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COLLEGE WOMEN AT GREATER RISK FOR RAPE, SEXUAL ASSAULT

With fall semester classes now under way at Oklahoma colleges and universities, college women should be aware they are at greater risk for becoming victims of rape or sexual assault, said Julie Young, deputy commissioner for domestic violence/sexual assault services at the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

“Most college rape and sexual assault cases fall into the category of date rape or acquaintance rape,” Young said. “Most people think of rape offenders as strangers, but – especially in a college setting – the offender usually is an acquaintance, date or friend. Approximately nine out of 10 college-age victims know their offenders.”

Young said one in 36 college women is a victim of rape or attempted rape every year. More than 80 percent of women who report being raped are under the age of 24.

The fact that alcohol flows freely on college campuses is one reason rape and sexual assault occur, Young said. Approximately 90 percent of campus rapes, in fact, involve alcohol, notes a study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

“Alcohol brings an entirely new dimension to rape and sexual assault, for both college-aged men and women,” Young noted. “When inhibitions are lowered and a

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woman says 'no,' her date or acquaintance may dismiss this, believing she really means 'yes.' However, in all cases, 'no' means 'no.' Rape is defined as 'unwanted attempted penetration by force or the threat of force.' If a man engages in sexual relations with a woman against her will, it is a violent crime, one that can ultimately lead to prison."

For women, the consumption of alcohol may contribute to a belief they are the ones at fault, the ones really responsible for the assault.

"When a rape or sexual assault occurs after a woman has been drinking alcohol, her feelings of self-reproach and shame are much higher than if she hadn't been drinking," Young said. "As a result, she is less likely to report being sexually assaulted for fear she won't be taken seriously, or that reporting the incident will evolve into a 'who believes him and who believes her' situation. Some women aren't even sure who to call."

Estimates are that fewer than 5 percent of sexual assaults or attempted sexual assaults on campus are reported to law enforcement or other campus officials, she added. "More than half of college women who are sexually assaulted don't report it because they don't want other people to know about it, yet two-thirds of them will tell a friend."

Reporting the crime of rape or sexual assault, either to campus or city police, is vital, Young said, because many men who rape or commit sexual assault will do it again.

"Perpetrators typically don't stop at one victim," she said.

In Oklahoma, for instance, a polygraph test of 43 sex offenders at one correctional facility found that each had sexually assaulted an average of 45 victims. One program in Colorado found that number to be significantly higher, with incarcerated sex offenders

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assaulting an average of 161 victims each.

Although most college campuses don't have rape crisis centers, some universities have women's health centers and virtually all have counseling centers, Young said.

"After reporting a rape or sexual assault to either campus or local police, it is important to receive follow-up counseling. I would encourage victims to take advantage of services offered either on or off campus. Rape and sexual assault are violent crimes that often have serious physical and mental health consequences. Victims have to realize they are not the ones at fault."

Young encouraged anybody with questions, or those needing support or counseling services, to call the ODMHSAS "Safeline," which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The number is **1-800-522-7233**.

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Editor's Note: Julie Young, deputy commissioner for domestic violence/sexual assault services at the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, is available for interview. To arrange an interview, call Pam McKeown, ODMHSAS Public Information Office, at 405-522-5102.