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# It's Time to Change the Narrative on Sexual Assault in Our High Schools

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Finally, college sexual assault is being taken seriously. There is a sea change in how we are recognizing college sexual assault, and the connections between campus sexual assault and our rape culture. The recently released [documentary](#) *The Hunting Ground* unearths how institutions of higher education are exceptionally dangerous environments for young women, and the failure of administrators to take seriously these sexual assault crimes on their campuses. Even President Obama has made campus sexual assault a top priority for his administration, releasing [guidelines](#) on how campus sexual assaults are to be treated by colleges and universities.

But, here's the problem: It is not just about college. It is also about the pervasive sexual victimization of girls in high school.

The statistics alone are harrowing:

- In a [recently released study](#), the Center for Disease Control finds that **1 in 5 high school females** experienced dating violence.
- The U.S. Department of Justice [reports](#) that approximately **1.8 million adolescents** in the United States have been the victims of sexual assault.
- A [study](#) compiled by the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault found that, in a survey of high school students, **56 percent of girls and 76 percent of boys** believed forced sex was acceptable under some circumstances.
- The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network [reports](#) that **44 percent** of victims are younger than voting age and **girls ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely** than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.
- According to a 2011 [study](#) by the American Association of University Women, in a given school year, **58 percent of 7th-12th graders** experience sexual harassment.

In truth, the problems associated with sexual violence against minors are probably worse than the data suggests. The Children's Advocacy Center [reports](#) younger victims are less likely to report sexual violence, and are at a higher risk of suffering from long-term negative debilitating effects, such as PTSD, major depression, and eating disorders.

Yet, our high schools are failing to generate meaningful discussion and awareness of sexual assault, despite its pervasiveness. The result is that too often, girls are left violated, hurt, voiceless, and absolutely unaware of their rights.

Under [Title IX](#) of the Education Amendments of 1972, all public and private schools -- at the elementary, secondary and collegiate levels -- that receive any federal funding are obligated to "respond promptly and effectively to sexual violence against students." However, Title IX complaints are typically filed more frequently at the collegiate level, with 87 colleges in the U.S. currently under investigation by the Department of Education for Title IX violations and only 25 school districts facing the same scrutiny.

In a [recent interview](#), Colby Bruno, senior legal counsel at the Victim Rights Law Center, points out that in addressing rape, "High schools are basically where colleges were like 15 years ago -- in the Dark Ages", considering 9 out of 10 schools he contacted about sexual violence cases were unaware that Title IX applied to them.

Even the mental health professionals tasked with helping our youth are too often uninformed. Break the Cycle, an organization that focuses on adolescent dating violence, found that more than [80 percent](#) of high school guidance counselors feel unprepared in dealing with reports of sexual violence.

Private schools have their own set of problems, especially secondary boarding schools. Currently, there are no national organizations that collect information from private/independent boarding schools regarding sexual violence, despite the fact that boarding school students are minors who are essentially living in a collegiate environment. An amass of scandals, including the recent appalling [sexual assault](#) case at St. Paul's School, highlight a culture of nonconsensual sexual activity.

Regardless of where she is, a high school girl subject to rape, sexual assault or cyber-bullying, is [too often](#) framed as a slut. She is shamed, denounced and ridiculed as a whore, not a victim.

It is the same, entrenched narrative that many young women have endured when sexually assaulted on college campuses.

We must admit that rape culture begins in high school -- all high schools. If we are serious about ending our tolerance for sexual violence, then we must confront the reality that high school (and sometimes even middle school) girls are being subject to sexual assault. It is time to change the narrative, the policies, and the laws for girls who are on the hunting grounds of our public and private high schools.

*This blog was co-written by Jeevna Sheth, a sophomore at The University of Chicago, studying Political Science and Human Rights.*

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