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Intercollegiate Athletes and Sexual Violence: A Review of Literature and Recommendations for Future Study

Kristy L. McCray¹

Abstract

The 1990s saw the development of research on violence against women perpetrated by intercollegiate student-athletes. Research in this field stagnated during the last 15 years, despite the fact that this time period has evidenced multiple high-profile, even fatal, cases of violence against women at the hands of male student-athletes. These events prompted the Office of Civil Rights to call upon universities to more appropriately investigate and sanction perpetrators of sexual assault. The ensuing actions by universities are expected to bring a renewed focus on male student-athletes, requiring further research to explore student-athletes sexually abusing women. This article outlines the pertinent literature on violence against women by male student-athletes, and suggests future research using new institutionalism as a theoretical framework.

Keywords

domestic violence, sexual assault, adult victims, offenders, prevention

Introduction

Prior to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, sexual assault, rape, and other forms of violence against women were rarely discussed in public forums, let alone studied in academic settings. During this "second wave" of the women's rights movement, rape crisis centers and other support mechanisms for women were created nationwide, though little research into both victimization and perpetration was conducted during this time (Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). The 1980s began to see general research in the field of violence against women. After a multitude of high-profile athletes garnered media attention for violent acts against women in the 1980s and 1990s (many of which are detailed in Benedict, 1997), researchers in fields ranging from sociology to psychology to higher education took notice and began conducting studies to assess the prevalence of student-athlete violence against women.

Using a sociological, critical lens, this article outlines the pertinent literature of violence against women by male student-athletes in intercollegiate athletics. Empirical results from the 1990s were mixed, and, as such, were subject to criticisms from the field. Further, there is a definitive gap in the literature in the 2000s. In April 2011, the Office for Civil Rights issued a "Dear Colleague Letter" (DCL) as a call for universities to more swiftly and adequately address incidences of sexual violence by students, though there is little current research on student-athlete populations (Ali, 2011). In the wake of this DCL, universities must have a fuller picture of student-

athlete involvement, as they begin implementing or revamping programs to reduce sexual violence on campus. Due to the lack of current research, and considering past criticisms, future areas of suggested research using the sociological framework of new institutionalism will be discussed.

Review of Literature

Until the 1990s, research in the field of student-athlete violence against women was nonexistent. Melnick (1992) was one of the first in the sport field to call upon colleagues to examine the relationship between intercollegiate athletic participation and sexual violence by male student-athletes. He proposed five potential reasons for the prevalence of student-athlete perpetration: (1) male bonding; (2) sport as a masculine-proving ground; (3) combative sports and violence; (4) the athletic justice system; and (5) big man on campus syndrome. Based upon these presumptive reasons, he also laid out the case for five reforms: (1) elimination of student-athlete-specific residences; (2) elimination of sexist talk in the sporting environment; (3) tougher, swift punishment for perpetrators; and (4) rape

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prevention education for student-athletes. Melnick's fifth suggestion is the most radical, "reformation of the male sport experience" (p. 35), which one can see echoed in sociology literature (Coakley, 2009).

Perhaps in response to Melnick's (1992) call to action, the mid-1990s saw the development of research on violence against women perpetrated by male athletes, particularly inter-collegiate student-athletes. Mostly quantitative in nature, empirical findings were mixed. What follows is a review of the literature detailing research that indicates higher student-athlete prevalence of sexual violence, rates similar to nonathletes, criticism of the field, and the positive impacts of rape education prevention programming with student-athletes. It is important to note that in studies of violence against women, other campus factors (e.g., fraternity affiliation, drug, and/or alcohol use) were addressed; however, due to the narrow focus of this article, only athletic participation will be considered.

One of the first studies, by Fritner and Rubinson (1993), provided early data on student-athlete perpetration of sexual violence. Their study focused on fraternity affiliation, alcohol use, and student-athlete involvement with sexual assault. The authors sampled 925 randomly selected women. Responses categorized women as experiencing one of four crimes: (1) sexual assault; (2) attempted sexual assault; (3) sexual abuse; and (4) battery, illegal restraint, and/or intimidation. Results indicated that 27.1% of women were victims of one of these crimes. Additionally, many women experienced more than one form of abuse. Victims self-identified their perpetrators, with student-athletes representing 22.6% of perpetrators of sexual assaults; 13.7% of perpetrators of attempted sexual assaults; 13.6% of perpetrators of sexual abuse incidences; and 11.09% of perpetrators of battery, illegal restraint, and/or intimidation incidences. During the time of the study, student-athletes represented less than 2% of the overall male student body. As such, Fritner and Rubinson indicated that student-athletes were "vastly overrepresented as offenders of these crimes" (p. 282) and noted that future research into this area should be undertaken. This will be seen throughout the decade by other researchers.

As with much of the literature, Koss and Gaines (1993) explored the link between fraternity affiliation and athletic participation with sexual violence. Due to the narrow focus of this article, information on fraternity participation will not be reviewed. Taking a different approach than Fritner and Rubinson (1993), the authors surveyed 530 male students, including 140 student-athletes, of which 16% participated revenue-producing sports (i.e., football and basketball). Using attributes such as sexual nonaggression, uninvited sexual advances, unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, and attempted or completed rape, the authors found true the "prediction of sexual aggression by participation in organized athletics" (Koss & Gaines, 1993, p. 104). However, the authors did indicate that the student-athlete/sexual aggression connection was less than that of alcohol and/or nicotine use (i.e., alcohol and/or nicotine use is a higher predictor of sexual aggression than athletic participation).

While Koss and Gaines (1993) relied on students' self-reports, Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald, and Benedict (1996) examined the incidences of sexual assault reported to campus judicial affairs. In their study of 10 judicial affairs offices during a 3-year period, they found an overrepresentation of male student-athletes as perpetrators of sexual assault and battering. Though the intent was to study battering, not all schools in the data set kept complete records on battering, and thus sexual assault and battering were both analyzed. Of the 10 participating schools, 35% of the perpetrators of sexual assault and battering were student-athletes, though they comprised only 3% of the student body. The authors did acknowledge the small sample (69 reports of sexual assault, 21 reports of battering), and cautioned that reports only comprise a small number of actual assaults occurring on any campus at any given time, due to the stigma, fear, and negative connotations of reporting crimes as intimate and taboo as sexual assault and battering.

While previous research found a link between athletic participation and sexually aggressive behavior and actions, Boeringer (1996, 1999) found a link between sport participation and sexually aggressive attitudes. After surveying 477 male undergraduates, of whom 16.2% were student-athletes, he found that student-athletes displayed a "greater rape proclivity" (Boeringer, 1996, p. 134). Further, student-athletes were more likely than their nonathlete counterparts to report *potential* use of coercion, alcohol and drugs, and force. Participants were asked to indicate their likelihood in engaging in acts such as coercion, force, and so on, if there was no chance they would be caught. Due to the hypothetical nature of the survey, it is not possible to determine from this data set whether student-athletes are more likely to *actually* use coercion, drugs and alcohol, and force. Thus, Boeringer (1996) was only able to measure attitudes. As such, he reported that while student-athletes are more likely to hypothetically engage in incidences of sexual force, they are not more likely than nonathletes to hypothetically engage in sexual aggression. He concluded by noting that this study did not allow for variances between different types of student-athletes, and suggested longitudinal research in the future to determine whether or not student-athletes who enter the sports world are already predisposed to violence and aggression, or how sports may encourage this aggression.

Boeringer (1999) followed his 1996 study with additional information about the likelihood of student-athletes to support rape myths. Within the same population, he found that student-athletes were significantly more likely to report agreement with 14 rape-supportive myths than did nonathletes. Boeringer hypothesized that hypermasculine environments were responsible for 56% of student-athletes responding positively to rape-supportive myths, whereas only 8% of nonathletes agreed with the same statements.

Despite the findings through student-athletes' self-reports and campus records of higher proclivity and incidences of sexual violence, other research indicates otherwise. Crosset, Benedict, and McDonald (1995) surveyed 20 campus police departments and found that student-athletes were not represented as perpetrators of sexual violence at higher rates than

nonathletes. A significant limitation of this study is that more than 80% of all rapes go unreported to police, and thus the campus police reports are not necessarily a representative sample (Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995).

The bulk of research on student-athlete violence against women was conducted and published in the mid-1990s. Also during this time, Koss and Cleveland (1996) detailed the methodological and conceptual concerns with the studies that led to such mixed empirical results. The authors noted sampling problems such as convenience, as well as the need for larger and more representative samples. They indicated that "qualitative richness has not been matched by quantitative rigor" (Koss & Cleveland, 1996, p. 181). Additionally, they addressed the nature of self-selection. Are more aggressive, rape-supportive men joining sports teams because they are naturally aggressive, or do sports actually make student-athletes more aggressive? The findings do not address this. Finally, they discussed a need to measure sport subcultures. Boeringer (1996) acknowledged this as a limitation, and Crosset (1999) focused on this in his critique.

Similar to Koss and Cleveland (1996), Crosset (1999) addressed the variance of sports and their individual cultures and noted that future research "should focus on why some positions, teams, sports, or programs are prone to committing specific types of violence against women" (p. 249). It does not appear that this research has been undertaken since Crosset's criticism in 1999. He also wrote that much of the research relied too broadly upon rape culture and called for both specificity in methods and theoretical constructs in future research. Finally, Crosset (1999) indicated a need to focus on structural changes within intercollegiate athletics and higher education, instead of relying upon individual and punitive responses to incidences of sexual violence against women by student-athletes.

Despite the calls to reevaluate the methods and conceptual frameworks and continue to study student-athlete sexual violence (Crosset, 1999; Koss & Cleveland, 1996), there is a significant gap in the research, with only two publications addressing student-athlete violence against women over the last 15 years. One study sought new empirical data on whether or not male student-athletes are more likely than nonathletes to perpetrate assault (Sawyer, Thompson, & Chicorelli, 2002). While the authors did narrow their focus and sample a variety of student-athlete groups (e.g., team-based vs. individual sports, class rank), they did so with a convenience sample, one of the issues noted by Koss and Cleveland (1996) as a limitation in this field of study. Though the results of Sawyer, Thompson, and Chicorelli (2002) cannot be generalized, their findings do support the idea that student-athletes are not a homogeneous group and should be studied accordingly.

Finally, the most current research on student-athlete violence is still 5 years old. Murnen and Kohlman (2007) conducted a meta-analytic review of both behaviors and attitudes that support sexual aggression. Through statistical analysis, they discovered a moderate effect between athletic participation and hypermasculinity, an attribute that positively

contributes to rape culture (Sanday, 1990). Further, small but significant associations were found between athletic participation and sexual aggression and rape myth acceptance. The authors recommended longitudinal studies with this student population, as well as distinct studies between student-athlete subcultures and teams. Additionally, Murnen and Kohlman suggested institutional change, which will be further addressed later in this article.

In summary, findings indicated student-athletes disproportionately represented perpetrators of incidences of violence against women (Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald, & Benedict, 1996; Fritner & Robinson, 1993) as well as possessing attitudes of stronger sexual aggression and rape myth acceptance (Boeringer, 1996, 1999; Koss & Gaines, 1993; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Sawyer et al., 2002). In contrast, one study found that student-athletes were not overrepresented as perpetrators in campus police reports (Crosset et al., 1995). Regardless of these mixed findings, many universities understood the critical need to reduce sexual violence on campus and began implementing both prevention and intervention programs on campuses. Though athletic participation is only one correlate of sexual violence, efforts have been made to document the effects of programming with student-athletes. Jackson and Davis (2000) outlined an athlete-specific rape education and prevention program, similar to what many universities provide to student-athletes. Unfortunately, while the abstract noted that "the program has been in place for 10 years and has demonstrated several uniquely positive results" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 589), these were not detailed in a methodologically sound way within the article. Several other programs, however, have documented success with empathy-based prevention (Foubert & Perry, 2007) and bystander intervention (McMahon & Farmer, 2009; Moynihan & Banyard, 2008). The previously mentioned findings related to intervention and prevention programming are specific to student-athletes, and it is likely there are other studies throughout the literature noting the success of general and/or campus-wide efforts that are not specific to student-athletes.

Current Issues

Despite the somewhat mixed findings, as well as the documented successes of some prevention and intervention programs, incidences of student-athlete violence against women continued to proliferate in the media during the last decade. Most notable is the 2010 fatal battering of lacrosse player Yeardley Love at the University of Virginia (UVA) by her ex-boyfriend George Huguey, also a lacrosse student-athlete at UVA (Ng, 2012). Though Huguey was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 23 years in prison, not all publicized incidents of violence against women receive the same level of justice for victims. In 2010, reports surfaced of a sexual assault by a University of Notre Dame football player, resulting in the suicide of the victim, Lizzy Seeberg, a student at nearby St. Mary's College. No charges have been filed in the Notre Dame case (Doyel, 2013), as is common with many reports of sexual

assaults, particularly those by student-athletes who receive media attention.

In addition to the UVA and Notre Dame cases, incidences of male student-athlete violence against women continue to abound in national press coverage. Throughout 2010, multiple University of Montana football players were investigated and/or charged with sexual assault and rape (Robbins, 2012). In August 2010, a Missouri football player was arrested for felony sexual assault (O'Neil, 2010). In September 2010, a Wake Forest basketball player was arrested for assault and accused of kicking and pushing his girlfriend, and a Florida football player was arrested on suspicion of stalking his girlfriend (O'Neil, 2010). In October 2010, a Baylor basketball player was arrested for assault and accused of breaking his girlfriend's jaw (O'Neil, 2010). In December 2010, a Florida International University baseball player was charged with rape in the Bahamas (Beasley, 2011). In February 2011, a University of Washington basketball player was accused of raping 16-year-old girl ("No rape charge against," 2011). In February 2012, two Boston University hockey players were charged with sexual assault (Carmichael, 2012). And most recently, in the fall of 2012, three Ohio State football players were questioned and suspected in a rape accusation made by a female student (Hope, 2013).

While there is concern that student-athletes face unfair scrutiny in and by the media due to their higher profile status when compared to nonathletes on college campuses (Coakley, 2009; Melnick, 1992), it remains that student-athletes are continuing to commit violence against women. It is more uncertain at this time whether or not they are doing so at rates higher than their nonathlete peers.

Regardless of student-athlete involvement, sexual violence continues to be highly prevalent on college campuses. In 2007, the National Institute of Justice released the Campus Sexual Assault Study. This study found that one in five undergraduate female students were the victims of attempted or completed sexual assault while in college, and included recommendations for future campus education and prevention (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). Based upon the findings in this study, the Office for Civil Rights released a DCL in April 2011 instructing universities to take more and decisive action to combat sexual violence on campus. The legal basis for this letter rests in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 banning sex discrimination in educational settings.

Moving Forward: Recommendations for Future Research

The DCL outlined how Title IX may be applied to adjudicate student-on-student sexual violence and further explained the responsibility of institutions to begin taking immediate steps to end violence against women on college campuses (Ali, 2011). While there is a call for institutions to more appropriately investigate and sanction perpetrators of sexual assault and provide overall campus education, universities have struggled with how to comply with the new requirements set forth in the

DCL (Kelderman, 2012). The language of the DCL is broad and vague, and many universities lack the oversight, resources, and funding to appropriately comply with the new regulations. The DCL and the ensuing actions by universities are expected to bring a renewed focus on male student-athletes, requiring further, more methodologically sound research to explore incidence, predictors, and risk factors for student-athletes sexually abusing women.

In addition to the need for current empirical data, a shift in theoretical framework should be considered. As Crosset (1999) noted, rape culture is often too broad and does not adequately explain the nature of student-athlete violence against women. Using a sociological approach, it is recommended that future studies are conducted using new institutionalism as a theoretical framework. Sociology, as a discipline, studies social institutions and "sociological institutionalists study the way in which institutions create meaning for individuals" (Lowndes, 2010, p. 65). New institutionalism is quite interdisciplinary, evolving in the 1960s and 1970s from the old institutionalism of economics and political science, and, in short, aims to explain institutions (Nee, 1998). More specifically, new institutionalism posits that individuals "reflect the values of institutions with which they are associated" (Sahu, 2010, p. 117). Institutions may be defined as "webs of interrelated rules and norms that govern social relationships, comprise the formal and informal social constraints that shape" the choices of individuals within an institution (Nee, 1998, p. 8). While it is important to recognize the influence of positive and negative consequences of an individual's actions within an institution, more fundamental to his or her choices are the ultimate values of the institution. Nee (1998) explained further:

[Institutions] specify the limits of legitimate action in the way that the rules of a game specify the structure within which players are free to pursue their strategic moves using pieces that have specific roles and status positions. Norms are implicit or explicit rules of expected behavior that embody the interests and preferences of members of a close-knit group or a community. (p. 8)

Following Crosset's (1999) criticism, rape culture is too broad to determine how often or even if student-athlete violence against women is more prevalent. However, using new institutionalism, one can focus more specifically on a variety of agents that may contribute to the cause, acceptance, and rates of student-athlete sexual violence: Sport teams, athletic departments, and universities themselves all comprise varying institutions. According to Koelble (1995), "institutions are not merely rules, procedures, organizational standards, and governance structures, but also conventions and customs" (p. 234). Sport teams, athletic departments, and universities may all fit under Koelble's definition of institutions.

Further, another strain of theory, feminist institutionalism, may add an additional layer of focus. According to Kenny (2007), new institutionalism is gender blind, and there is a need to include feminist discourse within the framework. Feminist

institutionalism may be defined as how “gender norms operate within institutions and how institutional processes construct and maintain gendered power dynamics” (Lowndes, 2010, p. 65). This is critical in researching violence against women, as sexual assault and other forms of abuse are rooted in power and control. Though new institutionalism acknowledges power dynamics, it often emphasizes those in privileged positions of power (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). While this is a good start, it is crucial to study violence against women using a framework that also examines those without the privilege of power.

Kenny (2007) wrote that feminist institutionalism can provide two critical insights. First, it establishes gender as a crucial element in studying institutions and power. Second, using a gendered approach allows power to be the central focus: “While power is generally underplayed in the new institutionalist literature, feminist research is centrally concerned with gendered power dynamics” (Kenny, 2007, p. 96). Given that sexual violence is predominantly perpetrated by men against women, and the DCL specifically focuses on sex discrimination from Title IX as justification for its demands, feminist institutionalism is a way to narrow the focus even more.

Potential for study may include both quantitative and qualitative methods. There is a clear need for further empirical data on the prevalence of student-athlete violence against women. Collecting quantitative data in this area would be useful. In addition, qualitative data may help fill in some of the gaps on why or how student-athlete violence against women occurs. Using new or feminist institutionalism as a framework, one may investigate a variety of actors, ranging from administrators to coaches to student-athletes themselves, learning more about the context and environments in which student-athlete violence against women is perpetrated. Power dynamics have long influenced the prevalence of sexual violence. Feminist institutionalism, however, may allow a researcher to more closely examine the institutions of intercollegiate athletics, providing greater insight into the intersection between the rules, procedures, governance structures, and norms of college sports and violence against women. Further, new institutionalism extends Crosset’s (1999) call to shift focus away from the individual perpetrator (i.e., the student-athlete) and more closely explore the responsibility of the varying institutions and structures of athletics (i.e., a team, an athletic department, or an entire university). Once a fuller picture is painted of the environments in which student-athletes play, practice, study, and live, prevention efforts can be tailored to help reduce violence against women.

The DCL is now giving institutions the chance to examine what role they play in the prevalence, acceptance—and now, prevention—of sexual violence to women. This renewed focus by universities, whether it is by choice to end violence against women, or by mandate through the DCL, provides a fresh opportunity to address the gaps in research on student-athlete sexual violence. In addition to seeking current empirical data on the prevalence of student-athlete violence, now is the time to address how and why this continues to happen. New and

feminist institutionalism can provide the framework for future studies, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, further addressing the shortcomings of research conducted in the 1990s (Crosset, 1999; Koss & Cleveland, 1996).

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