

Critique of Lisak & Miller, 2002 as basis for policy and practice

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Many people believe that college men who commit rape are predominately serial rapists. Where referenced, this claim is attributed to a single study: Lisak and Miller (2002). The serial rape assumption is evidenced by:

- Police officers and judges seeking a suspect with multiple victims and doubting victim claims when multiple victims are not identified.
- Lack of attention to offenders who do not fit the serial rapist profile because of the belief that they are rare.

One study should not bear the weight of authority to inform policy and advocacy. No study is perfect; all have strengths and weaknesses and knowledge becomes more sophisticated over time. The Lisak and Miller (2002) methods and data interpretation raise concerns about scientific merit that question its sufficiency as a basis for policy, including:

Concern about dissemination to the public

- The Lisak and Miller study has received massive media attention, but the results have been misinterpreted. Serial rape on campus was not actually examined in the study. The terms serial predators and serial rape were not used (see methodological concerns outline below).
- In dissemination of the results to professional groups and the public however, the terms have been used consistently (see <http://www.middlebury.edu/media/view/240951/original/> ; <http://www.davidlisak.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/SARUnderstandingPredatoryNatureSexualViolence.pdf>).
- The serial perpetration hypothesis has raised awareness about the seriousness of undetected or non-adjudicated rapists; however, more recent research undermines the serial perpetration hypothesis.
- Believing that only a few men who rape serially are responsible for sexual violence makes the problem seem easily managed and promises significant rape reduction .

Concern about generalizability of findings

- Data were collected from a single campus more than 10 years ago.
- The site was an urban commuter university where more than 20% of the students were over age 30 (range 18 to 71 years).

Concern about sampling

- To provide reliable estimates, surveys must obtain representative samples of the population of interest. Instead, Lisak and Miller obtained a convenience rather than a representative sample. They report that tables were set up on campus and men who walked by were offered three or four dollars to participate in a study of “childhood experiences and adult functioning” (Lizak & Miller, 2002, p. 76). Representativeness was not evaluated because men who completed the survey were not compared to the university’s student demographics.
- The number who refused is unknown so there is no way to calculate a refusal rate.
- Data were not weighted as is done in polling; thus, the responses of a few cannot be taken to represent the opinions of many. Nor were margins of error provided for the rates of occurrence projected by the authors.

Concern about design

- The authors used a cross-sectional design, which means that participants were asked to retrospectively recall experiences that may have occurred a decade or more ago.
- The preferred design involves multiple assessments of the same men during college enrollment so perpetration patterns during college can be examined over time.

Concern about measurement

- The authors included four questions to assess attempted and completed rape. These items are similar, but not identical to those used in past research. For example, three questions ask about ever perpetrating an unwanted sex act on “an adult” and one question asks about “on someone.” Because adult victims were specifically referenced, the word “someone” may have drawn responses that included acts perpetrated on non-adults.

- Participants were asked to recall all acts they had perpetrated “ever.” The proportion of these events that occurred in high school is unknown. All of these acts might have been committed prior to attending college.

Concern about over-estimating number of serial rapists based on assessment of number of acts committed

- Following standard procedures used by most researchers in this field, participants were asked to report on each sexual act separately. This means that if someone (for example) had oral sex and vaginal sex with the same person one evening by using or threatening to use physical force, this would be counted as 2 acts although both occurred during a single incident with the same victim. Conflation of the number of rape acts with the number of rape incidents may lead to overestimating the number of separate incidents, a problem endemic of the field as a whole.

Recent Evidence that Undermines the Serial Rape Belief: Moving beyond Lisak and Miller (2002)

Swartout, et al (forthcoming, July in *JAMA-Pediatrics*). A Trajectory Analysis of the Campus Serial Rapist Assumption

This study describes findings from two large college samples that provide empirical support for the argument that most men who commit rape in college do not do so over multiple years.

Suggested citation:

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