

# Awareness of a Rape Crisis Center and Knowledge about Sexual Violence among High School Adolescents



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## ABSTRACT

**Study Objective:** This study examined awareness among adolescents of a local rape crisis center as well as their knowledge about sexual violence.

**Design:** The Cleveland Rape Crisis Center (CRCC) conducts sexual violence prevention programs for high school students. A written, anonymous survey was distributed to students prior to the start of the program. Students were asked if they had heard of the CRCC; knowledge about sexual violence was assessed with a series of 7 statements (rape myths) that participants identified as true or false. Surveys were reviewed retrospectively. Analyses were carried out for individual questions and frequencies compared using chi-square analysis.

**Results:** A total of 1633 surveys were collected; 1118 (68.5%) participants were female and 514 (31.5%) were male; ages ranged from 12 to 19 years. Respondents described themselves as being of European descent (45.9%), African descent (26.2%), or mixed race (17.7%). Just over half (863, 52.9%) of survey respondents had heard of the CRCC. Over half (950, 58.2%) of participants answered 5 or more questions correctly (range of correct answers 0 to 7). In general, more participants who were aware of the CRCC were able to identify statements about rape correctly ( $P < .01$  for statements 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7,  $P < .001$  for  $\geq 5$  correct). Age, gender, and race were all significantly associated with knowledge about rape. Females were consistently more likely to get an answer correct, as were participants of European descent.

**Conclusion:** Awareness of the CRCC was associated with increased knowledge about sexual violence.

**Key Words:** Sexual violence, Sexual assault, Adolescents, Violence, Rape crisis centers, Rape myths

## Introduction

Adolescents are at high risk for sexual assault.<sup>1–4</sup> A 2011 survey of high school students found that 11.8% of girls and 4.5% of boys from grades 9–12 were forced to have sexual intercourse at some time in their lives.<sup>5</sup> Worldwide, studies indicate that as many as 62% of reported sexual assaults are committed against girls age 15 and younger.<sup>6</sup> Adolescent sexual assault has consequences that extend into adulthood, including higher rates of depression and illicit drug use among those who have been assaulted.<sup>7,8</sup> Women and men are more likely to be assaulted in adulthood if they were assaulted as children or teenagers. In a national survey, 60.4% of female and 69.2% of male adult victims were first raped before 18 years of age.<sup>9</sup>

This cycle of sexual violence is perpetuated, in part, by rape myths, defined by Burt as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists.”<sup>10</sup> Common rape myths are that a woman's clothing or actions can provoke her assault or that a man cannot control his sexual urges. Studies show that teenagers have higher acceptance of certain rape myths.<sup>11,12</sup> However, adolescence is a time when attitudes towards violence and sexuality are formed,

and those attitudes can be shaped by educational interventions.<sup>12</sup>

Rape crisis centers provide counseling and support to victims of sexual assault of all ages and promote sexual assault prevention through educational programs, some of which focus on decreasing the prevalence and acceptability of rape myths. Rape crisis centers emerged in the 1970s as a volunteer effort to offer a variety of services to rape victims, including hotline counseling and medical and legal support.<sup>13</sup> Political activism from rape crisis centers attempted to change societal perception of rape victims and lobbied for legal reform. As rape crisis centers evolved, they began to collaborate with other established organizations such as hospitals and law enforcement to provide training and education.<sup>14</sup> The Cleveland Rape Crisis Center (CRCC), founded in 1974, provides services to over 20,000 people per year. Those services include hospital advocacy, justice system advocacy, hotline calls, and education and community outreach. Prevention staff members travel to schools throughout Ohio conducting classes for children and adolescents.

Nationally, rape crisis centers are underutilized.<sup>15</sup> Many adult victims are unaware of the assistance offered by rape crisis centers.<sup>15</sup> Few studies have evaluated adolescent awareness of rape crisis centers. One study in 1985 demonstrated that while approximately 50% of adolescents knew there was a rape crisis center in their city, less than 20% knew the name of the center or its location.<sup>16</sup>

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This study assessed the awareness among adolescents of a local rape crisis center as well as their knowledge about sexual violence and certain rape myths.

**Methods**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of University Hospitals Case Medical Center. The CRCC conducts sexual violence prevention programs for students in grades 9-12 in schools in Cuyahoga County in Ohio. The goals of the program include increasing knowledge, positively changing attitudes and beliefs, and strengthening students' skills to prevent sexual violence before it happens. The program consists of 5 weekly or monthly sessions lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Programs are conducted by prevention staff from the CRCC. As part of the program, a written survey developed by the CRCC is distributed to students by program staff prior to the start of the first session and is completed anonymously. The participants are asked their age, sex, race, and the following multiple choice questions: (1) Have you heard of the CRCC and (2) If yes, then how did you hear about the CRCC?

Knowledge and acceptance of rape myths are assessed with a series of 7 statements that participants identify as true or false. For example, participants are asked to identify the statement "Most rapes are committed by someone the victim knows" as true or false.

We conducted a retrospective review of surveys distributed prior to each session. Each question was then coded as correct or not correct. The sum of correct answers was calculated for each participant and dichotomized at < 5/7 correct or ≥5/7 correct. The value of 5 out of 7 correct was chosen because the mean number correct was 5.3 (±1.3). Analyses were carried out for individual questions and the dichotomized total; frequencies and percent correct were reported. Frequencies were compared using chi-square analysis for those questions with <90% correct. Total number correct was also reported. Statistical analysis was conducted using SAS 9.3.

**Results**

A total of 1633 surveys were collected; 1118 (68.5%) participants were female, and 514 (31.5%) were male. The ages ranged from 12 to 19 years. Respondents described themselves as being of European descent (45.9%), African descent (26.2%), or mixed race (17.7%).

Just over half (863, 52.9%) of survey respondents had heard of the CRCC. Table 1 shows demographic and subject characteristics and their relationship to awareness of the CRCC. All of the demographic and subject characteristics shown were significantly related to awareness of the CRCC. Of those who were aware of the CRCC, more participants were female (74.3% vs 62.0% in the not aware group; *P* < .001). Fifty-five percent of the aware group were of European descent vs 35.3% of the not aware group (*P* < .001). In contrast, 34.5% of the not aware group were of African descent versus 18.8% of the aware group (*P* < .001).

As shown in Fig. 1, the majority of respondents heard about the CRCC from teachers or school (40.2%). Other

**Table 1**  
Awareness of Rape Crisis Center and Participant Characteristics

	Overall (%) N = 1633	Aware (%) N = 863	Not Aware (%) N = 770	<i>P</i>
Age (y)				
≤14	363 (22.3)	212 (24.6)	151 (19.7)	<.001
15	443 (27.2)	188 (21.8)	255 (33.3)	
16	428 (26.3)	201 (23.3)	227 (29.7)	
≥17	394 (24.2)	262 (30.4)	132 (17.5)	
Sex				
Male	514 (31.5)	222 (25.7)	292 (38.0)	<.001
Female	1118 (68.5)	641 (74.3)	477 (62.0)	
Race				
African descent	420 (26.2)	158 (18.8)	262 (34.5)	<.001
European descent	736 (45.9)	468 (55.6)	268 (35.3)	
Mixed race	283 (17.7)	138 (16.4)	145 (19.1)	
Other	163 (10.2)	78 (9.3)	85 (11.2)	
Know anyone who has used rape counseling services?				
Yes	185 (11.4)	111 (12.9)	74 (9.6)	.04
No	1443 (88.6)	749 (87.1)	694 (90.4)	

sources of information were posters (11.2%), friends (7.4%), and the Internet (5.1%). Less than 3% of participants chose the response "medical professional" as their source of information about the CRCC.

The number of respondents answering each question correctly is presented in Table 2. Over half (950 or 58.2%) of participants answered 5 or more questions correctly (range of correct answers was 0 to 7).

In general, more participants who were aware of the CRCC were able to identify statements about rape correctly (*P* < .01 for statements 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7, *P* < .001 for ≥5 correct). Those results are presented in Table 3.

Analysis based on demographic characteristics was focused on questions 4-7 where the percent correct was < 90% as described above. Age, gender, and race were all significantly associated with knowledge about rape, shown in Table 4. Females were consistently more likely to get an answer correct, as were those of European descent. Age was significant but was confounded with gender as there were more males age 15-16 and more females age ≤14. Knowing someone who had used rape crisis counseling services had no effect on knowledge.

**Discussion**

Approximately half of adolescents in this study had heard of the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center. Previous studies have shown that less than 20% of teenagers were aware of the name or location of such services.<sup>16</sup> The higher rate of awareness in our study may reflect the presence of staff

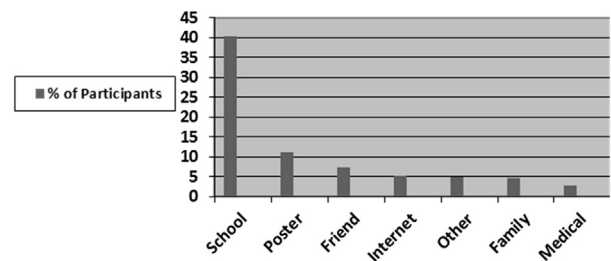


Fig. 1. Reported source of awareness of Cleveland Rape Crisis Center.

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