

RAPE
Forced sexual contact common among teens, study suggests

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Maggie Fox , NBC News

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From a hastily forced kiss to outright rape, violent or at least coerced sexual contact may be worryingly common among teens and young adults, researchers reported Monday.

They found 9 percent of youths aged 14 to 21 admitted to some kind of forced sexual contact, using tactics from guilt to threats and actual physical force. Half blamed their victims.

Four percent of the more than 1,000 young men and women surveyed admitted to having raped someone else, the researchers report in the American Medical Association journal JAMA Pediatrics.

But most who tried or completed rape said they didn't use physical force - 63 percent of those who said they had forced someone to have sex against their will said they used guilt as their main tactic, while 32 percent said they used arguments and other verbal pressure.

And the problem behavior tends to really begin at around age 16, said Michele Ybarra of the Center for Innovative Public Health Research in San Clemente, California and Kimberly Mitchell of the University of New Hampshire.

Ybarra says the study doesn't paint the whole picture and she says the findings should encourage other researchers to dig a little deeper into questions about sexual behavior in the teen years, and whether it's possible to predict and even prevent sexual violence.

What is clear is that many teens are not getting the message that 'no' means no, she said.

"What we wanted to find was the intent to get somebody to do something sexually when they knew the person did not want to do it," Ybarra said in a telephone interview.

It's hard to know just how common the problem really is, or how representative the teens and young adults in the survey are of the whole population. They'd all been taking part in a broader survey of teen use of violent media that started in 2006, when most were about 12, Ybarra and Mitchell say.

"We know that adolescence is an important time when these types of behavior emerge," Ybarra said.

The questions are very detailed and do not include words such as

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“rape”. The teens were asked questions such as “In the last 12 months, how often have you kissed, touched, or done anything sexual with another person when that person did not want you to?”

The teens were allowed to answer the questions online so they could do so in privacy – the hope being that they would answer more honestly than if they feared they were being monitored. Harris interactive helped conduct the poll; the study was paid for by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Parents had to give their permission for the teens to take part, so that limited how many responded, Ybarra notes. Nonetheless, the results were startling.

“Nine percent of youths reported some type of sexual violence perpetration in their lifetime: 8 percent kissed, touched, or made someone else do something sexual when the youth knew the other person did not want to (ie, forced sexual contact); 3 percent got someone to give into sex when he or she knew the other person did not want to have sex; 3 percent attempted but were not able to force someone to have sex (ie, attempted rape); and 2 percent forced someone to have sex with him or her (ie, completed rape).”

Youths who reported seeing more violent sex online, in magazines, on television or at the movies were more likely to commit violent sexual acts. “It’s a marker for concern,” Ybarra said.

Other studies have shown that between 64 percent and 96 percent of rapes in the United States never get reported to authorities, and that between 6 percent and 15 percent of men of mostly college age admit to having committed acts that meet the legal definition of rape.

Ybarra said the findings show a lot more effort is needed to prevent sexual assaults. “We, as a society, need to take more responsibility to identify perpetrators and implement programs in schools,” she said. Parents need to teach kids about healthy sex, young people need to speak up when friends describe either being victims or perpetrators of forced sex and schools need more programs to help teach youngsters about acceptable behavior, she says.

Scott Berkowitz, CEO of the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), says rapists tend to start their violent behavior in their teens. “Because so few cases are ever reported to police and successfully prosecuted, they tend to keep going,” Berkowitz said in a telephone interview.

And teens are by far the most vulnerable age group to being attacks. “Nearly half of all victims in the country are under 18 when they are victimized, so this is quite common among youth,” Berkowitz said,

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