

# CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS OF SELF-DISCLOSED SEXUAL AGGRESSION IN A NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF BELGIAN ADULTS AGED 16-69

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# CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS OF SELF-DISCLOSED SEXUAL AGGRESSION IN A NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF BELGIAN ADULTS AGED 16-69

## ABSTRACT

Sexual violence is a major public health, societal, and judicial problem worldwide. Studies investigating the characteristics of its offenders often rely on samples of convicted offenders, which are then biased by low reporting and conviction rates of sexual offences. The reliability of self-report studies of undetected sexual offenders, however, is threatened by underreporting of sexually aggressive acts. Despite these limitations, we argue that it is important to publish available data on self-disclosed sexual aggression to learn more about those who are more likely to report own sexual aggression and to further improve self-report methods.

Based on a self-report study conducted in a representative sample ( $n = 4,693$ ) of the Belgian general population aged 16 to 69, we provide lifetime and past-year prevalence rates of sexual aggression and report the characteristics of the events, including type, target, and the applied coercion strategies. A logistic regression analysis revealed factors associated with self-disclosed sexual aggression. Almost 4% of all participants reported at least one incident of hands-on sexual aggression. Men were more likely than women to report sexual aggression (aOR: 5.33 (95% CI:3.62-7.86). Furthermore, a history of sexual victimization was associated with sexual aggression. In most cases, the target was an (ex)partner or friend. About 4 in 5 perpetrators indicated that none of the given coercion strategies (i.e., force, threat, verbal pressure, or exploiting the victim's incapacitation or the own position of authority) applied to the incident. Further research is needed to clarify under which circumstances sexual aggression occurs and which factors increase reporting thereof.

### Keywords:

sexual violence perpetration; sexual offending; risk factors; prevalence; coercive strategy

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a global issue with long-lasting consequences for its victims and thereby also for society as a whole (World Health Organization, 2011). In order to prevent sexual violence, it is necessary to understand its perpetrators. Researching the perpetrators of sexual violence is, however, difficult. Studies into the nature and risk factors of sexual aggression frequently rely on samples of convicted offenders (e.g., Piquero et al., 2012). These samples are, however, highly biased due to the high dark figure of sexual offenses that are never detected (Kolivas & Gross, 2007) and the low conviction rates of sexual offenders (Krahé et al., 2008).

Self-report studies into sexual aggression are therefore indispensable to obtain information on the characteristics of perpetrators that are not and would never come in touch with the criminal justice system. Yet, the resulting prevalence rates of sexual aggression are likely biased as perpetrators, intentionally or unintentionally, may not acknowledge their actions as wrong or harmful (Strang et al., 2013). However, unintentional non-disclosure, because the sexual encounter was interpreted as consensual, is viewed as the larger threat to the validity of self-report measures of sexual aggression (Kolivas & Gross, 2007). Given that they limit this interpretation ambiguity, behaviorally specific self-reports are considered the best available tool to assess both sexual victimization and sexual aggression, and yet, they likely capture only a small part of cases of sexual aggression (Kolivas & Gross, 2007). Therefore, assessment tools of sexual aggression need to be developed further. To this end, studies on sexual aggression in the general population need to be published so that researchers can compare and improve their methodology in their assessment of sexual aggression.

The current study aims to be a part of this process by providing data on self-disclosed sexual aggression in a large representative sample of Belgian residents aged 16 to 69 years. In doing so, we shed light on the characteristics of sexual aggression and its, both male and female, perpetrators.

## METHODS

### Sampling Procedure and Participants

This study utilized data collected from October 2019 until February 2020 and from September 2020 until January 2021<sup>1</sup>. The National Register, containing demographic information on all Belgian residents, was used as the sampling frame from which Belgian residents were sampled to participate in an online survey. In two waves of data collection, 41,520 Belgian residents between 16 and 69 were drawn and contacted by the National Register. Participants could access the self-administered online survey via a link or QR code in Qualtrics.

The final sample consisted of  $n = 4,693$  respondents (50% male, 50% female), with a mean age of 39.2 years ( $SD = 17.2$ ). Fifty percent of the sample completed a level of higher education and 26% were students. Ten percent of the sample identified as non-heterosexual.

### Measures

The questionnaire to assess sexual perpetration was part of a larger study that mostly focused on sexual victimization<sup>2</sup>. The survey was provided in five languages including the most frequently spoken languages by the research population at the time of the study (i.e., Dutch, French, and English) and two additional languages (i.e., Arabic and Farsi<sup>3</sup>).

### Assessment of Sexual Aggression

Survey development was guided by the definition of the World Health Organization (2015) of sexual violence as:

[...] any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone's will" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). It can be committed "by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting" (WHO, 2002). It includes, but is not limited to, rape, attempted rape and sexual slavery, as well as unwanted touching, threatened sexual violence and verbal sexual harassment (Arsanjani, 1999). (p. 3)

In this paper, we will only focus on those acts that involved physical contact. Lifetime sexual aggression was assessed with eight behaviorally specific questions based on the Sexual Experience Survey – Long Form Perpetration (Koss et al., 2006, 2007), the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS; Smith et al., 2017), and the Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S; Krahé & Berger, 2013). These items can be further grouped into sexual abuse (physical contact but no penetration) and rape or attempted rape (physical contact with penetration). A list of the items can be found in Appendix A. If a question was answered affirmatively, respondents were asked how many times this had happened in the past 12 months. For the purpose of this analysis, these answers were recoded into a binary variable of no (= 0) vs. at least one (= 1) incident in the past year.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Register paused its activities which resulted in the second wave of data collection taking place later than initially planned.

<sup>2</sup> This study is part of a larger research project aimed at *Understanding the MEchanisms, NAture, MAgnitude, and Impact of Sexual Violence* in Belgium (UN-MENAMAIS; BR/175/A5/UN-MENAMAIS; Belspo, n.a.); [http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/themes\\_5\\_Social\\_en.stm#2016](http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/themes_5_Social_en.stm#2016).

<sup>3</sup> These languages as well as English were added to allow foreign-language speakers to participate.

All follow-up questions referred to the most recent incident in case the respondent reported different types or multiple acts of sexual aggression.

### **Coercive Strategy**

Respondents were further asked which circumstances best described the incident. The answer options reflected the coercion types of verbal pressure, (threat of) using force, exploiting a state of incapacitation, or their position of authority or power (Keygnaert et al., 2012; Keygnaert et al., 2014; Krahé & Berger, 2013). We further provided the option that none of the answers applied.

### ***Assessment of Associated Factors***

Respondents' sex was defined as 'sex assigned at birth'. Respondents were further asked about their age the first time they had sex (i.e., sexual initiation) and how many men and women they had sex with in their lives. The latter was assessed by asking respondents to fill in a number for male sexual partners and female sexual partners. When an answer to one of these two variables, but not to both, was missing, it was assigned the value 0.

To reduce information loss due to missing values in the following analysis, age at sexual initiation was grouped into early vs. late sexual initiation, with 15 years or younger being considered as early (cf. Epstein et al., 2018; Young et al., 2018). Respondents, all being at least 16 years old at the time of survey completion, who indicated that they never had sex were therefore assigned to the category late initiation. The number of male and female sexual partners was combined into a total number. Respondents who indicated that they never had sexual intercourse were given the value 0.

Furthermore, own victimization experiences were included in the analysis of factors associated with sexual aggression. To this end, the aggregated variable of lifetime hands-on victimization was used. Hands-on victimization was assessed with the same eight items, formulated from the victim's perspective, along with an additional item indicating that someone touched the victim's intimate body parts during care.

### **Analysis**

Analyses were conducted using R version 3.6.3. Multivariate logistic regression analyses were computed to examine the association of sexual aggression with the factors described above. All variables were added simultaneously resulting in adjusted odds ratios for each variable that control for the effects of the other predictor variables in the model. The multicollinearity assumption of multivariate regression analyses was tested with the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and indicated no violation. The linearity assumption of continuous variables added to the analysis (i.e., number of sex partners) was tested with the Box-Tidwell test (Box & Tidwell, 1962) which indicated a violation of this assumption. The variable was therefore dummy coded based on the median. Respondents who indicated having had none to two sex partners were given the value 0 and respondents who indicated having had three or more sex partners were given the value 1.

## **RESULTS**

### **Characteristics of Sexual Aggression**

#### ***Type of Sexual Aggression***

Overall, 167 respondents (3.6%) disclosed at least one incident of hands-on sexual aggression (5.7% of men; 1.5% of women). Forty-three respondents (0.9%) reported at least one incident in the past 12 months (1.4% of men; 0.5% of women). Appendix B shows the prevalence of each reported behavior disaggregated by sex. All questions that followed lifetime and past-year perpetration refer to the most recent incident in case of multiple types or cases.

### ***Target of Sexual Aggression***

In most cases ( $n = 48$ , 28.9%), the partner or ex-partner was the target of sexual aggression, in 47 cases (28.3%) a friend, in 32 cases (19.3%) an acquaintance, in 18 cases (10.8%) a colleague or classmate, in 14 cases (8.4%) someone else, in 16 cases (9.6%) someone unknown, and in 9 cases (5.4%) a family member. The answer “Someone I was responsible for” was never selected. Multiple answers were possible. Most male perpetrators (90.2%) indicated that the act was directed towards one or multiple women, ten (7.6%) towards another man, and three (2.3%) indicated the sex was unknown. Out of the 34 female perpetrators, 29 (85.3%) acted towards one or multiple men, and five (14.7%) towards another woman.

### ***Coercive Strategies***

Most respondents ( $n = 134$ , 80.7%) indicated that none of the provided answer options regarding the coercion strategy used applied. Twenty respondents (12.0%) indicated that they exploited the fact that the other person was unable to resist due to consuming too much alcohol or being incapacitated for another reason. Five respondents (3.0%) had used or threatened to use physical force. Four respondents (2.4%) each indicated having exploited their position of authority or power or verbal pressure.

### ***Factors Associated With Sexual Aggression***

The results of the logistic regression analysis of factors associated with sexual aggression and all adjusted odds ratios are summarized in Table 3. Respondents' sex and a history of past sexual victimization were the strongest predictors of sexual aggression. More than half of the respondents who reported having perpetrated some form of hands-on sexual violence, also reported having been victimized by some form of hands-on sexual violence ( $n = 87$ , 52.1%).

Furthermore, people below the age of 50 were more likely to report lifetime sexual aggression. However, the association was only significant for the youngest age group (16-24 years) in comparison with the oldest age group (50-69 years). A higher number of sexual partners was also related to a higher likelihood of sexual aggression, while an early sexual initiation was not.

[\[Insert Table 1 here\]](#)

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Aggression**

Prevalence rates obtained in previous self-report studies on sexual aggression range from 5.5 to 48.7% in men and 2.6 to 14.8% in women (Chirwa et al., 2018; D'Abreu et al., 2013; Krahé et al., 2003; Krahé et al., 2015; Schuster et al., 2016). Our rates are with 5.7% in men and 1.5% in women at the lower bound of these previous studies. More specifically, the proportion of respondents who reported having committed some form of sexual aggression is similar to the rates found in previous research in Belgium (Krahé et al., 2015). In their comparison of ten European countries, Belgium scored lowest (Krahé et al., 2015). That being said, concluding from that, together with our study, that sexual aggression is rare in Belgium, would be too simple. In a comparison of reported rapes (The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention [Brå]), Belgium scores higher than most countries in the study conducted by Krahé et al. (2015).

Studies that include both female and male sexual aggression have consistently found higher rates for male perpetration (e.g., D'Abreu et al., 2013; Krahé et al., 2015; Krahé & Berger, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2013) as was also the case in the current study. Previous research found that own victimization experiences (see Tharp et al., 2012 for a review) and sexual behaviors such as impersonal sex, having

multiple sexual partners, and an early sexual initiation (Krahé et al., 2003; Malamuth et al., 1996; Tharp et al., 2012) are associated with sexual aggression. Our findings corroborate these findings partially. A higher number of sexual partners was associated with sexual aggression while an early sexual initiation was not. Furthermore, past sexual victimization was, after participants' sex, the strongest predictor for sexual aggression in our study. However, we do not know whether the victimization or the sexually aggressive act occurred first. The target of the sexual aggression was in most reported cases a current or former partner and rarely someone unknown. While this confirms that the stereotype of the 'stranger-danger' should be rejected (Katz-Schiavone et al., 2008), other studies found smaller differences between these categories of victim-perpetrator relationship (Krahé et al., 2015) or higher rates for an unknown perpetrator as compared to a partner or ex-partner (Haas et al., 2012).

Regarding the coercion strategy used, the vast majority indicated that none of the answer options provided applied to the situation. The coercive strategy to exploit the fact that the victim was unable to resist was indicated most often which replicates the findings of Krahé et al. (2015) in Belgium and other European countries. A recently conducted study on female sexual victimization (Canan et al., 2020) found that three other strategies (e.g., surprising the victim with the behavior) are indicated more frequently or as often as the ones provided in the revised SES – Short Form Victimization (Koss et al. 2007). This shows that coercive strategies in a legal sense may not fully cover the mechanisms at play in situations of unwanted sexual behavior. Another reason for this outcome in our study may also be that someone acting in a sexually aggressive way may not (want to) interpret their behavior as, for example, exploitation.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was part of a larger study that also assessed the magnitude of sexual victimization in Belgium (Schapansky et al., 2021). We found that 42% of women and 19% of men living in Belgium experienced hands-on sexual violence in their lifetime which indicates a large discrepancy between the reporting of victimization and perpetration. Perpetrators may be unwilling to disclose sexually aggressive behavior or fail to recognize their own behavior as sexual aggression. Another reason for this discrepancy in prevalence rates might lie in the wording of the questions. While we relied on the victim's perspective for obtaining prevalence rates of sexual victimization (e.g., "Someone kissed me against my will."), it was also the victim's perspective that had to be considered in the assessment of sexual aggression ("Have you ever kissed someone against that person's will?"). Judging and acknowledging that someone acted against another person's will might be too ambiguous. Precisely because they limit ambiguity, behaviorally specific questions, as were used in this study, have been found to be most suitable to assess sexual violence experiences, including sexual aggression (Kolivas & Gross, 2007). That being said, for the assessment of sexual aggression, it appears that the unwantedness of the experience on the part of the victim requires to be assessed in a behaviorally specific way. Future research should therefore assess the circumstances under which the unwanted sexual experience occurred with behaviorally specific questions together with example situations. Based on our findings and those in our studies looking into coercive strategies (Canan et al., 2020), these circumstances should cover more than force, threat, verbal pressure, and use of incapacitation in order to cover a wider range of sexual aggression.

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## TABLES

**Table 1**

*Logistic regression analysis of factors associated with sexual aggression*

Predictors	Lifetime aOR (95% CI)
Sex (ref. female)	5.33 (3.62-7.86)***
Age	
16-24	1.56 (1.00-2.41)*
25-49	1.47 (0.98-2.19)
50-69	Ref
Sexual initiation (ref. early)	0.99 (0.65-1.51)
Number of sexual partners (ref. 0-2)	1.52 (1.04-2.21)*
Previous victimization	3.40 (2.28-5.07)***

Abbreviations: aOR, adjusted odds ratio

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A

#### *Sexual abuse (physical contact but no penetration)*

- Kissing: *Have you ever kissed someone against that person's will?*
- Fondling/rubbing: *Have you ever fondled or rubbed up against someone's intimate body parts (e.g., breasts, vagina, penis, anus) against that person's will?*
- Undressing: *Have you ever removed (some of) someone's clothes against that person's will?*

#### *Rape and attempted rape (physical contact with attempted or completed penetration)*

- Oral penetration: *Have you ever had oral sex with someone or had someone perform oral sex on you against that person's will?*
- Attempt of oral penetration: *Have you ever tried, but did not succeed, to have oral sex with someone or tried to have someone perform oral sex on you against that person's will?*
- Vaginal or anal penetration: *Have you ever put a penis, finger(s) or object(s) into someone's vagina or anus against that person's will?*
- Attempt of vaginal or anal penetration: *Have you ever tried, but did not succeed, to put a penis, finger(s) or object(s) into someone's vagina or anus against that person's will?*

- Forcing to penetrate: *Have you ever made someone put their penis, finger(s) or object(s) into your vagina or anus against that person's will?*

## Appendix B

### *Types of hands-on sexual aggression reported*

Item	Women <i>N</i> (%; 95% CI)	Men <i>N</i> (%; 95% CI)	Total <i>N</i> (%; 95% CI)
<b>Lifetime</b>			
Kissing	18 (0.8; 0.5-1.2)	55 (2.4; 1.8-3.1)	73 (1.6; 1.2-2.0)
Fondling/rubbing	11 (0.5; 0.2-0.9)	74 (3.2; 2.5-4.0)	85 (1.8; 1.5-2.2)
Undressing	1 (0.0; 0.0-0.3)	14 (0.6; 0.3-1.0)	15 (0.3; 0.2-0.5)
Oral penetration	1 (0.0; 0.0-0.3)	11 (0.5; 0.2-0.9)	12 (0.3; 0.1-0.5)
Attempted oral penetration	4 (0.2; 0.1-0.5)	12 (0.5; 0.1-1.2)	16 (0.3; 0.2-0.6)
Vaginal or anal penetration	3 (0.1; 0.0-0.4)	16 (0.7; 0.3-0.9)	19 (0.4; 0.2-0.6)
Attempted vag. or anal penetr.	2 (0.1; 0.0-0.3)	15 (0.6; 0.4-1.1)	17 (0.4; 0.2-0.6)
Forcing to penetrate	2 (0.1; 0.0-0.3)	1 (0.0; 0.0-0.3)	3 (0.1; 0.0-0.2)
<b>Any Hands-On SV</b>	<b>35 (1.5; 1.1-2.1)</b>	<b>132 (5.7; 4.8-6.7)</b>	<b>167 (3.6; 3.1-4.1)</b>
<b>Past 12 months</b>			
Kissing	3 (0.1; 0.0-0.4)	10 (0.4; 0.2-0.8)	13 (0.3; 0.2-0.5)
Fondling/rubbing	3 (0.1; 0.0-0.4)	14 (0.6; 0.3-1.0)	17 (0.4; 0.2-0.6)
Undressing	0 (0.0; 0.0-0.2)	5 (0.2; 0.1-0.5)	5 (0.1; 0.0-0.3)
Oral penetration	0 (0.0; 0.0-0.2)	2 (0.1; 0.0-0.3)	2 (0.0; 0.0-0.2)
Attempted oral penetration	2 (0.1; 0.0-0.3)	2 (0.1; 0.0-0.3)	4 (0.1; 0.0-0.2)
Vaginal or anal penetration	1 (0.0; 0.0-0.3)	6 (0.3; 0.1-0.6)	7 (0.1; 0.1-0.3)
Attempted vag. or anal penetr.	2 (0.1; 0.0-0.3)	5 (0.2; 0.1-0.5)	7 (0.1; 0.1-0.3)
Forcing to penetrate	0 (0.0; 0.0-0.2)	0 (0.0; 0.0-0.2)	0 (0.0; 0.0-0.1)
<b>Any Hands-On SV</b>	<b>11 (0.5; 0.2-0.9)</b>	<b>32 (1.4; 1.0-2.0)</b>	<b>43 (0.9; 0.7-1.2)</b>