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A longitudinal perspective on risk factors for sexual assault perpetration

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A five year longitudinal study examined risks factors for sexual assault and other forms of interpersonal violence among college students. The purpose was to provide longitudinal analyses of the central risk factors associated with sexual and nonsexual interpersonal aggression. Three incoming freshmen classes of men were administered a survey of a range of social experiences (N=831). They were re-surveyed at the end of each year of college for the next four years. Of the total number of incoming men, 65% completed the first survey. Yearly retention averaged 71%. The extent of re-offending across time was examined. Men who had engaged in adolescent sexual assault were 4 times more likely to sexually assault during the first year of college than men without a prior self-reported history of sexually assault. For men who self-reported sexually aggressive behaviors between 14-18 years old, 43.2% reported similar behaviors during the first year of college. The comparable figure for men with no prior history was 13.2%. Further analyses revealed that although the number of men who committed sexual aggression declined across time the risk of re-offending increased across time, resulting in a small group of men with an extensive offense history by the end of fours years of college. Additional analyses indicated that the best predictors of sexual aggression in college included prior dual aggression (sexual and non-sexual relationship aggression), alcohol and marijuana use, delinquent behaviors, peer support, number of sexual partners, and childhood experiences with family violence. However, the unique contributions of each of these predictors changed across time. For example, the impact of childhood abuse, as well as delinquency, declined, but the impact of sexual promiscuity increased across the five waves of data collection. The results suggest a developmental model of sexual aggression. Most offenders desisted across time, but a subset of offenders persisted.

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