

# “Never Go Out Alone”: An Analysis of College Rape Prevention Tips

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**Abstract** The role of women in college sexual assault prevention and risk reduction has been controversial as movements for men’s participation become more popular. Research on college sexual assault prevention and risk reduction has largely focused on individual programs or universities. Previous research has largely avoided larger studies of the messages many colleges give their students regarding who is responsible for rape prevention on campus. This article attempts to fill that gap by examining rape prevention and risk reduction tips posted on 40 college websites. Each tip was analyzed for frequency and intended audience and the women’s tips as a group were analyzed for common themes. Researchers found that most tips are still directed at women and that they convey four main messages: there are no safe places for women, women can’t trust anyone, women should never be alone, and women are vulnerable. Findings imply that the burden of college sexual assault prevention still falls primarily on female students.

**Keywords** Sexual assault · Prevention · Risk reduction · College students · Rape myths · Blaming the victim

## Introduction

Sexual assault remains an overwhelming problem in the United States, especially for college women (Camody 2005). Rates of sexual assault among college populations have stayed relatively stable for the last five decades (Adams-Curtis and

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Forbes 2004; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Marine 2004; Sampson 2002) with the most recent studies reporting that 19 % of women have been victim to an attempted or completed sexual assault during college (Center for Disease Control 2012). Many researchers have evidenced the harmful effects of sexual assault on women victimized during their undergraduate careers (Benson et al. 2007; Schwartz and Leggett 1999; Gurette and Caron 2007). Despite the high stakes and likelihood of college sexual assault, colleges struggle with which measures to put in place to best prevent sexual assault on their own campuses.

The role of women in sexual assault prevention and risk reduction has recently become increasingly controversial as movements for men's participation become more popular. Two dominant paradigms have emerged regarding women's involvement in rape prevention. The first argues that women's involvement in sexual assault prevention is empowering and effective, particularly in respect to self-defense training and avoidance of risky situations (de Becker 1997; Higginbotham 2008; Warshaw 1994). The second paradigm challenges the notion that women's risk reduction is effective, especially when compared to the constant fear that results from daily risk reduction and the tendency to blame rape victims who engaged in a "risky" behavior (Filipovic 2008; Hall 2004; Perry 2008; Ryan 1972; Valenti 2008). Instead, advocates of the second paradigm advocate for an approach to rape prevention that involves men and fights systemic causes of sexual assault (Filipovic 2008; Kimmel 2008; Warshaw 1994).

In a college setting, the debate has increasing importance since sexual assault rates are highest in women between 18 and 24 years old and college review boards may determine who to fault in a case of sexual misconduct on campus (Warshaw 1994). Previous research about this population has primarily focused on individual programs or universities to determine the expectations of women in rape prevention and risk reduction efforts and the effectiveness of various initiatives (Foubert et al. 2010; Morrison 2000; Orchowski et al. 2008; Pinzone-Glover et al. 1998; Rich et al. 2010). Research addressing many colleges and the surrounding American collegiate culture concerning women's role in rape prevention has been far less prevalent.

Broader studies that examine many universities have focused mainly on the representation of women in rape prevention materials and the effectiveness of a specific type of program (Brecklin and Ullman 2005; McCaughey and King 1995; Piccigallo et al. 2012). Usually, these types of studies focus on specific types of campaigns or classes rather than the messages colleges make available at all times. Studies examining rape prevention and risk reduction tips on college campuses are lacking from the academic discourse on sexual assault prevention.

Our study aims to fill that gap by examining the rape prevention and risk reduction tips offered by colleges to their students year-round. In particular, we investigated the messages sent to women through these types of tips to attempt to discover the current expected role of college women in sexual assault prevention and risk reduction. To explore this topic, we focused on three main questions: What are the most common rape prevention tips for women? What would a woman's life look like if she adhered to the most common tips? What does this say about the role of women in rape prevention?

## Method

Rape prevention tips were gathered from a systematic sample of 40 college websites. College websites offer multiple advantages over other possible sources for tips since they directly address the age groups at the highest risk, they are more trustworthy than other popular sources for prevention lore, and they are easily accessible both to researchers and any interested student.

Colleges included in the sample had to fit three criteria in order to ensure that they met the qualifications of a high risk campus. We only included 4-year institutions with physical campuses because students at this type of school are most likely to desire the full college experience, including socializing and partying with peers. We also required that all colleges in the study were mixed-sex since most sexual assaults are perpetrated by men on women. Colleges were also required to have fraternities and/or sororities as these institutions have been linked with a variety of risk factors for sexual assault (Kimmel 2008; Sanday 2007).

We used systematic sampling to choose websites from the college search engine Big Future on the College Board website. College Board offers many services to prospective college students including registration and information for Advanced Placement high school courses and registration for the SAT. Due to high school students' familiarity with the site, the college search engine has become popular with prospective students and is comprehensive and frequently updated. Big Future also has filters that permitted us to limit our results according to the previously described parameters. Big Future found 907 schools that fit our inclusion criteria. We used a systematic sample to select every twenty-second school from an alphabetical list for our sample.

After selecting 40 colleges, we used their website-specific search tools to find sexual assault prevention tips. Search terms used included "rape," "sexual assault," "crime," and "prevention tips." We examined all search results for sexual assault prevention tips that were specifically marked as either "rape prevention" or "sexual assault prevention" tips. We also would have used "risk reduction" as an indicator; however, none of the websites in the study used those terms. General crime prevention tips were excluded from the study as their intent to prevent sexual assault was unclear, especially in schools that habitually reported zero completed sexual assaults among their students. Most tips were found on a crime prevention page of the university's website. Often, sexual assault prevention tips were posted on the same page as the legally mandated annual fire and safety report. Some tips were isolated on a crime prevention page specifically addressing sexual assault. We did not find any tips on web pages for universities' student resource centers (such as women's resource centers or student health centers) or academic programs.

We recorded every tip that fit these qualifications for analysis of their frequency, intended audience, and themes common to other tips. When considering frequency, tips were considered the same if their wording was identical or their differences were purely syntactical. For example, "don't drink too much" was considered with "limit drinking" to account for frequency of the tip to limit alcohol consumption. We examined intended audience to fit into one of four categories: intended for women, intended for men, gender neutral tip, and unclear audience. Tips were

placed into a category based on indicators such as use of a victim or perpetrator's point of view, gendered pronouns, and explicit statements of intended audience (i.e. "Men Stopping Acquaintance Rape").

## Findings

We analyzed 494 tips from 15 schools for frequency, intended audience, and common themes. Of those tips, 397 were directed at women (80.36 %), 69 were directed at men (13.97 %), 27 were gender neutral (5.47 %), and one tip had an unclear audience (0.20 %). Out of the most recurrent 25 tips, only one was directed at men while the rest were directed at women (see Table 1). Colleges clearly write most of their sexual assault prevention tips for women, even if they do also include suggestions for men. Many of the tips intended for women reinforced four main ideas: women are vulnerable, there are no safe places for women, women should never be alone, and women can't trust anyone.

Interestingly, we found that 25 schools (62.5 %) did not provide any sexual assault prevention tips online. In most cases, these schools had very little information about sexual assault on their websites. Websites without tips often only provided federally mandated crime statistics for the past 3 years and information about the institutional response to sexual assault allegations. The way these schools treat sexual assault prevention on their websites highlights the invisibility of sexual violence on many college campuses, especially small- and medium-sized schools. Occasionally, some schools provided a wealth of information on sexual assault prevention activities on campus and resources for sexual assault victims, despite having no sexual assault prevention tips. These schools nearly always explained their decision to omit sexual assault prevention tips by linking common prevention tips to unfair burden on women and victim blaming. Schools that did not include any sexual assault prevention tips on their websites marked the two extremes in college sexual assault response: they either ignored sexual assault as a problem on their campuses or had strong institutional support of survivors that extended beyond simple tips on a website.

Our exploration of common themes concentrated on women's sexual assault prevention tips. We found that although most of the tips related more to risk reduction than prevention of sexual assault, colleges exclusively referred to women's role as sexual assault prevention, even if they acknowledge that their prevention tips were intended to reduce risky behavior in women. In our analysis of the 397 women's prevention tips, we found four common themes: there are no safe places, you can't trust anyone, never be alone, and you are vulnerable.

### There are No Safe Places

Nearly all colleges addressed the issue of place in their sexual assault prevention tips for women. Some schools organized their tips by the space in which to use them. For example, one school used the categories "Be Alert Where You Live," "Be Alert When Walking," and "Be Alert in Vehicles." The tips following each

**Table 1** Most common sexual assault prevention tips

Tip	Audience	Frequency
Communicate sexual limits	Women	15
Trust your instincts	Women	15
Be aware of surroundings	Women	12
Leave unsafe or uncomfortable situations	Women	12
Avoid secluded areas	Women	8
Lock your doors	Women	8
Make a scene	Women	7
Walk in well traveled areas	Women	7
Avoid being alone	Women	6
Be assertive	Women	6
Don't drink very much	Women	6
Meet new dates in public places	Women	6
No means no	Men	6
Walk in well lit places	Women	6
Ask a friend to walk you to your destination	Women	5
Don't open doors unless you know who's there	Women	5
Don't meet first dates alone	Women	5
Don't use drugs or alcohol	Women	5
Don't walk alone at night	Women	5
Have your keys ready before reaching your destination	Women	5
Learn about potential boyfriends before dates	Women	5
Say no	Women	5
Set sexual limits	Women	5
Take a self-defense class	Women	5
Walk with confidence	Women	5

category pertained to the particular place or scenario included in the title, insinuating that women need to think about and actively engage in sexual assault prevention in all of the listed places. Colleges that didn't use place-specific categories would often reference place when offering a tip by phrases such as, "if you are at a party or other group function," or "inside your residence hall room."

The tips that followed references to a certain place often pointed out dangers specific to the described scenario. For example the tip, "Be careful when inviting someone to your residence or accepting an invitation to theirs," points out women's homes and their acquaintances' homes are both unsafe places to meet acquaintances. Similarly, "When you go out, do so with people that you trust to look out for your safety. Be a good friend—keep an eye on your friends to make sure they are safe," tells women to look out for each other when out of the house because public can be a dangerous place for women. While general tips tended to be the most frequent, many schools included tips more specific to certain scenarios such as,

“Keep a telephone near your bed.” These tips emphasized the degree of fear women should maintain even in the places where they should have the most control.

Some schools would build tips upon each other to convince women that certain spaces are dangerous. The tips, “Avoid walking alone at night,” followed by, “If you must walk alone, stay in well-lighted areas, away from alleys, bushes, and entryways,” suggest together that walking anywhere alone is already unsafe, but highlights alleys, bushes, and entryways as the most dangerous places to be avoided. Many schools connected consideration for dangerous places with tips that were not necessarily specific to a certain location using this method.

Collectively, tips commenting on the dangers of certain spaces implicate that there are no safe places for women. Women’s tips referenced essentially all possible places a woman could go as dangerous including cars, predictable paths, parking lots, entryways, secluded areas, isolated roads, the internet, dates, men’s bedrooms, women’s personal homes, anywhere with strangers, anywhere with new friends, anywhere with men, anywhere where a woman is alone, and anywhere public after nightfall, as well as the catch-all place of “your surroundings.” In order to protect themselves against the risky places referenced by colleges, women must think about sexual assault prevention at all times in all scenarios. In contrast, none of the men’s tips suggested that certain places were more dangerous for men. Men’s tips also did not suggest that men should make these spaces safer for women. In combination, the men’s and women’s prevention tips suggested that women must be prepared for a sexual assault in all places at all times, but that men need not share any of that burden with them.

### You Can’t Trust Anyone

Tips frequently warned women to take precautions with the people surrounding them, especially strangers and recent acquaintances. Many tips of this nature recommended a constant vigilance for women around someone unfamiliar. For example, “Roll the windows down slightly if someone comes to help you in your car,” and “Don’t let strangers use your phone,” indicate the importance of using caution when interacting with someone new. Other tips supported avoiding new people altogether. The tips “Don’t pick up hitchhikers,” and “Avoid being alone with strangers” suggest that engaging unfamiliar people is too risky, regardless of the circumstances.

Women were instructed to be particularly careful with new romantic partners. Tips concerned with dating often advocated that women refuse to meet a date without someone else to supervise the encounter. Tips such as, “Don’t meet first dates alone,” and “Meet new dates in a public place,” teach women to fear new partners as potential rapists who must be vetted before some type of audience. Other tips recommended behavior to make dating less risky, including “Don’t be alone with a new date in a car,” and “Don’t drink excessively on a date.” These tips indicate that new partners are likely to take advantage of their dates if given the opportunity. We found no tips for men that suggested that romantic partners should be considered as potential threats, although we did occasionally find tips that advised men against accidentally appearing threatening to a romantic partner. In

general, tips related to dating habits depict men who show an interest in a woman as potential sexual aggressors who need to be carefully monitored and require their dates to remain vigilant.

Some tips expressed a need for women to be skeptical of everyone around them, regardless of how they met or how well they know each other. For example, “Don’t drink anything you have not brought or opened yourself,” suggests that regardless of who you choose to drink with (and what you’re drinking), women shouldn’t trust anyone to handle their beverage except themselves. This tip was followed by, “Don’t drink from another person’s container.” Since sharing drinks with a stranger or recent acquaintance is considered a social taboo, this tip largely refers to the potential that a friend could be the person attempting to take advantage of a woman. The idea that friends should be feared is exclusive to women’s sexual assault prevention tips. In men’s sexual assault prevention tips and even general crime prevention tips, friends are usually treated as trustworthy allies. For women, no acquaintance, friend, or romantic partner was exempt from suspicion.

### Never Be Alone

Many tips discussed potential dangers associated with spending time alone. Some of the most common tips advocated for avoiding solitude altogether, such as, “Avoid being alone,” and “Don’t walk alone at night.” Both of these tips offer no acceptable exceptions to their proposed rule and they were often followed with more specific scenarios in which solitude is even more dangerous. Tips like “Avoid being alone with strangers,” and “Don’t tell anyone that you’re alone,” emphasize the riskiness of solitude and hint at potential horrific scenarios that could result from spending time alone.

Other tips broached the issue of solitude by advocating some form of the buddy system. For example, “Ask a friend to walk you to your destination,” offers a substitute to walking alone to stress the importance of avoiding solitude. Specific alternatives to being alone varied greatly in substance, but were prevalent among the sample. Among these tips were suggestions like, “Call the campus escort service,” and “Accept rides from people you know well.” All of these tips advocated for identifying someone who could safely accompany a woman through a situation she would otherwise need to face alone.

If a woman needed to be alone, colleges also provided tips to minimize her solitude. Tips like “Avoid isolated roads,” and “Walk facing traffic,” place women in well-traveled places, even if the people around them are strangers. Other tips offered suggestions to make reaching out to someone easier when no one is in the immediate areas such as, “Keep a telephone near your bed,” and “Know your neighbors.” Tips like these aim to make it easier to contact someone who can help if an assailant appears. These tips hint that women are most vulnerable to attack when alone and that women should have a backup plan in place to summon someone who can help them in a dangerous situation.

## You are Vulnerable

All of the previously discussed categories build up to one overarching message that had a presence in nearly every tip with an intended female audience: women are vulnerable. Consider some of the tips we have already discussed. Women should know to “call the campus escort service” because women are more vulnerable without an escort. “Don’t drink excessively on a date,” reminds women they are already vulnerable while on a date and should exercise caution in doing anything that would make them more vulnerable. “Keep a telephone near your bed,” reminds women that they are vulnerable to attack even in the comfort of their own homes. Most women’s tips were accompanied with a subtle reminder that women could be sexually assaulted whenever they are vulnerable and that women are vulnerable at all times.

Women’s vulnerability also came up in tips intended for a male audience. For example, “Don’t encourage your date to drink,” emphasizes women’s vulnerability in conjunction with alcohol while also giving men the power to stop a date’s risky choice. “Don’t pressure a woman to have sex,” implies that women are especially vulnerable when feeling pressured and advocates that men take that into consideration when interacting with sexual partners. Even in tips not intended for women, the subject of female vulnerability came up regularly and often placed women in a passively resistant role in response to that vulnerability.

Tips for active resistance still included elements of female vulnerability. Tips like “Pretend to faint,” or “Say that you’re sick,” suggest that women place themselves in a more vulnerable position to convince a rapist to stop an assault. Even “Use pepper spray in appropriate weather conditions,” reminds women that their physically violent attacks against perpetrators could still place them in the more vulnerable position. This tip was followed by the reminder that a perpetrator could overpower a woman to take her pepper spray and use it against her, making her even more vulnerable. Similar messages were also given about use of weapons, but not in a tip format. Women were frequently reminded of their physical vulnerability, regardless of how they attempted to ward off their assailants.

## Discussion

Sexual assault prevention tips present a paradox for women in which they are always vulnerable to attack, yet expected to prevent their own sexual assaults. Constant vulnerability implies that regardless of what a woman does, she will still be vulnerable to a sexual attack. Tips often offered conflicting ideas to combat sexual assault that reflected constant vulnerability. For example, tips suggesting that women avoid being alone often placed women around strangers who were considered some of the least trustworthy people in other tips. If women are vulnerable in every situation as these tips implied, tips that suggest a certain action or habit must still place women in a vulnerable position. However, if women are actually vulnerable all of the time, their ability to manage that vulnerability to prevent a sexual assault is questionable. Even the seemingly most effective tactics to

make women less vulnerable, such as the use of pepper spray or weapons, were followed up with a caveat about how those courses of action could make women the most vulnerable of all.

The conflicting expectations that women are vulnerable and that women should prevent their own sexual assaults leads to blaming rape victims for not doing enough. Prevention tips for women set high expectations for female participation in rape prevention. Tips like “Be aware of surroundings,” ask for nothing short of constant vigilance for women to demonstrate their desire not to be assaulted. Even more colloquially common tips such as, “Don’t walk alone at night,” ask women to place restrictions on themselves that they can’t feasibly follow all of the time. Setting such high standards for women in sexual assault prevention, especially without equally taxing expectations on men, perpetuates myths about what women must do or not do to signify that they weren’t “asking for it” at the time of their sexual assault.

Furthermore, many of the tips were too broad or too narrow to help women who find themselves in a dangerous situation. Tips like, “Be assertive,” and “Walk with confidence,” were some of the most recurrent tips, even though they are too broad to offer any real information to women about how to follow the tip. Narrow tips such as, “If your vehicle breaks down, display a sign,” offer advice that most women will never be able to follow because they most likely will not have the necessary tools in the moment to execute the tip. Still, broad and narrow tips contribute to the lore surrounding rape prevention and set unrealistic expectations for women to demonstrate adequate participation in personal “common sense” prevention efforts.

Despite the efforts of movements pushing for more male involvement in college rape prevention, we found that the expectations for men and women to prevent sexual assault remain disparate. Women are still expected to think about and attempt to counteract rape at all times in all scenarios. In contrast, most schools lacked any prevention tips for men, making male prevention efforts seem optional. When men’s prevention tips were included, they continued to highlight women’s vulnerability and placed little responsibility on men to stop sexual assault aside from stopping a sexual encounter should their partner verbally say no. Women still bear the burden of sexual assault prevention, as well as the constant fear that accompanies it.

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