

# RIA Reaching Others: Alcohol and Sexual Assault



In the April 2014 report, [Not Alone](#), the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault announced plans to address the pervasive problem of college sexual assault. Although this issue has received considerable attention recently, researchers have known for many years about the high rates of sexual assault experienced by college students. One factor has been consistently identified as a major contributor to campus sexual assaults and yet is seldom addressed: the presence of heavy drinking by perpetrators, victims or both.

Researchers, advocates and policymakers agree: sexual assault is never justified. Forcing sexual contact on someone who is unwilling or unable to consent is always wrong. Unfortunately, disagreements about the role of alcohol have at times been a key stumbling block in efforts to develop effective prevention strategies. Cultural myths that treat drinking as justification for rape still persist. For that reason, some advocates are concerned that acknowledging the pervasive role of binge drinking in assaults may be seen as blaming the victim. Although responsibility falls squarely on the perpetrator, ignoring the role of alcohol will not advance prevention efforts.

Heavy alcohol consumption never “causes” or justifies sexual assault, but research does show that drinking increases risk of assault. **It is the position of the UB Research Institute on Addictions that reduction of binge drinking must be recognized as a crucial goal for prevention efforts.** To bring further clarity to this discussion, we offer a review of current research on college sexual assault and alcohol use.

## Heavy alcohol use is a factor in a majority of college sexual assaults

Heavy alcohol use has been repeatedly linked to sexual assault of college students. Heavy alcohol use, or binge drinking, refers to having enough alcohol in a single sitting to cause significant physical and cognitive impairment (four or more drinks for women, five or more drinks for men). The vast majority of college sexual assaults occur after drinking heavily in contexts such as bars and parties, and involve a known perpetrator.

- ▶ About 72 percent of rapes occurred when the victim was too intoxicated to consent, according to a national college sample.
- ▶ Sexual assaults are 19 times more likely to occur on days when women consume four or more drinks.
- ▶ Assaults frequently occur during presumed “hook-ups” with partners not well known, that start out with some consensual behavior but progress beyond the point to which one partner desires or agrees.
- ▶ Having a history of heavy drinking and/or sexual victimization in high school increases vulnerability to sexual assault in college.

## Heavy alcohol use can contribute to men’s perpetration of sexual assault

Men who drink heavily are more likely to commit sexual assault; however, not every man is prone to perpetration even if he drinks. Rather, heavy alcohol use appears to interact with certain personality traits, attitudes and past experiences to increase the likelihood of committing assault.

### Not Alone – White House Task Force Report

In April, the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault released its first report on how colleges can combat sexual assault on campus.

The report outlines four recommendations to help colleges identify, prevent, and respond to sexual assault cases, as well as enforce the law.

#### Identify the scope of the problem:

Colleges are advised to conduct climate surveys to gauge the prevalence of sexual assault on campus, test students’ awareness about the issue, and craft solutions.

**Help prevent campus sexual assault:** On the advice of the Centers for Disease Control, campuses are urged to implement effective prevention programs, including bystander intervention training.

**Help schools respond effectively when a student is assaulted:** Recommendations include giving victims a confidential place for support; specialized training for school officials; effectively investigating what happened; sanctioning perpetrators; and helping survivors recover.

**Improve, and make more transparent, the federal government’s enforcement efforts:** A dedicated website ([www.NotAlone.gov](http://www.NotAlone.gov)) has public enforcement data and provides resources about rights and responsibilities to students and schools.

Source: Not Alone – [Protecting Students from Sexual Assault Fact Sheet](#)

Heavy alcohol consumption contributes to sexual assault perpetration among men who:

- ▶ Are hostile towards women
- ▶ Believe in “rape myths,” such as “she was asking for it”
- ▶ Lack empathy towards others
- ▶ Have positive attitudes about casual sex
- ▶ Misperceive women’s friendliness as sexual interest
- ▶ Accept the ideas of male dominance and aggression
- ▶ Have a history of childhood maltreatment/abuse



Such males often report taking advantage of women’s intoxication as a tactic for isolating them and coercing them to have sex.

## Social norms regarding alcohol and sex help to perpetuate sexual assault

The college culture that promotes binge drinking and casual sex creates an atmosphere ripe for sexual assault. Influences from the larger society also contribute to creating conditions in which sexual assault thrives:

- ▶ Depictions of alcohol and sex are routinely intertwined in the popular media, contributing to the misperception that women who drink are sexually willing and available.
- ▶ The sexual double standard by which drinking exonerates male aggression but holds females accountable for their victimization remains pervasive in U.S. culture.
- ▶ The current “hook-up” culture that promotes casual sex increases women’s risk of encountering aggressive men.
- ▶ Intoxicated rapes are often discounted as not being “real” rapes because of the lack of physical resistance, when in fact the incapacitated victim is incapable of consenting or resisting. Incapacitated rape and forcible rape have similar negative consequences for women’s mental health.

## Alcohol involvement creates barriers to reporting sexual assault

Sexual assaults involving alcohol do not fit the stereotype of a rapist as a stranger who jumps out from behind the bushes to attack an unwitting woman who screams and fights back. This image creates several significant barriers to reporting an incapacitated rape:

- ▶ Underage drinkers who are victimized may fear legal or disciplinary consequences for alcohol use.
- ▶ Victims may fear retaliation or stigmatization by other students.
- ▶ Victims may fear that they would be dismissed, objectified or persecuted by law enforcement or campus officials (known as re-victimization).
- ▶ Victims may wrongly blame themselves for the situation.
- ▶ Due to alcohol’s effects on cognition, victims may have difficulty recalling the details of the event.
- ▶ There may be ambiguity around issues of consent:
  - ▶ Lack of physical resistance may be misinterpreted as consent.
  - ▶ Consenting to any sexual act may be misinterpreted as consenting to all sexual acts.
- ▶ Victims themselves may not define their experience as rape.



It is vitally important that campus sexual assault policies provide clear guidelines that encompass incapacitated rape – those all-too-frequent situations where victims are too intoxicated to give consent.

## RIA Experts on Alcohol and Sexual Assault

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## Scholarly Research

[Alcohol’s role in sexual violence perpetration](#)

[Alcohol-related sexual assault: A common problem among college students](#)

[Factors influencing the relationship between alcohol and aggression among college women](#)

[Alcohol consumption and women’s vulnerability to sexual victimization](#)

## For More Information:

[Not Alone: The Website](#)

[College Drinking Fact Sheet \(NIAAA\)](#)

[College Drinking – Changing the Culture](#)

[What Colleges Need to Know Now: An Update on College Drinking Research](#)