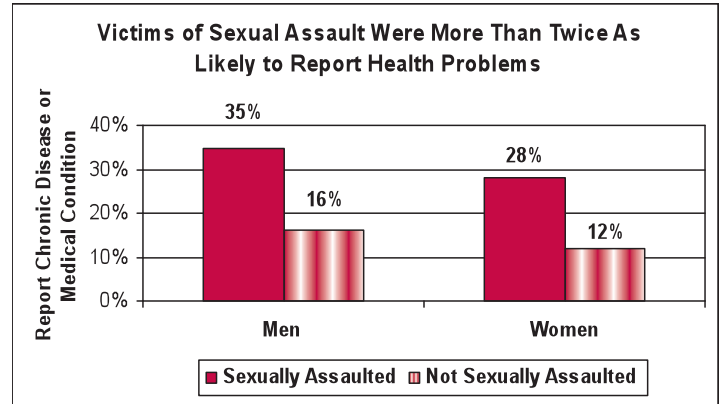
Sexual violence is a crime in which youth are particularly at risk. Forty-one percent of the most recent sexual assaults of females reported in the New Hampshire survey occurred before the victim's 18th birthday, and 83% occurred before the age of 25. Sixty-nine percent of the most recent sexual assaults committed against males in New Hampshire occurred before the victim was 18. Fifty-one percent of men who reported having been sexually assaulted said it occurred when they were age 12 or younger; another 18% said they were assaulted between ages 13 and 17.



Again, these figures are conservative, as only the most recent assaults that men and women experienced were reported. This underscores the finding that although these Surveys were conducted with men and women throughout the age spectrum, the majority of victims of sexual assault in New Hampshire were children or young adults when they were assaulted.

**Sexual violence is a health problem for men and women in New Hampshire**

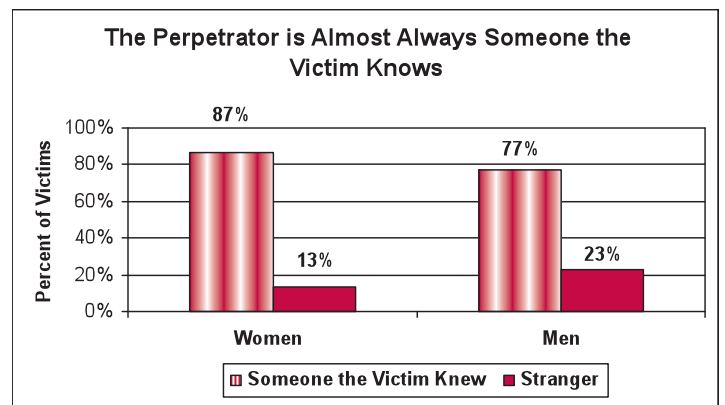
Consistent with other research, men and women reporting sexual assault also reported poorer physical health. In the New Hampshire Surveys, women and men who reported having a chronic disease or medical condition were more than twice as likely to report sexual violence compared to those who did not report having a chronic disease or medical condition.



Numerous other studies have found links between sexual assault and long-term health effects. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study has shown that adverse childhood experiences, including physical and sexual abuse, increase the victim's risk for physical and mental health difficulties and substance abuse problems. The ACE Study findings suggest that childhood abuse is a major risk factor for poor quality of life and the leading causes of illness and death in the United States.

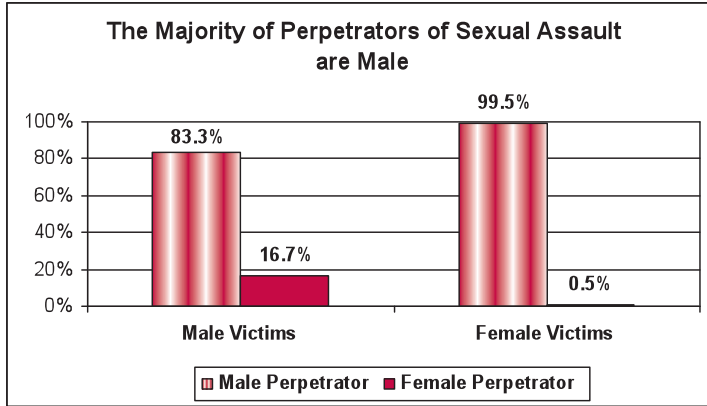
**The perpetrator is almost always someone the victim knows**

Consistent with previous research, the data show clearly that for the majority of victims of sexual violence, the perpetrator of the most recent assault they experienced is someone whom they know. In New Hampshire, as elsewhere in the United States, a victim of sexual assault is most likely to be harmed by someone in her or his own circle of friends and family.



## The Majority of Perpetrators of Sexual Assault are Male

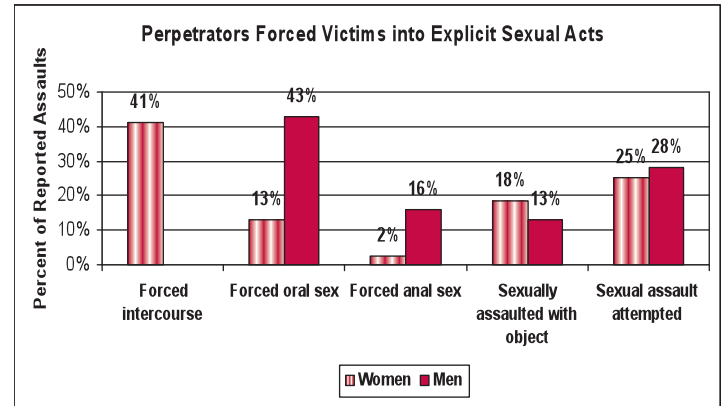
Men committed the majority of sexual assaults reported in both Surveys. It is important to note that although the majority of perpetrators are male, the vast majority of men have never committed a sexual assault. Based on the sample of incidents reported by the women in this survey, 100% of victims of sexual assault reported having at least one perpetrator who was male. Only one participant indicated that she had been the victim of a female perpetrator. The survey of men found that 16.7% of perpetrators were female, and 83.3% were male.



## Sexual Assault Includes a Variety of Forced Sexual Acts

The sexual assaults reported by male and female survey respondents showed that victims were forced to engage

in explicit sexual acts, including forced intercourse, oral and anal sex, and being sexually assaulted with an object. About a quarter of all victims were victims of attempted sexual assault.



## There is Not Universal Awareness of Services for Victims of Sexual Assault

The NH Violence Against Men Survey found that only half of survey respondents knew how to contact their local crisis center for help regarding sexual assault or intimate partner violence. While it is encouraging that half of men know where to turn for help, or where to refer female victims, it is important that everyone know about local services for victims. The NH Violence Against Women Survey found that 72% of survey respondents knew how to contact their local crisis center for help. While this is a more encouraging result, it also shows that 28% of women did not know about local services.

## Findings and Recommendations

FINDING	RECOMMENDATION
Nearly one in four women and one in twenty men in New Hampshire have been sexually assaulted.	Transform community understanding of the realities of sexual assault and promote primary prevention programs.
Young women and children of both genders are at greatest risk for sexual assault.	Promote primary prevention programs with a focus on children and youth.
Sexual violence is a health problem in New Hampshire.	Expand funding for victim services in New Hampshire.
The perpetrator is almost always someone the victim knows.	Transform community understanding of the realities of sexual assault and promote primary prevention programs.
The majority of perpetrators of sexual assault are male.	Engage men in anti-sexual violence efforts.
Sexual assault includes a variety of forced sexual acts.	Transform community understanding of the realities of sexual assault and promote primary prevention programs.
There is not universal awareness of services for victims of sexual assault.	Support outreach and awareness activities.

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## **Transform Community Understanding of the Realities of Sexual Assault:**

The data from the Violence Against Women and Men Surveys provide important insights into the realities of sexual assault. Knowing that one in four women have been sexually assaulted, most commonly by someone they know, and most likely when they are young, makes it difficult to maintain the attitude that victims are somehow responsible for their own assaults, that sexual assault involves strangers who are motivated by irresistible sexual urges, or that sexual assault rarely happens. The fact that sexual assault of males happens almost exclusively to children again challenges the myth that victims are responsible for assaults.

Perpetrators get away with their crimes so often partly because of the reluctance of victims to report sexual assault due to the shame, stigma and victim-blaming that is still common in our society. When individuals hold fast to the myths of sexual assault, there is an unwitting collusion with offenders, allowing them to continue assaulting children and young women without fearing that their crimes will be reported and prosecuted. Compounding this problem is the fact that children who are sexually assaulted often do not understand that the assaults are wrong, due to the grooming of victims and the violations of trust that perpetrators employ in order to have access to their victims.

One of the most effective prevention measures possible would be to create community understanding and support for all victims so they can report the crime of sexual assault the first time an offender commits a crime. For children, this means providing developmentally appropriate education about sexual abuse and ensuring children who are victims have safe adults to tell. This would prevent perpetrators from continuing to assault others, which research has shown to be common, and would also help victims understand they are not to blame for the assaults, and help them to heal effectively from the trauma they have experienced.

## **Promote Primary Prevention Programs with a Focus on Children and Youth:**

Sexual violence prevention, especially targeting youth, is a priority for the NHCADSV and its member programs, yet there is extremely limited financial support for these efforts. The member programs of NHCADSV are engaged in a process to develop evidence-based, primary prevention programs for sexual assault through our Prevention Education Committee. Prevention Innovations at the University of New Hampshire has developed a Bystander Education program and multimedia campaign that has been shown to increase positive, active bystander behaviors to prevent

sexual violence on campus. NHCADSV has collaborated with the New Hampshire Division of Public Health to develop a Sexual Violence Primary Prevention Plan that calls on all levels of the community to engage in addressing the realities of sexual assault in our state. All of these efforts are critical, and need ongoing support from government, private funders and communities to achieve the goal of preventing sexual violence before it can begin.

**Engage men in anti-sexual violence efforts:** Although men are the primary perpetrators of sexual assault, the vast majority of men have never committed a sexual assault. The majority of men who are not perpetrators have a crucial role to play in speaking out against sexual violence. By stepping in before sexual violence occurs, while it is occurring or supporting victims after it has happened, challenging commonly held misperceptions of sexual assault, nonviolent men stand as strong role models who respect women and children's sexual boundaries and promote the social transformation that is necessary to end sexual violence.

**Support Outreach and Awareness Activities:** In order to be assisted by the NHCADSV's 14 member programs, victims need to know about services and the importance of trauma-informed care. It remains vital that outreach and awareness programs be continued so that victims know where to turn for help to address the trauma of sexual assault that may result in negative health consequences. Several years ago, NHCADSV was awarded funding by the NH Department of Justice to produce a public awareness campaign with the simple message that anyone can be a victim of sexual assault, and that help is available through the NHCADSV member programs. The funding enabled NHCADSV to buy significant air time for television and radio spots, providing more exposure than ever to public messages about sexual assault. During the two years following this awareness campaign, the numbers of victims contacting member programs for assistance increased significantly. Ongoing funding to support continued outreach and awareness efforts, across a broad range of media, would help ensure that public attitudes about sexual assault begin to shift, and that victims would know where to turn for support.

**Expand Funding for Victim Services in NH:** The New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is a comprehensive network of 14 member programs that provide services to victims of sexual and domestic violence. Free, confidential services for victims include 24 hours a day, seven days a week hotlines, emergency shelter, crisis intervention, assistance with

obtaining restraining orders, accompaniment for rape victims during forensic sexual assault exams, individual counseling and support groups. Recent federal and private funding cuts have threatened the stability of many of these programs at a time when they are serving more victims who have more and more complex needs. Additionally, given the findings in both the NH Violence Surveys that most victims are assaulted in their youth, support for programs that address victimization of children is needed to prevent the health, mental health and substance abuse problems that arise from trauma experienced during youth.

## **Conclusion**

We cannot afford to ignore the high rates of sexual violence in our state. We need to strengthen our resolve to directly confront sexual assault, and to support efforts to create communities, societal systems and institutions that support victims and hold abusers accountable for the harm they cause. Fortunately, New Hampshire has a comprehensive network of local programs to provide direct services to victims, and has a strong history of collaborative efforts directed at improving societal and systemic responses to victims.

The alarming number of women and men in New Hampshire who have experienced sexual assault, primarily as children and youth, underscores the need for effective primary prevention programs, for information and support for victims, and to raise awareness of the prevalence, realities and consequences of sexual assault.

While many of the recommendations presented above would require additional funding, an acknowledged difficulty, the most important recommendation costs nothing. If each member of our communities understood the realities of sexual assault, spoke out to support victims, and held perpetrators accountable, we could create a safer, healthier and more just state.

## **Survey Design and Description**

The NH Violence Against Women and Men Surveys were random digit dial surveys of adult females and males in the state of New Hampshire. Interviews were conducted with 508 adult females and 1,012 adult males in New Hampshire. The demographics of the survey participants were compared to the 2005 NH Census Data and are comparable to the larger population with a few exceptions. Men and women ages 18-24 were underrepresented as were men and women with annual household incomes less than \$25,000. Research in the field finds that younger and poorer women and men are at higher risk for sexual violence which supports the conclusion that the survey data provide a conservative estimate of the prevalence of sexual violence in NH.

When considering the findings, it is important to note that the Surveys measured lifetime prevalence of assaults, and did not determine where the assaults occurred. Survey respondents were asked if they had ever been victims of specific behaviors that constitute sexual violence, and if they answered yes, were then asked about the most recent assault. While New Hampshire has a higher percentage of women and men currently living in the state who have been a victim of sexual assault than the national survey found, it can not be concluded that the assaults occurred in New Hampshire. However, we have found no evidence that victims are more likely to relocate to New Hampshire. The rate of assault could also be higher than the numbers indicated, as victims who were assaulted more than once only reported on the most recent assault. A limitation of the survey is that men were not asked about forced intercourse, as there is a presumption that the prevalence rates are very low. Future surveys would provide an opportunity to include that question.

The interviews were conducted by professional interviewers between October 26 and November 20, 2006 (females) and October 26 and November 20, 2007 (males). The studies were funded by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a grant from the University of New Hampshire Outreach Scholars Program and the NH Division of Public Health Services. Further information regarding the research design can be obtained by contacting NHCADSV.

**Research Team (listed alphabetically):** For further information about or copies of the NH Violence Against Women and Men Surveys, or this report, contact NHCADSV at 224-8893.

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## **NHCADSV Crisis Centers and Contact Information:**

**Response to Sexual and Domestic Violence**  
(Berlin, Colebrook, Lancaster)  
\*office number (603) 752-5679

**Turning Points Network**  
(Claremont, Newport)  
\*office number (603) 543-0155

**Rape and Domestic Violence Crisis Center**  
(Concord)  
\*office number (603) 225-7376

**Starting Point**  
(Conway, Ossipee)  
\*office number (603) 356-7993

**Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program**  
(SHARPP)  
(UNH, Durham)  
\*office number (603) 862-3494

**Monadnock Center for Violence Prevention**  
(Keene, Jaffrey, Peterborough)  
\*office number (603) 352-3782

**New Beginnings**  
(Laconia and all of Belknap County)  
\*office number (603) 528-6511

**WISE** (Lebanon)  
\*office number (603) 448-5922

**The Support Center at Burch House**  
(Littleton, Woodsville)  
\*office number (603) 444-0624

**YWCA Crisis Service**  
(Manchester, Derry)  
\*office number (603) 625-5785

**Bridges: Domestic and Sexual Violence Support**  
(Nashua, Milford)  
\*office number (603) 889-0858

**Voices Against Violence**  
(Plymouth)  
\*office number (603) 536-5999

**A Safe Place**  
(Portsmouth, Rochester, Salem)  
\*office number (603) 436-4619

**Sexual Assault Support Services**  
(Portsmouth, Rochester)  
\*office number (603) 436-4107

### **Statewide Hotlines:**

**Sexual Assault: 1-800-277-5570**

**Domestic Violence: 1-866-644-3574**