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Twisting Sexual-Assault Statistics

President Obama's numbers are hyperbolic.

By Katherine Connell

It is estimated that one in five women on college campuses has been sexually assaulted during their time there — *one in five*,” President Obama said on Wednesday. The occasion for this lecture: He was announcing the creation of a White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault.

It's a startlingly high number that figured prominently in the leads of media reports on the announcement. As NRO contributor Heather Mac Donald pointed out the last time the administration bandied it about, if it were true it would mean that women at American colleges experience a “rate of sexual assault astronomically higher than anything seen in America's most violent cities (in Detroit, for example, there were 36.8 rapes per 100,000 inhabitants in 2009, a rate of 0.037 percent.)”

But is it accurate? While estimates in this range have been reported since the '80s, the report released in conjunction with the president's creation of the task force cites a pair of more recent studies for the figure. One of them, “The Campus Sexual Assault Study,” prepared for the National Institute of Justice in 2007, found that 19 percent of women reported “experiencing completed or attempted sexual assault since entering college.” The number who experienced a completed sexual assault was 13.7 percent; 4.7 percent of respondents experienced “physically forced” assaults (3.7 percent of these physically forced assaults were rapes). Eleven percent of women were assaulted while incapacitated by alcohol or drugs.

The problem with lumping all of these figures together is that they cover a range of incidents, some of them inarguably rape or lesser kinds of sexual assault, and others that are harder to categorize that way. The best evidence that this ambiguity exists is that many of the women classified by researchers as having experienced rape or sexual assault do not consider this to have been their experience. The NIJ study found that more than 60 percent of women who were victims of incapacitated rape did not think they had been raped, which reflects the difficulty of determining what constitutes consent in drunken sex, even for the people involved. Such studies consistently find this discrepancy between women's self-reported attitudes and how researchers classify their responses.

To understand how this works, consider another study to which the president's report points, finding that 20 percent of women are raped in their lifetimes. In its definition of rape, the CDC's "[National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence](#)" survey includes sex that occurred when the victim was drunk or high, regardless of whether she was incapacitated or unable to give consent. Participants were asked to respond to the question: "When you were drunk, high, drugged, or passed out and unable to give consent, how many people ever had vaginal sex with you?" A woman could list instances of consensual sex she had while intoxicated that she did not consider to be rape — that were in fact not rape — and the researchers would nonetheless classify her as a rape victim.

None of this is to deny that rape obviously can and frequently does occur in cases where alcohol is involved. Nor is it to say that the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses is not a serious problem. It is. It is serious enough to merit addressing without resorting to inflated statistics. And these numbers point to a larger problem with the culture of our colleges. The bogus "one in five" formulation does more to obscure the issue than to honestly address it.

Then again, to justify the sweeping federal response that the president has ordered to address the problem, he probably needs a bit of hyperbole.

— *Katherine Connell is an associate editor at NATIONAL REVIEW.*