

# False accusations of sexual assault: Prevalence, misperceptions, and implications for prevention work with men and boys

Charlie Huntington<sup>a</sup>, Alan D. Berkowitz<sup>b</sup>, and Lindsay M. Orchowski<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Denver, Denver, CO, United States, <sup>b</sup>Independent Researcher and Consultant, Mount Shasta, CA, United States, <sup>c</sup>Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Providence, RI, United States

With the rise of social media and the #MeToo movement, individuals are now coming forward to disclose personal experiences of sexual assault perhaps more than ever before (Modrek & Chakalov, 2019). As a result, accusations of sexual assault are especially present in the public conscience. Boys and men express increasing concern over their ability to interact with girls and women without crossing a boundary and perpetrating harassment or assault. Importantly, however, boys and men experience this concern in the context of widespread misinformation and overestimations about the prevalence and nature of false accusations of sexual violence, which likely contributes to their worry about being accused of sexual assault. As a result, it is likely that providing correct information about sexual violence and correcting misperceptions of the prevalence of false accusations can increase boys' and men's sympathy and support for victims of sexual violence, increase their interest in prevention efforts, and reduce their likelihood of retaliation against individuals who report. Accordingly, this chapter reviews the empirical literature on false accusations, describes the impact of overestimation of the prevalence of false accusations, and offers recommendations for successful incorporation of false accusations into prevention curricula and discussion of the topic with boys and men.

## Reporting sexual victimization

Decades of research indicate that among violent crimes, sexual victimization is one of the most underreported (Allen, 2007; Koss, 1992; Mengeling, Booth, Torner, & Sadler, 2014; Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). Most sexual assaults and rapes go unreported, with only 38% of the women who experienced an assault nationwide reporting it to the police over a 1-year period (Catalano, 2006). Research conducted over 20 years ago among college women—who are at increased risk for victimization relative to other demographics (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Humphrey & White, 2000)—found

that only 17% of individuals experiencing sexual assaults and 22% experiencing rape reported the experience to an on-campus authority (e.g., campus security; Sloan, Fisher, & Cullen, 1997), and only 5%–13% of college women who experience rape or attempted rape report it to the police (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003; Koss, 1988).

More recent data suggest that reporting rates remain low. Most survivors of sexual assault disclose what happened to a close friend or loved one (Dworkin, Pittenger, & Allen, 2016; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014), although rates may be slightly lower among undergraduate women (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). However, rates of reporting to authorities are much lower (Edwards, Dardis, & Gidycz, 2012; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). In a nationally representative sample, only 14% of women report rape experiences to law enforcement (Paul, Zinzow, McCauley, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 2014), and recent studies suggest that fewer than 10% of victims seek any kind of formal help (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Krebs et al., 2016). College women, the demographic most at risk of sexual assault, are less likely than same-aged nonstudents to report their assault to police (Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

Despite the well-established finding that sexual assaults are underreported, many members of the public and many law enforcement personnel endorse beliefs that individuals who report sexual violence do so for personal gain or to inflict harm on the alleged perpetrator (Jordan, 2004; Venema, 2014). For example, interviews with 40 police officers involved in a rape case in the previous year revealed that they believed anywhere from 5% to 90% of assaults were a false allegation, with an average rate of perceived false reports of 53% across the sample (McMillan, 2018). A second study with police officers found that they believed 16% and 25% of rape reports were false (Ask, 2010), and a third, with Los Angeles Police Department sex crimes detectives, found that 73% of them expressed the belief that teenagers lie about sexual assault (O'Neal & Hayes, 2020). Similarly, 43% of prosecutors sample from a Midwestern state demonstrated moderate to high levels of rape myth acceptance (Gyls & McNamara, 1996). Additional research with detectives specializing in sexual assault cases also suggests that even when detectives acknowledge rape myths as false, their behaviors toward victims in investigations does not align with this knowledge (Schwartz, 2010).

These views are pervasive outside the criminal justice professions as well. A recent survey of active U.S. military personnel found that 49% of respondents thought that women lie about rape to get back at their dates (Berry-Caban et al., 2020), a belief echoed by 22% of college men (Edwards, Gidycz, & Desai, 2012), 19% of college women (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007), and 50% of community men and women (Burt, 1980). More recently, 33% of Australian men endorsed the belief that “many allegations of sexual assault made by women are false” (Webster et al., 2018), while 31% of US adults agreed that false claims of sexual harassment and assault made by women are a “major problem” (Pew Research Center, 2018). These perceptions are broadly incongruent with the prevalence of false reports demonstrated in research that rigorously examines police records for evidence of baseless reports and intentional falsification (e.g., De Zutter, Horselenberg, & van Koppen, 2017), suggesting that members of the public, as well as individuals involved in the legal procedures surrounding sexual assault, consistently overestimate actual false reporting rates, with significant deleterious consequences.

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### **Defining a false report, unfounded report, unsubstantiated report, and baseless report**

The discrepancy between public perceptions of the prevalence of false reports and actual rates of false reporting is attributable in part to variation in the operationalization of false reporting across

the literature. Whereas reports of sexual assault are variously labeled as “unfounded,” “baseless,” or “unsubstantiated” within the legal system when there is insufficient evidence to conclusively prove an attempted or completed assault took place, a report that is verifiable as false is held to the stringent definition of instances when, following reporting of a crime to law enforcement, subsequent investigation factually proves that the experience was fabricated and that it never occurred. A report failing to cross the legal threshold for a sexual assault crime, but without disproving evidence, is still presumed truthful. In other words, a false report constitutes an intentionally fabricated experience, while “unfounded,” “baseless,” or “unsubstantiated” reports must be assumed to be neither proven nor disproven, and therefore potentially accurate. This distinction is often lost when claims are described as “baseless” or “unfounded,” with the public assuming that claims of rape are fabricated, potentially leading in turn to an overestimation of the frequency of false reports. Not even scholars are above participating in this conflation (for a review, see [Lisak, Gardinier, Nicksa, & Cote, 2010](#)).

Additionally, despite advances in forensic science, several factors impede evidence collection in sexual violence cases ([Johnson, Peterson, Sommers, & Baskin, 2012](#)). For example, among 2887 cases of rape reported to the police between 2008 and 2010, 7.3% were declared “unfounded,” indicating insufficient evidence to label what happened a crime ([Morabito, Williams, & Pattavina, 2019](#)). This difficulty may increase when the victim was not physically injured in the assault, was using alcohol at the time, or was assaulted by a stranger ([Sommers et al., 2006](#); [Spohn & Tellis, 2012](#); [Sugar, Fine, & Eckert, 2004](#)). The relative severity of the experience reported to police also appears implicated in the likelihood that they will deem a report of rape “unfounded” ([Spohn, White, & Tellis, 2014](#)). Issues relating to classification and the investigative process itself may therefore lead to inflations in the numbers of reports that are either perceived to be false accusations. Whereas it is also possible that “unfounded” or “unsubstantiated” claims of sexual violence could be false accusations, rather than truthful claims with insufficient evidence, this would be less likely, given the courage it takes for a victim to report and the numerous barriers involved in doing so. Ignorance of the impediments to collecting evidence to substantiate that a sexual assault occurred may be one reason why individuals believe that false reports are more common than they actually are.

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## Study methodology

Further complicating the picture, research reports and syntheses of the literature that attempt to determine the rate of confirmed false reports of sexual assault demonstrate differences in methodology (see [Lisak, 2007](#)), which can in turn produce different outcomes. Reliance only on medical examinations ([McCahill, Meyer, & Fischman, 1979](#)) versus multiple data sources (i.e., police reports, medical examinations, and witness reports; [Kelly, Lovett, & Regan, 2005](#); [Spohn et al., 2014](#)) may skew interpretations. Additionally, recantation of a complaint is sometimes counted as constituting a false report (e.g., [Kanin, 1994](#)), despite research indicating many reasons that a victim may decide to recant for multiple reasons related to difficulties of the process, aside from that of actual fabrication ([Bonomi, Gangamma, Locke, Katafiasz, & Martin, 2011](#)).

Early studies chose to operationalize false reporting by reference to police classifications of cases. As more than half of cases brought to the police are ultimately deemed to have insufficient evidence for prosecution ([Gregory & Lees, 1996](#)), researchers have noted the potential for substantial bias in categorizing some of these cases as false ([Koppelaar, Lange, & Van De Velde, 1997](#)). Indeed, studies from the United Kingdom found that between 8.2% and 10.9% of cases were classified as false reports

(Grace, Lloyd, & Smith, 1992; Harris & Grace, 1999; Kelly et al., 2005); however, when researchers distinguish between “unfounded” reports and those featuring an actual recantation of the allegations, these numbers drop significantly (Kelly, 2010; Kelly et al., 2005). Studies that do not suffer from these methodological flaws often report significantly lower rates (e.g., Heenan & Murray, 2006). Across North America in particular, use of more rigorous standards (e.g., intentional fabrication) has led researchers to find false accusations rates between 3% and 6.8% (Clark & Lewis, 1977; de Zutter et al., 2017; Lisak et al., 2010; Lonsway & Archambault, 2008; McCahill et al., 1979; Spohn et al., 2014). Similarly, when syntheses of the literature include a diversity of study methodologies, a wide range of prevalence rates results (Rumney, 2006), but in studies where researchers reviewed records themselves to evaluate their status prevalence rates ranged from 2.1% to 10.3% (Ferguson & Malouff, 2016).

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### Overestimation of false reports by law enforcement and the public

As the scientific literature consistently indicates that false accusations constitute a very small proportion of all sexual assault allegations, why does the perception that reports are often fabricated persist? As previously discussed, early studies of prevalence rates which found very high rates of false reports suffer from a variety of methodological issues. The work of Kanin (1994), Maclean (1979), and Stewart (1981) yielded false reporting rates of 41%, 49%, and 90%, respectively, and these results were widely disseminated. Other researchers have provided thorough critiques of these studies (Ferguson & Malouff, 2016; Lisak et al., 2010; Rumney, 2006). Kanin (1994) did not give a definition of a false report, relied on police subjectivity, and provided little detail regarding methodology for assessing police department classifications. Maclean (1979) allowed for classification of an allegation as false if the victim did not appear, injured, upset, or “disheveled.” Stewart’s (1981) methodology was unclear and sample size was extremely limited ( $n = 10$ ). Despite these shortcomings, it has been suggested that these studies resulted in deeply rooted doubts among members of law enforcement relating to the truthfulness of sexual violence reports (Rumney, 2006).

Public perception of false accusations of rate may also be influenced by the disproportionate attention given in the media to accusations eventually found to be false. High-profile cases, such as the accusations made and later withdrawn against lacrosse players at an elite private university in 2006, may add apparent legitimacy to the myth that false reports are common (Taylor & Johnson, 2007), even though withdrawal of an accusation, as noted before, does not indicate that it is false. Such cases may even influence decision-making among public defenders, reducing the visibility of rape cases that are in fact founded (McCannon & Wilson, 2019). Furthermore, proven cases of sexual assault have not typically received the same amount of media attention (Belknap, 2010), making false accusations all the more memorable.

Cases against celebrities may also be wrongly assumed to be a false accusation when the charges are dropped, with little attention paid to the possibility that intensive media coverage and related pressure made continuing to press charges untenable for the victim. For example, the dropped charges against basketball superstar Kobe Bryant after he allegedly assaulted a 19-year-old woman in 2003 may have led some individuals to believe that the allegations were unfounded, rather than an allegation that was dropped as a result of public scrutiny and backlash. Studies of the press coverage surrounding this case showed that 10% of headlines featured a rape myth, as did the text of 42% of the articles (Franiuk, Seefeldt, & Cepress, 2008; Franiuk, Seefeldt, & Vandello, 2008). Furthermore, when exposed

to headlines and articles featuring rape myths, college students were more likely to endorse the beliefs that Bryant was innocent and that his alleged victim was lying (Franiuk, Seefeldt, & Cepress, 2008; Franiuk, Seefeldt, & Vandello, 2008). These rape myths, in combination with the public humiliation and death threats the alleged victim experienced after her identity was revealed, likely motivated the alleged victim to stop pursuing the case. As a result, the public was left with the possible interpretation—rooted in rape myths—that she had been lying all along.

Cognitive biases may also limit our capacity to perceive the truth of sexual assault allegations. Cognitive dissonance may arise when individuals are informed that someone they feel positively toward has committed a sexual assault. To preserve this favorable perception and avoid the possibility that they have erred in their judgment, people may discount the allegation. In this regard, confirmation bias may influence their reactions, with individuals seeking out information that supports their prior interpretation of a given individual and ignoring or downplaying information that contradicts it (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1976; Nickerson, 1998). Feeling positively toward the alleged perpetrator, in combination with believing in rape myths, may also predispose individuals to dismiss rape allegations.

Finally, the belief that bad things happen to bad people, while good things happen to good people, may lead individuals to victim blame (Stromwall, Landstrom, & Alfredsson, 2014; Whatley & Riggio, 1993). When individuals are exposed to information that contradicts this “Just World Hypothesis” (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966), they may resolve the cognitive dissonance of having to acknowledge that bad things can happen to good people—meaning they themselves are potentially at risk—by discounting the credibility of the victim. In addition, perpetrators often target vulnerable individuals, giving them better chances of controlling the narrative around the assault, which can amplify their apparent credibility and cast further doubt on the victim’s account.

The perceived credibility of a case may also hinge on its ability to meet the standards of “real rape” (Estrich, 1987). This stereotype, defined by Susan Estrich (1987), suggests that rape involves the following characteristics: a stranger perpetrating penile-vaginal penetration, in an isolated location, using force or the threat of injury from a weapon, with the victim resisting, sustaining injury, appearing visibly upset by the attack, and immediately reporting it to the police. Research suggests that a profile of “real victims” exists as well, with more credibility assigned to victims who are younger, Caucasian, single, employed, free of mental health concerns, have not previously been victimized, were not drinking prior to the assault, and express emotion when discussing the assault (Du Mont, Miller, & Myhr, 2003).

Most assaults and victims do not conform to these stereotypes. Perpetrators are typically known to the victims (i.e., as acquaintances or dates; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) and assaults in the context of established intimate relationships, characterized by prior sexual activity, are common (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999). Many assaults do not feature the use of a force or a weapon, but rather coercion or exploitation of a partner’s incapacitation due to alcohol (Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996). Assaults may not result in visible injuries (Tark & Kleck, 2014), as individuals often demonstrate a “freeze” response to sexual trauma and do not respond with substantial physical resistance (Marx, Forsyth, Gallup, Fusé, & Lexington, 2008). Finally, victims may dissociate and present as numb when interacting with police officers, but distressed victims are perceived as more credible by criminal justice professionals and the public alike (Nitschke, McKimmie, & Vanman, 2019).

As the characteristics of “real rape” are frequently absent from sexual assaults, this may result in victims not being believed (Venema, 2014). Rape victims report experiencing more perceptions that

their experience was not rape if they engaged in what are perceived as risky behaviors (e.g., kissing the perpetrator at a bar, getting in the perpetrator's car; Stewart, Dobbin, & Gatowski, 1996). Absence of outward physical harm is associated with more doubt about an allegation (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988; Krahe, Temkin, Bieneck, & Berger, 2008; Layman, Gidycz, & Lynn, 1996), which may explain why acquaintance rapes are discredited (Burkhart & Fromuth, 1996; Frazier & Seales, 1997). Police officers also endorse rape myths (Parratt & Pina, 2017; Venema, 2014), and when individuals are asked to engage in mock juror exercises, their endorsement of rape myths is negatively associated with their likelihood of believing rape scenarios (McKimmie, Masser, & Bongiorno, 2014).

The same rape myths that impede recognition by others can also reduce a victims' ability to recognize their own experiences as rape, increasing the time between the assault and their reporting of it to authorities and thereby driving skepticism of their account (Capers, 2012). If the assailant was known to the victim (Koss, 1985; Layman et al., 1996), did not use force (Artime, McCallum, & Peterson, 2014), or had a prior sexual history with the victim (Koss, 1985; Shotland & Goodstein, 1992); or if the victim did not physically resist (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007), strongly endorses rape myths (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004), or self-blames for the experience (Frazier & Seales, 1997; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011), they will be less likely to identify the experience as rape (Bondurant, 2001; Orchowski et al., 2013). Accordingly, victims often delay reporting for at least a year (Ullman & Filipas, 2001), sometimes out of fear that they will be blamed for their experience (Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992; Sudderth, 1998), and sometimes because they engaged in psychological protective behaviors such as dissociation during the event and repression of the memory afterward (Courtois, 1988).

Finally, Lonsway (2010) describes a pathway along which sexual assault investigations may unfold that illustrates how cognitive biases may derail the investigative process, potentially causing cases to close and contributing to the perception that a victim has recanted. In the "cycle of suspicion," police officers (or university administrators) may utilize investigative tactics that stem from a predisposition not to believe victims; then, as this distrust is consciously or unconsciously communicated, the victim may disengage from the process or become defensive or resistant, apparently validating the suspicions of the investigator (Latts & Geiselman, 1991; Lonsway, 2010). As this process becomes more aversive to the victim, they may recant their accusations, reinforcing the perception that many victims fabricate reports.

Overestimation of the prevalence of false accusations is thus shaped by cognitive biases within the media, police officers, and victims themselves. Multiple factors intersect to create an environment that treats only certain experiences as sexual assaults and that undermines a victim throughout the aftermath of an assault. Next, we describe the consequences of this widespread overestimation of the rates of false accusations.

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## Consequences of overestimating false allegations

Overestimation of the rate of false accusations may breed a culture of suspicion toward victims of sexual assault, especially among law enforcement (Kelly et al., 2005). Victims who believe that law enforcement personnel will doubt their accounts may refrain from filing reports (Felson & Pare, 2005). If victims experience hostility or suspicion from the justice system, they may disengage or recant their allegations to spare themselves a pointless and even retraumatizing judicial process. Either way, the likelihood that perpetrators are brought to justice decreases, potentially allowing perpetrators to continue aggressing.

Misconception on the part of police may bias their investigative work and eventual prosecution of the cases (Lonsway, Archambault, & Lisak, 2009), in turn influencing how the public perceives the veracity of accusations. Family and friends may react with disbelief, suspicion, or blaming language when victims disclose their experiences (Ullman, 2010). Negative responses to disclosure may engender secondary victimization in victims, an unfortunately common and harmful experience (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012, 2015). Retaliation against victims is even possible by friends of the accused and is often fueled by the incorrect belief that an accusation is false.

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## When reports are false

False reports occur rarely enough that research into their natures is limited; however, several characteristics appear to be helpful in differentiating false from genuine reports (Hunt & Bull, 2012). The majority of false reports in a study of 357 cases in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were filed by alleged victims who suffered from delusions (Sheridan & Blaauw, 2004). Similarly, false reports may occur in the context of a diagnosis of factitious disorder or Munchausen's syndrome, in which individuals repeatedly report that highly dramatic and fantastical events well beyond ordinary experience have happened to them (Brown & Schefflin, 1999; Hazelwood & Burgess, 2016). In this case, such individuals have likely reported other severe crimes against them that have turned out to be false. Personal problems and the need for sympathy, attention, or other emotional gain are also known to motivate false reporting (de Zutter, Horselenberg, & van Koppen, 2018; McNamara, McDonald, & Lawrence, 2012). More broadly, seeking an alibi is a relatively common reason for false reports of crimes (McNamara et al., 2012), including sexual assault victimization (de Zutter et al., 2018; O'Neal, Spohn, Tellis, & White, 2014). Taken together, however, the majority of false reports appear to be filed by people experiencing substantial psychological and emotional challenges for whom accusing another person satisfies a personal motive (Lonsway, Archambault, & Berkowitz, 2018). It is thus possible that some men may find themselves embroiled in such a situation because they did not carefully assess the psychological stability of their potential sexual partner. An additional complicating factor is that whereas this psychological profile applies specifically to some people making false reports, it may be generalized to all reporters of sexual assault by law enforcement personnel and the general public. False reports may also come from third parties; for example, 46% of the 121 cases from a sample in Great Britain in 2013 that were determined to be false had been reported by someone other than the purported victim (Avalos, 2018).

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## Negative consequences of overestimations of false reports for prevention work with men and boys

In their recent review of interventions targeting prevention of sexual, dating, and intimate partner violence, Graham et al. (2019) identified seven distinct programs for men and boys with peer-reviewed evaluations. Among these, only two feature substantial in-person group discussions of sexual consent and attitudes regarding rape (i.e., Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011; Lobo, 2004) and only one has explicitly stated that it covers the topic of false accusations (Gidycz et al., 2011). As the possible differential influences of specific topics and activities within curricula on attitudinal and behavioral

outcomes have not been explored, it is difficult to say how often false accusations are discussed by prevention educators, nor what effects such discussion may have on boys' and men's attitudes and behaviors. However, a review of existing programs suggests that they are rarely discussed (Wright, Zounlome, & Whiston, 2020).

Failing to address this topic is a significant oversight, as overestimating the prevalence of false accusations may lead to a "false fear of being falsely accused" among men (Berkowitz, 2001, 2002). Particularly in the wake of the #MeToo revelations, men express concern that they will be falsely accused of sexual assault, anticipating severe consequences for their own lives (Hirsch, Khan, Wamboldt, & Mellins, 2019; Ipsos, 2018). Focus groups and interviews with college men suggest such fears stem in part from gender norms that expect them to initiate sexual encounters and obtain consent, even though alcohol consumption frequently precedes sex and verbal communication of consent is rare (Hirsch et al., 2019). Similarly, over half of men express the belief that it is now harder for men to know how to interact with women in the workplace (Pew Research Center, 2018), and female academics have responded to their male colleagues' fear of mentoring women with an editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (Soklaridis et al., 2018).

Quantitative and qualitative findings thus demonstrate that men are invested in avoiding nonconsensual encounters (or less charitably, in avoiding blame for such encounters). How then can educators and healthcare providers leverage this concern to engage men in prevention efforts? The following sections describe ways to address men's and boys' overestimation of false accusations for their participation in prevention work.

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## Recommendations for facilitators

The integrated model of sexual assault (Berkowitz, 2003) proposes that the conditions in which a man will perpetrate or justify a sexual assault depend on his attitudes, beliefs, socialization, and peer group relationships. These four categories represent possible treatment targets and entry points into discussion of sexual assault risk with men. Men's inaccurate ideas about the rates of false accusations are one such belief related to their propensity to justify sexual assault. Without addressing this misperception, men may take victims and sexual aggression in general less seriously, reducing their capacity to avoid perpetrating sexual aggression or to intervene as an active bystander. However, with open-ended, Socratic questioning, exercises in perspective-taking, presentation of relevant research (including norms for participants in a workshop), and questioning of social norms, boys and men should be able to understand where their misunderstanding of false accusations came from and the importance of taking accusations of rape seriously. When facilitators in workshops for men ask the audience if they know a victim, and if they believe the accusation, invariably the outcome is that many know a victim and that most believe the report. Revealing this information about peers can have a powerful impact (Orchowski et al., 2011).

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## Addressing the real rapist stereotype

Just as stereotypes exist for "real rape" and "real victims," the image of a "real rapist" persists (Cameron & Frazer, 1987). The stereotype of a "real rapist" likely sows doubt toward rape allegations in which the perpetrator does not fit the profile. For example, stereotypes about the typical rapist include that he carries

a knife, wears a mask, and attacks strangers in dark places—characteristics that do not correspond to the perpetrator of a sexual assault. Stereotypes of rapists as deviant, “crazy,” and often ethnic or sexual minorities are perpetuated in popular media and legal discourse (Holmes & Deckard, 2019; Orenstein, 1998; Wells & Motley, 2001). Furthermore, particularly among college men—often the audience for prevention programming—the characteristics of a “typical rapist” are in contradistinction to those of the modal college male (Lisak, 2004). Since most college men are white and middle class, and since most college men do not aggress against others in this way, they can easily categorize themselves and their demographically similar peers as “good guys” who do not fit the expected stereotype of the “real rapist.” The stereotype of the “real rapist” may therefore make it difficult for men to perceive that most rapists are psychologically “normal” (Baker, 1997), that all men exhibit behaviors on a continuum from aberrant to normal (Kelly, 1988), and that perpetrators can and do share their sociodemographic characteristics. Thus, when presented with the information that an individual who does not meet the stereotype of the “real rapist” has been charged with sexual assault, men may assume that the allegation is false.

Viewed through this lens, rape cases become less of a question of what happened and more a question of what potential damage might befall an alleged perpetrator if he has been falsely accused (Boyle, 2019). Philosophy professor Kate Manne (2018) introduced the idea of “himpathy” in response to the supportive public and media response that powerful men accused of sexual assault receive, defining it as “the inappropriate and disproportionate sympathy powerful men often enjoy in cases of sexual assault, homicide and other misogynistic behaviour” (Manne, 2018, np). “Himpathy” centers the accused man, focusing the discourse on the possible consequences of the allegations for him, and not his alleged victim (Sela-Shayovitz, 2015). In addition, many, if not most, rape allegations that receive media coverage focus on successful men, casting the alleged victim as an antagonist and likely activating this “himpathic” response, while also downplaying or omitting the experiences of the victim that may serve to validate the report. Perceiving this pattern, though confronting for many men, can help them understand why victims are often disbelieved or negatively received.

However, many men resist the insinuation that they or others like them could perpetrate sexual assault. Indeed, studies have shown negative reactions among college men to being characterized as possible perpetrators, describing themselves and their peers as “good” people and showing a bias toward disbelieving accusations made against their friends and teammates (Arbeit, 2017; McMahon & Lawrence Farmer, 2009). The bias that “good guys don’t rape” appears to be highest in men whose identities afford them social capital, such as fraternity men (Martinez, Wiersma-Mosley, Jozkowski, & Becnel, 2018). In other words, the men who endorse more traditional gender roles and higher rape myth acceptance (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013), and who are at greater risk for perpetration (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007), are perhaps those least likely to be willing to consider the possibility that they or their peers would assault someone. Indeed, there is evidence of a boomerang effect for some men, wherein exposure to sexual assault prevention programming results in more negative reactions for a small minority toward victims and the idea of intervening. Both college men high in sexism, but also those at low risk for perpetration, can react adversely to the suggestion that they could be involved in sexual violence (Bosson, Parrott, Swan, Kuchynka, & Schramm, 2015; Spikes & Sternadori, 2018). Despite this possibility, sexual assault prevention programs for men routinely engage their audiences in critical reflection (Foubert & Newberry, 2006; Gidycz et al., 2011). To reduce the likelihood of such a reaction, facilitators might highlight the complex nature of sexual consent and the risks of sexual behavior under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and the possibility that a man can think he has consent when he does not, which will lead him to feel falsely accused later on.

Faced with this potentially hostile reaction to their teachings, facilitators of sexual assault prevention curricula may feel intimidated. It is difficult to make men understand that peers and public figures they admire can be guilty of sexual assault. Assuring men that their experiences and concerns are valid, while also increasing empathy for victims and understanding of their experience of reporting, can help diminish reactance and increase the likelihood men will respond positively to the facts about false accusations.

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## Creating a hospitable environment for discussing the fear of false accusation

Facilitators can validate men's fears of crossing boundaries and their frustration with the cultural expectation that they are responsible for initiating sexual contact and getting consent. Creating an opportunity for men to express these negative reactions and have them be received nonjudgmentally may build trust in the facilitator, increasing their subsequent receptivity to discussing false accusations (Gidycz et al., 2011; Orchowski et al., 2018). Curricula that are interactive, discussion based, and nonblaming program seem more conducive to attitude change (Earle, 1996; Lonsway, 1996). All-male groups work better (Brecklin & Forde, 2001; Newlands & O'Donohue, 2016), creating opportunity for more open dialog, less defensiveness, greater diversity of opinion, and more willingness to challenge each other (Berkowitz, 1994).

One example of the efficacy of this approach comes from a qualitative study of men who were actively engaged in antirape advocacy on their college campuses. These men had generally been approached by other men in a nonconfrontational, alliance-building manner, sharing stories that felt relevant, with subsequent increases in empathy toward survivors and motivation to engage in prevention work (Piccigallo, Lilley, & Miller, 2015). A nonconfrontational facilitation style may also protect somewhat against psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966) on the part of the men most at risk of sexually aggressing, who are likely to respond with hostility to antiviolence messages that threaten their sexual expectations and sense of entitlement (Malamuth, Huppini, & Linz, 2018). Giving men experiences of open-ended, accepting spaces for discussion is likely to decrease their resistance to having their misperceptions about false accusations corrected (Oesterle, Orchowski, Borsari, Berkowitz, & Barnett, 2017).

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## Focus on the victim

Building empathy is a common target for bystander training programs (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Foubert & Newberry, 2006; Palm Reed, Hines, Armstrong, & Cameron, 2015). While men's empathy for sexual assault victims is related to their likelihood of intervening as a bystander (Kotze & Turner, 2019) and negatively associated with actual perpetration and its known risk factors (Hudson-Flege, Grover, Mece, Ramos, & Thompson, 2020; Wheeler, George, & Dahl, 2002), the evidence for promoting empathy with sexual assault victims as a technique to promote intervention and reduce rape likelihood among men is equivocal. One study found that only women were influenced by the empathy component of such a program (Hines, Bishop, & Palm Reed, 2019), while others suggest that men's increases in empathy for victims can be related to other desirable treatment outcomes (e.g., Foubert & Newberry, 2006). This can be done by soliciting workshop participants' observations and feelings about women they know who have been raped.

To help boys and men understand why rape convictions are rare and how this may relate to perceptions of false accusations, facilitators can lead them through the experiences of a rape victim following an assault or ask them to relate the experiences of victims they know personally. Sharing biases against accusers and the frequency of rape myths in the media and among law enforcement personnel can show men that accusers do not receive the warm and sympathetic reaction they may envision. Further Socratic questioning can help men realize that few aspects of the process are rewarding or simple. Presenting statistics about how few rape kits are processed and how few cases even go to trial may help men understand that the disparity between the amount of rape accusations they are aware of and the rape convictions reported in the media does not result from false reporting. As men come to understand the difference between “unfounded” and “false” reports, they may overcome the perception that an unfounded case (i.e., one with insufficient evidence) is “false” rather than “unproven.”

Sharing the distinction that rape is about power, and not sexual pleasure, may also be instructive. If men are aware that most sexual aggressors “interview” potential victims (de Becker, 1999), eschewing those who seem more capable of resistance (Hollander, 2014; Senn et al., 2015) and instead pursuing more vulnerable individuals, they may understand why in many cases rape victims come from less privileged positions than their assailants. Additionally, presenting evidence of how men and boys use different strategies from women and girls to communicate and assess for consent (Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014; Righi, Bogen, Kuo, & Orchowski, 2019) may help men see how a power differential and looking for the wrong signals from one’s partner can combine to create conditions conducive to assault.

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### Highlight misperceptions of social norms regarding sexual assault

Finally, helping men recognize that they have overestimated their peers’ support for sexual violence and belief in rape myths can promote their engagement in sessions. Men routinely overestimate their peers’ comfort with coercive behaviors and underestimate how much their peers value consent (Berkowitz, 2002; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). Perceived pressure to be sexual even impacts the likelihood that men themselves will willingly engage in unwanted sex (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988), a research finding that may help men realize the impact of such pressure on their own lives. This could increase the possibility that men would be willing to take action regarding a peer they definitively knew was guilty of sexual assault (McMahon & Lawrence Farmer, 2009). Highlighting and correcting this misperception can open up a larger discussion of male gender role expectations, reducing pressure on men to be sexually active and giving them opportunities to express discomfort with coercive behaviors. This can be reinforced with sharing normative data that highlights how generally intolerant of coercive behaviors most men are (Gidycz et al., 2011).

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### Facilitator experiences with discussing false accusations

Facilitators of sexual assault prevention programs have found discussions of the reality of false allegations to be necessary, critical, and complex. Men and boys typically react with surprise, often followed by resistance or disbelief, when presented with actual rates of false allegations. To counter skepticism, the facilitator must be able to concisely and accurately describe how these statistics are obtained, conveying in plain language the distinctions between “unfounded” and “false” allegations.

<b>Reasons for overestimation of false reports</b>	<b>Approaches for facilitators</b>
Biased reporting of statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present rigorous research; accurately explain methodology and terminology</li> </ul>
Overrepresentation of false accusations in the media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss how the rarity of accusations that are verified as false that makes them especially compelling</li> </ul>
Media bias against accusers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present and discuss examples of discrediting language in the media</li> </ul>
Low conviction rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss reasons victims choose to recant, not press charges, or not report at all</li> </ul>
Cognitive biases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychoeducation on topics such as cognitive dissonance</li> </ul>
Stereotypes (i.e., “real victim” and “real rapist”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present data that shows most perpetrators and victims do not file these profiles</li> </ul>

Efforts to use specific instances of rape allegations to illustrate this point, such as accusations made against famous men, have met with mixed success. While boys and men may comprehend some of the difficulties victims face when their alleged assailants are more popular and powerful, boys’ and men’s allegiance to these public figures can generate in them enough resistance to derail the conversation. It may be easier for men and boys to understand the origins of their misperceptions by engaging with audience members’ stories of their own peers facing “false” accusations. In these more quotidian situations, facilitators find opportunities to highlight the complexities of consent, such as navigating texts vs in-person communication of sexual interests, whether consent is possible while intoxicated, and gender differences in expressing consent. The topic then becomes a departure point for subsequent conversations about why a man might think his partner had consented when in fact she had not, leading to discrepant accounts of the incident and the characterization by some parties of the accusations as false.

Discussions of false allegations have the potential to be decisive moments in engaging boys and men in sexual assault prevention. If facilitators ably address the audience’s concerns about study methodology, they have an opportunity to turn this correction of misperceptions into a teachable moment. Emphasizing the relative rarity of false accusations also opens a window into the subjectivity of the victim, helping men and boys understand that the decision to report an assault has significant consequences for all parties involved. Understanding reasons for misperception can make boys and men more open-minded and considerate potential allies in sexual assault prevention. Strategies for addressing the topic of false accusations in the context of prevention programming are presented in [Table 1](#).

## Conclusion

The purpose of the present chapter was to present the definition, prevalence rates, and reasons for the overestimation of false accusations of sexual violence. This chapter also aimed to highlight the relevance of false accusations to prevention work and, despite minimal research on false accusations as a topic in prevention education, sought to offer tools for educators to address this critical topic when intervening with boys and men. As discussed, the rate of confirmed false accusations across studies is

low (for a review, see Lisak et al., 2010), but biases in the justice system can contribute to the overestimation of false reports as being relatively common (Lonsway et al., 2009). This bias is apparent among the general public as well (Webster et al., 2018), suggesting that disbelief of survivors (and therefore discrediting of their reports) is common. This misperception may increase the difficulties survivors face in reporting their experiences and remaining involved in the legal process (Felson & Pare, 2005); it also limits men's abilities to respond effectively and sympathetically to survivors (Jordan, 2004).

Efforts to correct the misconception among boys and men that false accusations are common may also help improve their response to prevention programming and make them more effective allies in efforts to reduce sexual violence. Facilitators can welcome men's lived experiences and stories of personal contacts with victims into the conversation, validate men's fears of committing assault, and take a nonaccusative stance toward participants that stresses the complex nature of sexual consent practices and the risks of sexual activity while using drugs and alcohol. By dispelling stereotypes about "real rapists" and "real victims," summarizing the empirical research on rates of false accusations, and highlighting misperceptions of social norms regarding assault, facilitators can also provide valuable information that may help mobilize men into more effective allies.

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