

Virtual Issue: Sexual Violence

This online-only virtual issue, co-edited and introduced co-authored by Nicole Bedera and Trenton M. Haltom, highlights articles previously published in *Social Problems* that address sexual violence. While these articles examine multiple facets of sexual violence, they can be organized thematically around sources of sexual violence, the social regulation of survivors, and resistance to sexual violence.

Introduction to the Virtual Issue

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Sexual violence is typically considered a personal problem—something that happens between two (or occasionally more) people, usually outside of public view, and explained simply by the perpetrator’s moral or psychological shortcomings. As sociologists, we know that many personal problems can have social causes. Just as Durkheim (1897) applied this principle to suicide, sociologists in the #MeToo era can learn a lot about sexual assault by considering society and structure. This special issue of *Social Problems* highlights previous scholarship that brings a distinctly sociological approach to the topic of sexual violence. Specifically, the special issue connects articles across three themes in the sociological literature: causes of sexual violence, the social regulation of survivors through organizations, and resistance to sexual violence.

Sexual violence is a particularly difficult social problem to understand, in part because its recognition as a social problem is hugely controversial. What many consider to be sexual assault others recognize as “normal” sexual behavior between men and women. Sexual violence is notoriously underreported and under-prosecuted. Even the definition of sexual assault is hotly contested—no two states have identical definitions of sexual assault and most states’ sexual assault laws are constantly evolving. For these reasons, what sexual assault *is* can be difficult to pinpoint. As academics, we turn to a vast psychological literature on what types of unwanted sexual behaviors cause significant harm. Accordingly, we consider sexual assault to be any loss of physical autonomy through unwanted actions of a sexual nature. This definition includes not only sexual activity forced through physical violence, but also sexual activity forced through incapacitation, coercion, and other power disparities. It includes not only rape, but also other unwanted sexual touches. Similarly, gender-based violence includes sexual violence, but also other types of crimes in which adult victims are selected based off of their gender, such as intimate partner violence, stalking, and kidnapping.

Despite the difficulty in discussing and researching sexual assault, *Social Problems* has brought a sociological perspective to discussions of sexual violence for over fifty years ([Gagnon 1965](#)). Among the most relevant threads to debates in the #MeToo era are those on the structural sources of sexual violence and the ideologies of its perpetrators. [Scully and Marolla](#) (1985) were among the first to argue that rape fulfills a social function, giving rewards to rapists beyond personal sexual or violent gratification. Understanding these rewards (and decreasing them) could lead to innovation in the prevention of sexual violence. To better understand victims, [Purvin](#) (2007) considered the way social structures—and social welfare policy in particular—increase low-income women’s vulnerability to sexual violence. [Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney](#) (2006) bridged these two approaches to understanding the sources of sexual assault in their examination of how the college party environment both encourages sexual violence perpetration and exacerbates the risk of victimization. Central to each of these articles is an underlying theme that sexual violence can be addressed through changing social structures that perpetuate gender inequality and its intersections with other oppressions, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and disability status.

The impact of sexual violence extends far beyond the assault itself. Sociologists have also considered the way social structures shape victims' experiences with institutions designed to help them, such as shelters, hospitals, police, and courts, but often end up re-victimizing instead. [Williams](#) (1984) began this conversation by asking what circumstances shaped victims' decisions about whether or not to report their rapes. She discovered that women who see themselves as "classic" rape victims—victims who are violently attacked by strangers—are by far the most likely to report the crimes committed against them. More recently, [Sweet](#) (2018) expanded the academic literature to include intimate partner violence victims and the narratives they use to cast themselves as "worthy victims." To do so, victims must tell stories of survivorhood that obscure the role of structure in their experiences—they blame themselves and their own personal shortcomings for the abuse they endured, rather than institutions like patriarchy or poverty that should shoulder most of the blame. [Frohmann](#) (1998) and [Spohn, Beichner, and Davis-Frenzel](#) (2001) spoke directly to each other in a still-evolving scholarly discourse around the ways prosecutors manage—and ultimately discourage—victims from pursuing criminal justice after incidents of sexual violence.

Finally, this special issue explores a vision of a world without sexual violence and the discourses shaping the efforts to achieve that goal. [Rose](#) (1977) investigated the sources of the most persistent rhetoric in anti-violence movements and the institutions they hope to affect, concluding that feminist voices are the strongest and the most successful, as seen through changes in laws and social movements that have come to more closely align with feminist rhetoric. [Scott](#) (1993) studied two separate feminist approaches to anti-violence work, finding a stark difference in the tactics invoked by each group depending on their political surroundings and organizational structures. As we continue to live in a world where violence against women is commonplace, [Kleck and Sayles](#) (1990) focused on the way individual women resist violent attacks and the success of those strategies, such as physical combat and the use of weapons.

Taken together, we hope this collection of articles will serve as an inspiration for continued sociological work on sexual violence. To meaningfully address gender-based violence, we must understand the structures shaping the behaviors of individual actors—the pressures, rewards, and constraints they face, as well as the way they differ based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual identity, and disability status. By thinking structurally and intersectionally, sociologists can make significant gains in the fight to end sexual violence.

On a more basic level, we also hope this special issue emphasizes the importance of a data-driven discourse on gender-based violence both within and outside of academia. The findings from this collection of studies are surprising and many contradict conventional beliefs about sexual violence, including ideologies that blame victims for the sexual abuse they endure—or doubt the authenticity of their claims of violence in the first place—as well as those that imagine sexual assailants as irreparably evil bad actors. In turning to scientific inquiry around sexual violence, we hope to advance the national discussion sparked by #MeToo beyond tired debates along political lines about what should count as sexual violence and whether or not victims can be trusted. We envision instead widespread recognition of sexual violence—*all* sexual violence—as a social problem that deserves a solution.

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