

Research brief: Attitudes about sports culture, sexual violence, and leadership roles among college student-athletes

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During the 2001-2002 academic year, the Department of Sexual Assault Services and Crime Victim Assistance at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, sponsored a comprehensive study to gather data about student-athlete culture, attitudes about violence against women, and social change and leadership. The overall purpose of this study was to explore the culture of college athletics to better understand the ways in which it may or may not be rape supportive. This study also attempted to uncover ways in which members of the student-athlete community can and already do influence the culture in ways that are likely to decrease sexual assault.

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, this study gathered data from male and female student-athletes through three main methods. First, 205 sophomore and junior student-athletes completed a quantitative survey measuring attitudes about violence against women and social change. Next, focus groups were held with nine men's and women's athletic teams and finally, 22 men and women athletes participated in individual interviews. The focus groups and individual interviews explored perceptions of what constitutes violence against women; definitions of masculinity in sport and their relationship to violence against women; situations in which violence against women is either tolerated or rejected; and possible avenues for creating social change.

Results from this study included support for the notion that certain rape-prone contexts exist within the student-athlete culture in this sample, and that these are sanctioned in subtle yet powerful ways. The aspects of male student-athlete culture found to be rape supportive in this sample include the fostering of a sense of privilege and entitlement for male athletes; the sanctioning of violence and aggression within the context of sport with possible "spillover" effects; the use of derogatory language to describe women in team settings; and the belief that there are certain circumstances where sexual violence is "unintentional" or the victim's fault.

This study also found that there are student-athletes who currently work for social change on issues of violence against women and also that there exists the potential to do more. Unique resources exist within the student-athlete culture in this sample that can be utilized to create social change on issues of sexual violence, including tight-knit team communities and a position of status and respect by others on campus. There is also potential for team captains and coaches to use their powerful role to influence team members to act in ways that respect women and to take a public stand on issues of violence against women.

It is intended that this research provides a rich description of student-athletes' definitions and perceptions of the occurrence of sexual assault and violence against women in their team communities and that this information can be used to design

effective prevention programming. While the results are not generalizable beyond this sample, they may offer members of college athletic communities a foundation for better understanding the contributing factors to the occurrence of violence against women in their team and student-athlete community, the specific contexts in which there are particular problems and the situations where there is resistance to attitudes that support violence and efforts for change.

Using the results of this study to inform our programming efforts, SAS/CVA offers a variety of educational programs geared specifically for student-athlete communities. **SCREAM Athletes** is a peer education theater program in which students use improvisational theater to engage other students in addressing interpersonal violence in many forms, including sexual assault. This program is designed and performed by student-athletes and addresses the unique aspects of student-athlete culture.

The department also created a video/DVD entitled, “**The Locker Room and Beyond: Student-Athlete Leaders Challenging Sexual Violence**” that comes with a curriculum and can be used by student-athlete audiences to explore the issue of sexual violence, student-athlete culture, and social change. The curriculum includes instructions on facilitating the program, and staff from SAS/CVA is also available to come to other institutions to facilitate the program. For more information on our educational programs, please contact SAS/CVA at (732) 932-1181 or by emailing the director, Ruth Anne Koenick, at koenick@rci.rutgers.edu.

The complete Executive Summary for this study is available by clicking [here](#). For more information about the study or permission to use results, contact Sarah McMahon at smcmahon@rci.rutgers.edu.