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Almost 1 in 5 Women Have Been Raped in US

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A national survey by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) released on Friday revealed that about 19.3 percent of U.S. women have been victims of rape, and 43.9 percent have experienced sexual assault at some point in their lives.

Regarding men, the figures decrease to 1.7 percent and 23 percent respectively.

In the report, rape is defined as "completed forced penetration" (11.5 percent, 13.8 million people), "attempted forced penetration" (6.4 percent, 7.7 million), and "completed alcohol- or drug-facilitated penetration" (9.3 percent, 11.2 million).

For almost 80 percent of women, the assaults occurred when they were under 25 years of age (40 percent were under 18), and only 9.3 percent of rapes occurred under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The report also revealed that the majority of women knew their rapist, as 45.4 percent of rapes were committed by a former intimate partner, added to 12.1 percent committed by a family member.

The report bases its results on interviews with 12,727 men and women over the age of 18, held in 2011. Although the response rate to the survey was only 33 percent, the authors of the report affirm they have worked to overcome any possible bias, and claim it is even very likely that their results underestimate the extent of sexual assault in the United States.

The figures coincide with a previous 2010 survey of about 16,000 interviewees, which stated that 18.3 percent of women and 1.4 percent of men declared having been raped in the past.

The survey comes at a time of debate in the country, after many incidents of sexual violence occurred on university campuses and in the military earlier this year.

College authorities have especially attracted criticism, as their genuine efforts to track and punish perpetrators of sexual abuse have been questioned, with critics arguing they put the university's reputation first. Over 40 percent of 440 colleges surveyed had not investigated a sexual assault in the past five years, according to a report released in July by Senator Claire McCaskill (Missouri Democrat).

Feminists have also urged the federal administration to reform sex education provided in schools, as years of "abstinence focused programs" funded by George W. Bush Jr could have had a negative impact on generations of youth, unaware of the subtleties of sexual intercourse.

The notion of consent, specifically, has been the object of recent campaigns ("no means no"), while the Californian Senate went further, voting unanimously for a bill with a "yes means yes" policy: the bill specifies that "lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent."

However feminists remain divided on the existence of a "rape culture" in the United States. The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) for instance, in a letter to the White House said in its recommendations: "While it is helpful to point out the systemic barriers to addressing the problem, it is important to not lose sight of a simple fact: Rape is caused not by cultural factors but by the conscious decisions, of a small percentage of the community, to commit a violent crime."

Other feminists replied by saying that the notion of "rape culture" did not deny individual responsibility, but rather described how rapists feel empowered to commit the rape without feeling responsible, blaming the victims for their own rapes.

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