

Sexual Assault Victimization, Perpetration, and Associated Beliefs Among High-Risk Groups

On College Campuses

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### **Abstract**

Sexual assault is a pervasive problem that poses a perpetual threat towards those who occupy college campuses, particularly towards the female student population. Past research has helped to reveal the occurrence of high sexual assault rates and the Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) that accompanies sexual assault among college campuses, but less research has examined members of potentially high-risk groups such as Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) members among college campuses. The purpose of this secondary analysis study was to explore data gathered from a recently conducted Sexual Misconduct Campus Climate Survey to assess disparities among prevalence rates at the University of Wyoming, and to analyze the beliefs associated with sexual assault between high-risk groups and the general college population. The current research considers high-risk student groups to include previously identified groups (i.e., sororities, fraternities, athletic teams) as well as a group that may be at increased risk for assault (i.e., ROTC). Consistent with prior research, I predicted higher rates of sexual assault victimization, perpetration, alongside higher reports of RMA among high-risk groups. Although there is not much research that has specifically explored ROTC members, I predicted that members of this group will report elevated rates due to the high incidence of sexual assault in the military and military service academies. Findings from the present study suggest that the hypothesized higher victimization and perpetration rates of sexual assault exist and are associated with higher reports of rape myth acceptance, particularly among ROTC members.

*Keywords: sexual assault, rape myth acceptance (RMA), fraternities, sororities, military*

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Sexual assault is a pervasive problem and public health issue that is occurring across many different social environments, though college campuses and military service academies have reported higher rates compared to the general population (Brubaker 2009; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). Members of both sexes have been subjected to victimization, though women are victimized at much higher rates than men, especially women who attend a university (Franklin 2015; Franklin & Bouffard, 2012; Minow & Einolf, 2009). Sexual assault victimization rates are especially high among sorority members and military service academy women compared to other female students and compared to women in a similar age range (Brubaker, 2009; Carroll et al., 2016; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Minow & Einolf, 2009).

Sexual assault can be defined as sexual contact that is nonconsensual through force or the threat of force, nonphysical threats, or incapacitation (Cantor et al., 2015; Seabrook, Ward, & Giaccardi, 2018). The way in which sexual assault is defined impacts how prevalence rates are gathered and portrayed, as it may lead to misconceptions about the operational definition of sexual assault, and potentially contribute to inconsistent interpretations of data (Muehlenhard, et al., 2017). A broad definition of sexual assault encompasses a wide range of unwanted sexual contact and helps to conceptualize the full scope of the problem (Muehlenhard, et al., 2017). Using a broad definition of sexual assault in a study helps to avoid excluding incidents of sexual assault but may reveal uncertain results due to a lack of specificity, such as seemingly exaggerated prevalence rates to an audience who does not view certain acts as sexual assault (Muehlenhard, et al., 2017). If a study defines sexual assault more narrowly, the results may not

seem as exaggerated, though rates of sexual perpetration are at risk of being underscored and the possibility of condoning inappropriate behavior not covered in the definition exists (Muehlenhard, et al., 2017). A narrow definition of sexual assault can be useful to focus on particular instances of sexual assault, such as attempted or completed rape, and aid in the exploration of areas to target for intervention purposes.

#### *Sexual Assault Prevalence Among College Campuses*

Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) conducted a large study on the occurrence of sexual assault on college campuses across the country, and examined 6,159 students from 32 different colleges, in which 54.4% of female participants reported some sort of unwanted sexual experience. More recently, reported prevalence rates of sexual assault among women enrolled in college range from one in three to one in six (Cantor et al., 2015; Carroll et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2000). One review took an in-depth look to studies that focused attention on the statistic of prevalence rates and found that it is empirically sound to say that on average 1 in 5 women are sexually assaulted during their time enrolled in college (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). Another review of sexual assault literature found no significant change among sexual coercion over the last 50 years (Adams-Curtis & Forbes 2004).

#### *Assault Within Fraternities and Athletic Teams*

Men are not victimized nearly as much as women, though men still experience sexual assault victimization (Franklin & Bouffard, 2012). Canon, Jozkowski, and Crawford (2018) conducted a study including 1,024 students and found that 9.6% of men had experienced a sexual assault. The perpetration rate of sexual assault on college campuses are particularly high among fraternities and athletic teams (Minow & Einolf, 2009; Young, Desmarais, Baldwin, & Chandler, 2017). One study revealed that over one in three reported campus rapes having occurred in a

fraternity (Minow & Einolf, 2009). Another study found that males who joined a fraternity were three times as likely to engage in sexual assault than males who did not (Foubert, Newberry, & Tatum, 2007). In athletics, competitive and especially “win-orientated” men were more likely to report acting sexually aggressive towards women (Caron et al., 1997). Young, Desmarais, Baldwin, and Chandler (2017) studied athletes among recreational and intercollegiate athletes and compared their results to non-athletes. Among their results, Young et al. (2017) found that recreational and intercollegiate had higher rates of sexual coercion than non-athletes, which researchers attribute to the masculine ideologies found among athletes.

All-male groups such as fraternities and athletic teams have been known to cultivate an environment that encourages sexual assault victimization (Franklin, 2016; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Seabrook et al., 2018). Murnen and Kohlman (2007) completed a meta-analysis that found that male athletes and members in fraternities had higher scores of sexual aggression than men who were not involved in those groups. Additionally, all-male groups were found to be associated with attitudes that accept and support hypermasculine beliefs affiliated with violence against women (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Seabrook et al., 2018). Examples of hypermasculinity include the belief that men are dominant and sexually superior over women, behave aggressively by nature, and have the need to confirm their masculinity through the “sexual conquest” of a woman (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007).

#### *Assault Prevalence Among Sororities*

Past empirical research shows that sexual assault has shown to have a positive significant relationship with sorority membership (Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991; Franklin, 2016; Minow & Einolf, 2009). Minow and Einolf (2009) conducted a survey and found that sorority members

were much more likely to have experienced an attempted or completed rape when comparing them to non-sorority women. In the study, Minow and Einolf (2009) found that 14% of sorority women experienced an attempted rape and 33% experienced a completed rape, while 6% of non-sorority members experienced an attempted rape and 8% experienced a completed rape (Minow & Einolf, 2009).

Within the literature, the high rates of sexual assault among sorority membership is thought to be partially explained by the frequent social interactions with fraternity members (Carroll et al., 2016; Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991; Franklin, 2008; Minow & Einolf, 2009; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). Research suggests that this frequent interaction can perpetuate sexual assault due to exposure to an all-male environment, and because perpetrators of sexual assault have often shown to be associated with the victim prior to the assault (Brubaker, 2009). Additionally, research proposes that the acceptance of traditional gender roles is associated with increased risk of sexual assault and is more common among sorority and fraternity members (Anderson et al., 1997; Carroll et al., 2016; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007).

### *Rape Myth Acceptance*

Socially constructed narratives surrounding sexual assault have led to the existence of overarching false beliefs regarding sexual assault known as Rape Myths (Burt, 1980). Rape myths are stereotyped and prejudiced beliefs that include misconceptions of rapists and those who have been raped, which can create a hostile environment for sexual assault victims, and have shown to misrepresent past research findings on various aspects of sexual assault (Burt, 1980). The degree to which one validates and endorses false beliefs encompassed by Rape Myths is known as Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) (Burt, 1980; Reling, Barton, Becker, &

Valasik, 2018). Common rape myths often include the attribution of blame for the misconduct to the victim due to what they were wearing or said during the incident, and the belief that rapists are people who cannot control their sexual urges (Burt, 1980; Hockett et al., 2016).

Researchers have documented associations between the high sexual assault rates and RMA, as rape myths have shown to perpetuate and predict sexual violence (Caron, et al., 1997; Johnson & Beech, 2017). Empirical research on RMA has reliably discovered higher RMA among men than women (Carroll, Rosenstein, Foubert, Clark, and Korenman, 2016). Although women are less likely to endorse rape myths, sorority women have shown to be more likely to display RMA than women who are not in a sorority (Anderson et al., 1997; Carroll et al., 2016). All-male groups such as athletic teams and fraternities have previously been found to exhibit significantly higher endorsement of RMA (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). Among athletes, Young et al. (2017) found that male athletes had a higher affinity for rape myth acceptance than non-athletes.

#### *Assault Prevalence Among Military Services*

In the military, sexual assault has been shown to be more prominent compared to average civilians (Rabelo et al., 2018). Military sexual trauma (MST) has gained a lot of widespread attention, some calling the rate of MST an “epidemic” (Cernak, 2015). Female military students in military service academies experience higher rates of sexual assault victimization compared to men and to female college students, as well as female civilians (Brubaker, 2009; Carroll et al., 2016). It has been reported that about 23% to 30% of women have experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault (Carroll et al., 2016; Department of Defense, 2012). Among men in the military, studies have found that 1% to 12% of men have been victimized; however, some of the reported rates have been documented prior to serving in the military (Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

The higher rates of sexual assault in the military have been attributed to the “rape culture” that is present within the military, as well as hypermasculine attitudes (Carroll et al., 2016; Turchick & Wilson, 2010).

Military service academies include men and women compared to sex segregated fraternities and sororities and have been known to present higher rates of sexual assault (Brubaker, 2009; Carroll et al., 2016). Research shows that the inclusion of women into the armed forces has much to do with the reports of sexual assault, especially in areas that were once male-dominated (Department of Defense, 2010; Rosenstein, Angelis, McCone, & Carroll, 2018). Although research tells us that rates are high in military service academies, underreporting is an issue brought to light from anonymous surveys (Brubaker, 2009; Rosenstein, 2018). Military service academies include hierarchical structures, and women have a minority status known as tokenism in military service academies, which can influence their interactions with men including the encouragement of traditional gender norms (Rosenstein, 2018). As the research shows, female military academy students experience high rates of sexual assault compared to female civilians, but not enough research explores the prevalence of sexual assault among ROTC members on college campuses specifically.

Past research reveals heightened sexual assault prevalence rates among fraternities, athletic groups, sororities, and students among military service academies relative to the general college population; however, rates of campus military organizations such as Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) have not been examined. In this research, attention is given to groups known to be at a higher risk for RMA and the victimization of sexual violence, due to the known rates and the connection between rape myth acceptance and sexual violence. From past research, we understand that there are high rates of sexual assault and RMA among all-male group



including fraternities and athletics, and a link between sorority membership and the occurrence of victimization. Members of ROTC are also considered to be a high risk group and worthy of further investigation due to the lack of prior research on this group, and amount of sexual assault known to be prevalent in the military.

### **Current Study**

To explore the rate of sexual assault among high risk student groups, researchers at the University of Wyoming conducted a Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey administered in the spring semester of 2018. The current research is a secondary analysis of data gathered from the Sexual Misconduct Campus Climate Survey. The survey included the Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Consortium Survey (ARC3) and the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) to gather a more accurate interpretation of the rate of sexual assault on the campus, and the extent to which rape myths are accepted and associated with sexual assault. This research evaluates the disparities of sexual assault victimization and RMA among groups considered to be high risk as compared to the general college campus, including students in fraternities, sororities, athletics and ROTC. Consistent with prior research, I predicted higher rates of sexual assault victimization, perpetration, alongside higher reports of RMA among high-risk groups. I also predicted that members among ROTC would report elevated rates of sexual assault due to the high volume of sexual assault within the military and military service academies. To analyze the current data, I included an ANOVA and chi score analyses to compare RMA among the high-risk groups and the general college population.

## Methods

### *Measures*

The current research investigates sexual assault victimization and perpetration prevalence and associated false beliefs found among the University of Wyoming population, by use of the results found in the Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey administered to students. Before taking the Campus Climate Survey, an informed consent was administered to students, and a debriefing form was given afterwards. In the Sexual Misconduct Campus Climate Survey distributed by researchers at the University of Wyoming is the ARC3 and the IRMA, the predominant tool utilized in the survey. Compared to other campus climate surveys that only evaluate victimization, the ARC3 is differentiated in that it evaluates sexual misconduct victimization as well as perpetration (Wood et al., 2017).

The ARC3 posits that meaningful sexual misconduct prevention is rooted in recognizing why perpetration occurs and understanding the environments that are conducive to sexual misconduct (Swartout, et al., 2019). Measures from other surveys known to be reliable and valid were used in the construction of the ARC3 to gather more accurate rates of sexual misconduct in order to educate individuals and administration for intervention purposes (Swartout, et al., 2019). It was constructed by researchers who have expertise in areas such as gender-based violence, student affairs, and student conduct policies (Swartout, et al., 2019). The ARC3 asks very specific questions to investigate sexual misconduct including sexual violence, sexual harassment, stalking, and intimate partner violence, as well as questions to identify bystander intervention behavior, attitudes towards the process of reporting to their college, and perceptions of campus safety overall (Swartout, et al., 2019). There are 19 modules within the ARC3, which include sections of questions inquiring about information such as alcohol use, peer norms, perceptions of

campus climate, and victimization/perpetration of stalking, dating violence, and sexual violence (Swartout, et al., 2019).

The IMRA was also included in the Campus Climate Survey, which gathers information on individual rape myth acceptance and the degree to which these myths are accepted such as questioning misconceptions about consent and victim blame (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). It is the most widely used scale to measure rape myths and is considered to be the most reliable scale for measuring rape myths (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). One study done by Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald (1999) specifically studies the validity of the IRMA and were able to ensure the scale's content validity. The IRMA has 22 item and 4 subscales including (1) She Asked for It, (2) He Didn't Mean To, (3) It Wasn't Really Rape, (4) She Lied (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Example items from the IRMA include asking the participant the extent to which they agree "If both people are drunk, it can't be rape" and "If a girl doesn't say 'no' she can't claim rape" (Lonsway, 1999).

To analyze the data, an ANOVA was conducted and chi score analyses to compare sexual assault experiences and RMA among the high risk groups. A broad and a narrow definition of sexual assault was used to compare results. The broad definition of sexual assault used in the study describes any nonconsensual sexual touching, as well as any attempted or completed act of nonconsensual oral, anal, or vaginal penetration. The narrow definition of sexual assault in this research is limited to only instances of attempted or completed oral, anal, or vaginal rape.

### *Participants*

Approximately a quarter (25.28% N = 2482) of students accessed the Campus Climate Survey and 19.76% (N = 1897) completed the full survey. If a participant completed at least 90% of the survey questions it was considered completed. In terms of class standing, completed

surveys were comprised of 25% first year students, 19% second year students, 22% third year students, 15% fourth year students, 6% of fifth year or more students, and 13% graduate or professional students. Out of those who completed the survey, 63.3% identified as female, 35.3% identified as male, and 1.3% as gender non/conforming. When examining sexual orientation, 87% of students identified as heterosexual, 2.8% lesbian/gay, 6.6%, bisexual, 1.4% Asexual, 1.1% queer, and 0.9% identified as other. In consideration of ethnicity, there were 87.1% Non-Hispanic White students, 2.6% Hispanic White, 4.0% Hispanic/latinx, 2.7% Asian/ Asian American, 1.3% Black/African American, 0.4% Native American/American Indian, 0.1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.2% Multiracial, and 0.6% other. Although the survey was completed by a predominantly white sample, it is representative of the college population at the University of Wyoming. On average, participants took 27.6 minutes to complete the survey.

### *Procedures*

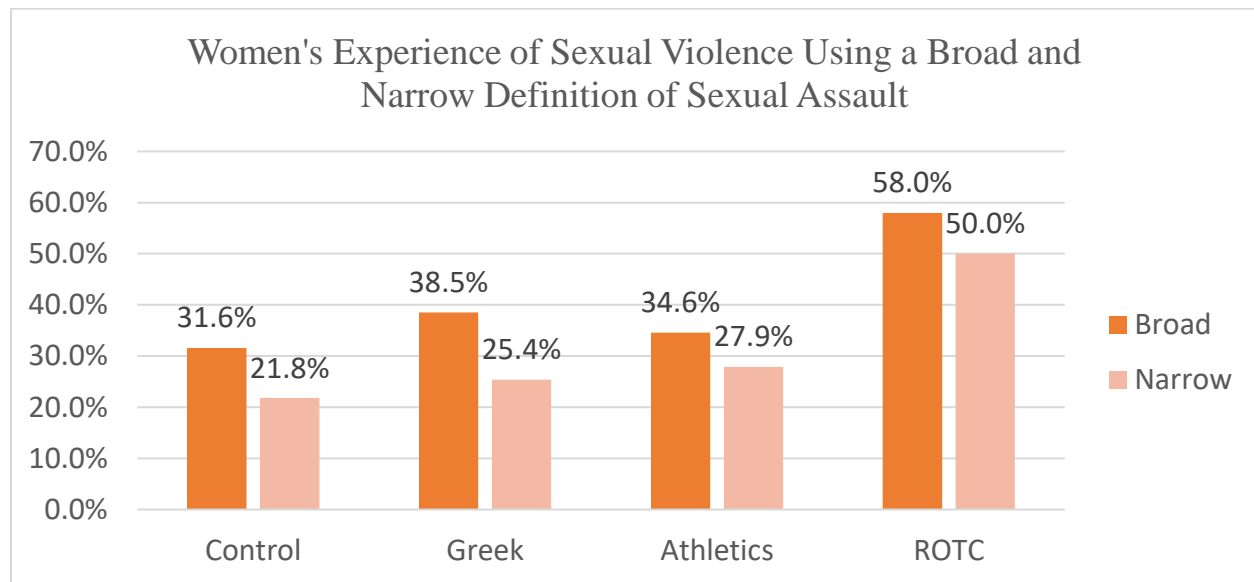
The survey was sent to students of the University through a campus-wide email, which invited students to participate in an anonymous survey to assess beliefs and behaviors surrounding sexual assault. University of Wyoming undergraduate, graduate, and professional students were invited to participate. The Campus Climate Survey data was collected over 37 days, between January 23<sup>rd</sup> through March 1<sup>st</sup> of 2018. Announcements, fliers, and table tents advertised for the survey. Incentive items for having completed the survey included a random drawing for cash prizes as well as Amazon and local restaurant/coffee shop gift certificates, personal training sessions, bookstore credit, University apparel, and other prizes. Student group incentives were offered to groups such ROTC, fraternities, sororities, residential communities, and athletics. Roughly 200 incentive prizes were available with there being about a 1 in 10

chance of winning. After the survey was conducted, a secondary analysis was carried out, which included an ANOVA and chi score analyses.

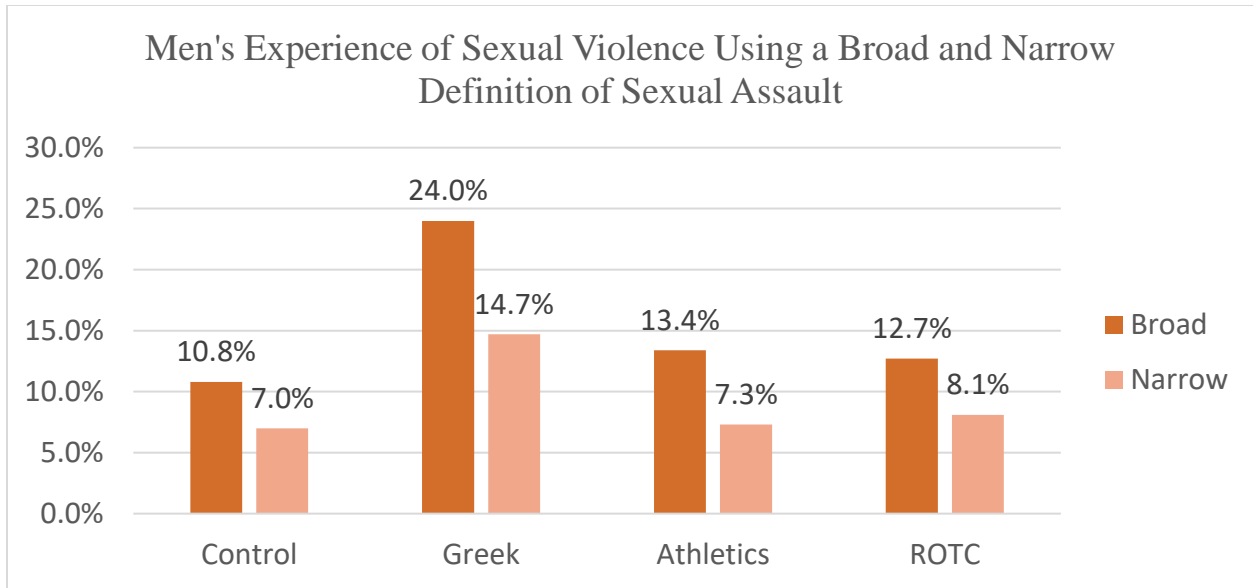
### **Results**

There was a significant association between student group and assault using the broad definition of sexual assault  $X^2 = 16.718$ ,  $p = .001$ , control group = 31.6%, Greek = 38.5%, athletics = 34.6%, and ROTC 58.0%. Additionally, a significant association was found between student group and the narrow definition of sexual assault  $X^2 = 22.156$ ,  $p = .001$ , control group = 21.8%, Greek = 25.4%, athletics = 27.9%, and ROTC = 50.0%. Participants in the control group involved students who were not among the high-risk groups and displayed the lowest percentage of sexual violence, followed by athletics, members of the Greek system (fraternities and sororities), and female ROTC members who showed the highest victimization rate of just under 60%. Overall, women experienced higher rates of sexual assault. Among athletics, 13.3% of male students and 35.0% of females experienced at least one unwanted sexual touching or an attempted or completed penetration. Graph 1 shows the results of sexually violent experiences of women using the broad and the narrow definition of sexual assault, and graph 2 shows the reported experience of sexual violence among men using the broad and narrow definition of sexual assault. Members of ROTC (N = 112) showed the highest rate of sexual assault among women with a victimization rate of 50%. Out of the entire sample of the Campus Climate Survey, 27% of both male and female participants reported experiencing at least one incidence of sexual assault. In the results of the Men's experiences of sexual violence, Greek membership endorsed the highest rate of victimization which remains consistent across both a broad and a narrow definition of sexual assault.

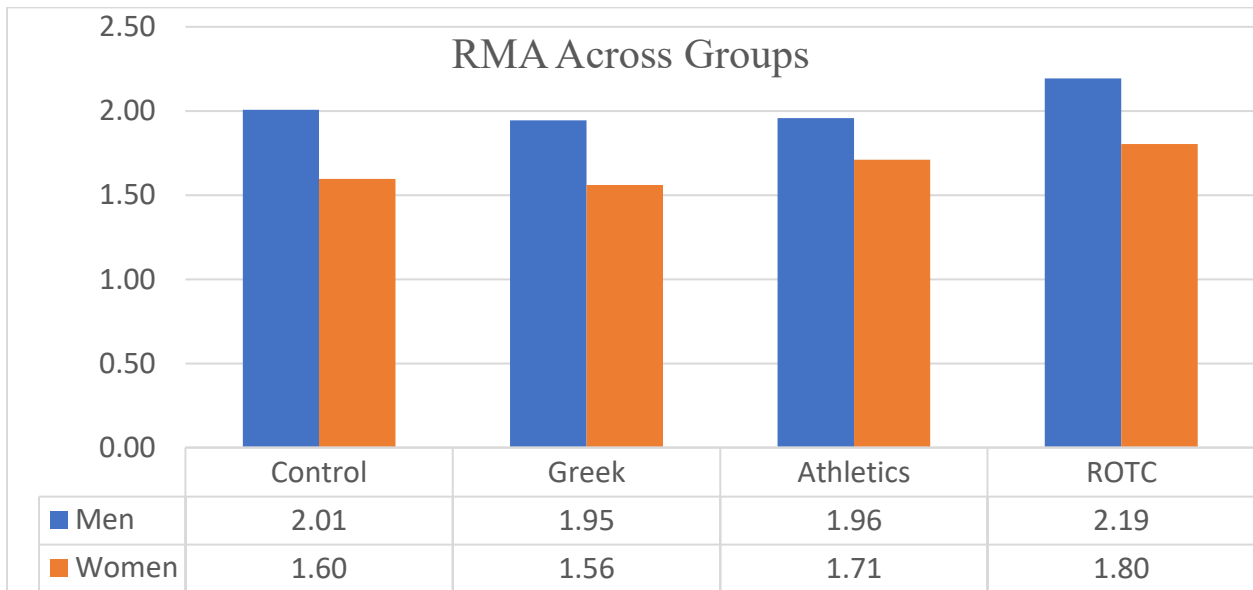
All groups showed some endorsement for RMA, including the control group. When looking to comparisons of RMA reports, I found a significant difference between men and women. Consistent with prior research displayed in graph 3, men consistently endorsed more RMA than women across all of the groups.  $F(1, 2190) = 23.596, p < .001$ . Although men scored higher than women in the RMA measures, men and women reported rather high rates of RMA across all groups. The difference between the high-risk groups is also significant, with ROTC participants endorsing higher RMA compared to all other groups.  $F(3, 2190) = 3.407, p < .001$ .



[Graph 1: Women's Experience of Sexual Violence Using a Broad ( $X^2 = 16.718, p = .001$ ) and Narrow ( $X^2 = 22.156, p = .001$ ) Definition of Sexual Assault]



[Graph 2: Men's Experience of Sexual Violence Using a Broad ( $X^2=10.141$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and Narrow ( $X^2=5.093$ ,  $p = .001$ ) Definition of Sexual Assault]



[Graph 3: Results: Rape Myth Acceptance Across Groups.]

### Discussion

The current study aimed to better understand the prevalence and quality of behaviors and beliefs associated with sexual assault among high risk groups at the University of Wyoming, by

use of a secondary analysis of a Campus Climate Sexual Assault survey completed by nearly 2000 students attending the 2018 spring semester at the University of Wyoming. The research replicated previous findings such as higher RMA among men than women, higher victimization rates among women than men, and sexual assault rates collected from the survey were consistent with rates at other universities (Swartout, et al., 2019). Overall, women experienced higher rates of sexual assault using both a broad and a narrow definition of sexual assault. The control group scores less than all of the high-risk groups in regard to sexual assault, but not by much. Among females, members of ROTC had the highest rates of victimization, and among males, members of the Greek system had the highest rate of victimization. Members of ROTC endorsed the highest RMA among the high risk groups, though rates were high among all groups, including the control group. The results of the study confirmed that all high-risk groups and the general college population had high rates of victimization and rape myth acceptance, though members of certain high-risk groups displayed even higher rates of both victimization and rape myth acceptance.

Though the Sexual Misconduct Campus Climate Survey is conducted in a way in which to conceal the participant through anonymity, reluctance to report is possible, for reasons such as a fear of identifiability or a lack of knowledge on what constitutes sexual assault and/or consent. The ARC3 and IRMA ask questions that may be distressing to those who have been victimized or perpetrated in an attempt to gather accurate rates, potentially leading to an avoidance to disclose the extent of an assault, or discontinuation of the survey. The biggest limitation within this study is that this survey included a sample of volunteers who participated partly to earn an incentive prize, and selection bias cannot be ruled out. This analysis included the results of just one college campus which portrayed high rates of sexual violence among all of the groups, the



high-risk groups revealing higher rates, and ROTC displaying the highest rates; therefore, there is a call for more research on college campuses overall and in regard to groups more susceptible to sexual violence to better target intervention strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Sexual assault is a pervasive public health issue across all college campuses, and the university of Wyoming is no exception. From my analysis of the data, one can see that sexual assault is a problem at this University and calls for an intervention. Climate surveys are able to gather more accurate data, partly because of the anonymity as well as the incorporation of measures known to be reliable. From the data, one can see where sexual assault is more pervasive, and with this current study, researchers can begin to focus intervention efforts, though more research is needed to continue to evaluate the sexual assault problem that college campuses have. Additionally, more research is needed to understand toxic environments perpetuated by hypermasculinity, and intervention efforts in order to combat the sexual assault that results.

Regular prevention programs are necessary on college campuses due to the high amount of sexual assault, in order to inform and help prevent such high rates. Sexual assault prevention programs on college campuses need to include education on sexual assault as well as on bystander intervention behaviors. Findings in this data offer an opportunity to implement more well-informed prevention strategies to combat the sexual assault and rape myth acceptance at the University of Wyoming, particularly among students who scored higher for RMA and sexual violence. In addition to prevention programs, support for students following an assault is important to aid in the success of the student, and to help prevent disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder. The rates of sexual assault analyzed in this research show a need for more sexual assault education and prevention strategies across the scope of this and all Universities, but

especially within the high-risk groups identified in this study. This research also brings awareness to the neglect that ROTC members have had in sexual assault research, and more attention is warranted.

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