

# Summary of Storylines of Physical and Sexual Assault in Urban Nightlife: The Impact of Individual Disposition and Social Context

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Note: This study was submitted as a dissertation and was not published in a peer reviewed journal. It is a federally-funded grant final report submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice.

## Background

This study examined specific storylines of physical and sexual assault in urban nightlife venues (i.e., bars and nightclubs) and the individual-level factors and contextual influences that shaped storylines of physical and sexual assault. Information about how individuals managed physical and sexual assault victimization risk in these social locations was also examined. This study was a secondary analysis of a larger multi-method ethnographic study of the alcohol-drugs-crime (ADC) connection in urban nightlife scenes in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Data was obtained from 51 interviews (26 males and 25 females) and through direct observation of 33 nightlife events. Key concepts that contributed to offending and victimization were generated and storylines were created. "Storylines encompass all of the events and conditions that increase the likelihood of crime or victimization the individual's perception of and reaction to these events and conditions, interactions with others, the social contexts in which these interactions occur, as well as the offender or victim's emotional state and level of self-control" (Agnew 2006). Storylines begin with the occurrence of a tangible event; that is, "something happens" to an individual (Agnew 2006). The event is unexpected and represents' a deviation from typical or routine aspects of one's everyday life. Identity and contextual profiles were then constructed for each respondent that reported an offending or victimization experience. Information used to create the contextual profiles included: types of venues, frequency of attendance, motivations, social organization of venue, cultural atmosphere, if venues were perceived as dangerous or not, level of alcohol and drug use, and the role and attitude of security and/or police.

The following summary provides the findings related to sexual assault victimization. None of the respondents reported sexual assault perpetration. The full report can be found at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230408.pdf>.

## General Findings

- 41 sexual assault victimizations within the past 5 years were reported among 15 different respondents
- 80% of women had experienced one or more incidents of sexual assault within the past 5 years
- None of the women reported incidents to the police or other authorities
- Reasons for not reporting sexual assault incidents included: perceived culpability on the part of the victim, perceived lack of seriousness of the incident, and inability of the victim to identify the perpetrator.

## Storylines of Sexual Assault

- *Competing definitions of the situation.* “Misinterpretation of what was perceived as a sexualized behavior performed by the victim, directed at the offender and perceived as inviting sexual contact.” The offender engaged in some form of more aggressive sexual behavior or began to forcefully pursue a sexual encounter.
  - Reported 9 times among 15 different respondents
- *Opportunistic predation.* “Unwanted sexual groping of female victim by male stranger or a group of strangers, with whom the individual had no prior contact or interaction with.”
  - Reported 6 times among 15 different respondents
- *Drug and alcohol use.* “Voluntary or involuntary use of drugs or alcohol to the point of severe inebriation, followed by a completed or attempted sexual assault.”
  - Reported 3 times among 15 different respondents

## Individual-Level Influences on Storyline for Sexual Assault

- 16 of 20 respondents reported 1 more identity disruptions in youth (i.e., parental separation/divorce, lack of parenting, frequently moving residences, disjunction between culturally proscribed norms & culturally experienced norms).
- 9 of 20 respondents reported delinquent peer involvement (i.e., drug involvement & truancy).
- 16 of 20 respondents reported current moderate-heavy alcohol use (as reported in past 6 months)
- 12 of 20 respondents reported current moderate-heavy drug use (as reported in past 6 months)
- 13 of 20 respondents reported prior victimization (i.e., sexual, verbal harassment, personal theft, & other).
- 16 of 20 respondents reported high outing frequency (i.e., nightlife events attended per week).

## Identity Profiles for Sexual Assault

### *Drug and Alcohol Use*

- 6 of 20 classified as current or former drug users.
- Key characteristics included connection to drug-related music collectives (i.e., raves & EDM nightlife scenes) & current involvement in nightlife.
- Long-term drug use was the primary reason for current involvement in nightlife.

### *Regular Girls & Alcohol Outlets*

- 14 of 20 respondents reported regular attendance at mainstream nightlife events held in crowded venues.
- Primary motivations for attendance were to socialize with friends, relax, or dance.
- Majority of respondents reported moderate alcohol use.

## Contextual Influences on Storyline for Sexual Assault

- Majority of victimization occurred at commercial nightlife events (atmosphere of elitism, prioritization of social status and style, highly sexualized gendered interaction, & “hooking-up” objectives).
- Traditional gender role constructions increased the likelihood of sexual assault storylines.
- Three dimensions of a commercial nightlife venue’s social organization shaped sexual assault storylines:
  - Levels of venue crowding
  - Role of venue security
  - Sex and alcohol as themes around which the event was organized

## **Managing Risk of Sexual Assault by Respondents**

### *Individual-level risk management tactics*

- Shaming aggressors to deter future incidents
- Clubbing in groups
- Monitoring alcohol purchases (and consumption levels)
- Use of gestures and signals to alert friends to potentially compromising situations
- Avoiding interactions with strangers

### *Environmental-level risk management tactics*

- Avoided certain locations that they perceived to be more dangerous
- Shifted between venues based on who they were with on a particular evening

## **Limitations**

Participants were recruited by store owners in popular nightlife areas from a major metropolitan area; findings to other populations or geographic areas may not be generalizable.