Do We Need to Talk?
Exploring the Underreporting of Sexual Violence Among Students at Duke University

Julia Simenauer

Particularly in light of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in this essay, the names and some identifying characteristics of those interviewed have been changed in order to protect the identities of these women.

As I sit down to talk to Lindsay Robbins, a senior at Duke University, I know the topic of conversation is going to be difficult and, in many ways, painful. Both suffering and secrecy are intrinsic to the subject at hand. Lindsay begins by acknowledging, “I don’t want this to be a secret, but there are people that I know wouldn’t react well.”

I had decided to reach out to women like Lindsay on a warm autumn evening several weeks prior. It is just before sunset as I head into Perkin’s Library on Duke’s West Campus. It is a typical Monday, and I am completely absorbed in the staggering amount of work I have to complete within the next several hours. At times like these—with deadlines and exams fast approaching—it’s nearly impossible to rip me out of my universe of academic anxiety. However, on this occasion, I catch a glimpse of a yellow flyer that stops me dead in my tracks. The word that roots me to the spot is rapist.

This is not a word we often see in huge block letters in public.

I stop to read the full sentence and let it hit me like a punch to the stomach: “I go to Duke, but the places I can go at Duke are limited by my rapist—they are limited by the fact that I know I might see him.”

This statement forces a difficult realization upon its reader. It is not a vague, abstract statement about sexual assault in general or even just rape in college specifically. This flyer is so hard-hitting because it I have no distance from it. It forces me to make the hard connection between something I cherish—Duke and its student body—with something utterly abominable—rape.

It is a truth that often goes ignored, but one that Lindsay knows all too well: there are students at Duke University who are rapists. This is not something we like to think about, let alone talk about.
But as I find a table inside the library and try to focus on my work, I cannot get the flyer’s speaker out of my mind. I look at the female students studying around me, and realize the this matter is likely more prevalent and immediate than I would have ever guessed. I would soon find out the heartbreaking truth in this hunch.

In the coming weeks, as this subject continues to infiltrate my thoughts, I decide to seek out some of Duke’s women who have been effected by sexual violence. This is not an easy task—those affected are often understandably hesitant to speak openly about their experience. Nonetheless, there are still many women who promote the importance of awareness and open dialogue about sexual crimes. Despite the sensitivity—and even the stigma—surrounding these topics, these women are willing to share their stories. They often use many of the female organizations on campus as an outlet.

Several visits to the Duke University Women’s Center provide me with the opportunity to meet with the women who do seek healing through counseling and discussion, although they are certainly in the minority. I first meet Lindsay, who knows that her willingness to talk about her experience may help other women who are suffering. She also knows that it is often easier to not open up.

“One of the biggest problems is that you’re just not going to talk about it, most likely,” she says. “I’m very open about what happened to me now, but it’s taken three years. Right after it happened, I wasn’t talking about it.”

Given the emotional trauma inflicted by these offenses, it is certainly not surprising to learn that sexual violence is the most drastically unreported crime. According to the best available data provided by the U.S. Department of Justice, more than 95% incidents of sexual assault on college campuses go unreported. With sexual assault, we are now dealing with an issue far more delicate and intricate than crime of a nonsexual nature. Justifiably or not, the blame is often considered “blurry” and responsibility is shared between both perpetrator and victim. There is a massive amount of shame involved. Everyone begins feeling enormously uncomfortable.

Perhaps this is what makes sexual violence a crime that typically goes unspoken, despite being so destructive and pervasive. When such a significant proportion of victims are opting not to report these crimes against them, we have to recognize that there must be an explanation for doing so.

Through Lindsay, I meet another young woman who has been the victim of sexual abuse at Duke University. Like Lindsay, Jacqueline Sanders is among the 95% of women who do not choose to file an official report.

She explains, “I felt like I had enough on my plate just dealing with what had happened to me, I honestly didn’t have the energy to go through the steps of taking legal action. I didn’t want to have to keep reliving the experience and I definitely was terrified of the thought of having to confront…this guy.” She doesn’t tell me the name of her rapist.

It is startling to recognize how many aspects of her life have been instantaneously mutilated by this single act, but it is unlikely that her assailant will ever fully understand the extent to the damage he has caused.
Lindsay has a similar experience. “The worst part is that sometimes I feel like he doesn’t even think he’s done anything wrong.”

It is this type of sickening, entitled thinking that is only worsened when these individuals are not turned in for their crimes. They are not being punished or held accountable for the pain they inflict, and the mentality of self-entitlement is furthered. But it is hard to put the onus on the victims to report their assailters when there is often as much reason to keep silent as there is to speak up.

According to a study published by RAINN, only 5% of all sexual crimes committed will result in a court conviction. The percentage is even smaller when these crimes are committed on a college campus. With such slight odds of legal action, victims risk prolonging the trauma of their experience with little potential of justice ever being served.

Society is even more reluctant to castigate men as sexual assailants when the accused are college undergraduates. Often when women report sexual abuse in this context, we hear about how the allegations pose to ruin the life of the defending party. The man is illustrated as youthful, innocent, and full of potential—if the woman is lying, she will have destroyed his bright, limitless future.

Instead, we tend to associate the title of *rapist* with “creepy” men. We picture aggressive sociopaths that await the perfect opportunity—women walking home in dark alleys after midnight—and then strike. When asked to describe a typical rapist, very few will come up with the image of a young, decorous college student wearing a Ralph Lauren fleece with slacks, walking around with an iPad. This may explain in part why many women point to the fear that they “will not be believed,” when asked why they choose to keep quiet.

Lindsay is well-versed with these types of additional hardships that accompany being a survivor of sexual assault at a top-ten university. She has lived through the unimaginable pain of being raped during her first year away from home as a freshman in college. She was not assaulted on the street outside of seedy bar or attacked by an intruder in her apartment. She was sexually violated by someone she knew and trusted, someone she called a close friend. Someone who was raised in a wealthy family, had a girlfriend, went to a prestigious school, and had never been convicted of a crime in his life.

It is this proximity to her assailter that makes her pain so persistently excruciating. She tells me plainly, “I really can’t have a healthy relationship with men at this school. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

Like the anonymous voice in the yellow flyer, she cannot live a life that is sequestered from her trauma. She and her rapist share social circles. He has even met her parents.

“I haven’t told anyone who is friends with him. And my parents know him well, but obviously I would never tell them,” Lindsay explains calmly.

Her voice does not waver as she recounts some details from the night she was assaulted, “We were in my room alone, hooking up, and I realized he wanted to have sex with me. I remember saying, ‘Wait, no,’ over and over again, but he acted like he didn’t hear me. He pretty much just held me down and had sex with me anyway.”
The prevalence of this tragedy is confirmed by another Duke senior, Kelly Wolfe, a student leader for one of several feminist women’s groups on campus. She works closely with women who have been the victims of sexual crimes, and is among the students and faculty who work tirelessly to prevent future incidences through increased education and awareness.

“One in five women at Duke are sexually assaulted during their four years in college, and that’s a very conservative number,” Kelly tells me, “Some studies give a number as high as one in four.”

As my mouth falls open, she keeps talking, “Six cases of rape were officially reported and brought before the Office of Student Conduct in the 2011-2012 academic year, but something closer to 160 cases of sexual assault were unofficially reported to administration in some form of the student seeking help.”

There is a long pause as Kelly lets these number sink in. When she catches my eye, she sighs “And even that is a fraction of what is actually happening.”

These types of statistics are shocking, but seem almost callous. Though staggering, these numbers will never be able to quantify the underlying pain and violation they seek to represent. However, through her work, Kelly has had the opportunity to attach real women and personal accounts to these abstract statistics. She has worked to counsel many women seeking help after sex-related traumas, and has encountered numerous situations similar to Lindsay’s in which official reports are never filed.

“I think part of the reason it gets swept under the rug is that we really do have trouble accepting stories of rape especially by acquaintances, guys that we go home with, or by partners.”

Kelly also mentions that reports of these incidents occur most commonly within the parameters of Duke’s fraternity and sorority social scene, the very institutions that promote themselves as being meticulously selective for the best of the best.

“I do feel that [sexual crime] is more prevalent in the Greek system,” she says, “If only because there are more opportunities.” Perhaps this is no surprise—Greek life is always associated with a heavy-drinking culture, which increases sexual activity in general, and risky sexual behavior in particular. But alcohol doesn’t make it okay. Nothing makes it okay.

Much of my conversation with Lindsay, who is affiliated with one of Duke’s sororities, also helps to shed light on the role of Greek life in creating an environment that facilitates risky sexual behavior, and far too often, sex without consent.

“Women at this school are often put in a position where they are trying to be good enough for men. I think a lot of that is perpetrated by Greek life, especially how sorority status is primarily determined by the fraternities that they associate with. It’s unfortunate and it’s not the other way around,” she says firmly.

Kelly elaborates, “Anytime you are actively or implicitly encourage to hook up with someone it is going to create—if not opportunities for sexual assault—very uncomfortable sexual situations.”

Uncomfortable, indeed. The lines between awkward sex, unwanted sex, unconsented sex, and nonconsensual sex (i.e. flat-out rape) may be blurry—
especially when alcohol is involved—but who walks away feeling irreversibly violated? An overwhelming majority of the time, it’s the woman.

Kelly recognizes this unclear distinction as well, and knows that it’s a major problem in and of itself. “Consider a woman who goes home and only has sex with a guy because her sorority sisters told her she should—okay, that’s not rape, but it’s still a shitty experience, to say the least.

“Situations do exist, when the guy truly makes a mistake—there’s a misunderstanding or they’re both too drunk, but I have never heard any accounts from these floods of women in which they felt that their rapist was anything but a calculated rapist.”

And that’s the point—regardless of intent, the damage is done. Unfortunately, the state of artificial social superiority often implemented by the Greek system not only creates dangerous sexual conditions, but also represses victims from reporting sexual crimes when they do occur. Furthermore, the impact of these crimes infiltrates every aspect of their life here at Duke, which some would argue creates a gender obstacle within the academic institution in which many females are reeling from emotional trauma while struggling to stay on top of their work.

The person who should be reeling from the consequences of these devastating incidents—carrying the shame, guilt and regret—are the same perpetrators that walk free. The aftermath is now left for the victims—the violated women—to cope with in the midst of Duke’s already hefty academic and social stresses.

“There’s no way it won’t effect your work. It has to. Life isn’t compartmentalized, as much as we try. Everything bleeds together. I mean, we can’t separate it,” Lindsay explains. And she knows first hand.

“It takes time to recover from any sort of trauma, and at Duke you have to deal with these things in the middle of it all. There’s no time that you can just take off from everything; there’s not a huge amount of time that you can just take off from life. If you have three tests next week and you were sexually assaulted on Saturday, you might just need to get through those three tests.”

I can’t help but feel it is a tragic state of things when academia is prioritized over our health, over our safety, and over our quality of life. When I mention this, Lindsay agrees, “It’s a major problem, especially when it comes to reporting because by the time you do decide to deal with it, it may be too late to get some of the closure that you need.”

This was exactly the complaint of the many students who protested the change made to the statue of limitations for student sexual misconduct. Earlier in 2012, the University announced that the period of time in which students could file an official report for an incident had been changed from two years following the incident to one year. The Duke student body was rightfully outraged. Shortening the statue of limitations sent a strong message to victims of sexual abuse: we don’t want to hear about it.

But the student body, particularly a number of feminist student organizations, did not simply accept this new policy. They immediately began to take action. After long weeks of active student protest—including the yellow flyers
posted outside of Perkin’s Library to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual assault on campus—the University finally reversed its decision and completely eliminated the statue of limitations. It was a remarkable victory.

Like many victims, Jacqueline was thrilled when Duke changed its stance, even though she herself did not opt to file a report and has no plans for doing so in the future.

“It’s not always in the best interest of the victim to turn in [their assailter], but we need to make sure they know the option is open. I don’t think I would ever report the boy who raped me, but it is a relief knowing that I could at any point if I wanted to.”

Before the elimination of the statue of limitations, another flyer on campus as part of the Rape Campaign read: “I tried to tell you Duke. You just. Wouldn’t. Listen.”

But there are many students who read your words and heard you loud and clear. I speak as one of them. You don’t have to talk, but if you choose to, we are listening.