

**A cross-sectional survey examining sexual assault and harassment prevalence, perceived vulnerability, and association with alcohol in a student population**

**Background**

The prevalence of sexual assault and harassment at universities is unclear due to underreporting. Furthermore, student perceptions of vulnerability to sexual assault and how these relate to alcohol are unknown. The current study examines the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment in a student sample, and how this relates to issues of vulnerability and alcohol.

**Methods**

Participants were recruited via a weekly email of notices that is sent to all students attending a town-based Scottish university of approximately 7,200 students. The study was approved by the university ethics committee, and all participants gave their informed consent before participating. The online survey was run in November 2013 and included validated scales examining personal experience of sexual harassment and assault, perception of own and peers' vulnerability to sexual assault, and AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test). Data was analysed using Chi-square and t-tests.

**Findings**

The survey was completed by 175 students (135 females), aged 17-56 ( $M=21.91$ ), 48% of whom were in their first year of study. There was no significant difference in the proportion of males (22.5%) and females (37.0%) who reported having experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault at the university,  $\chi^2(2)=3.56, p=.17$ . Participants perceived themselves as significantly less vulnerable than same-gender peers,  $t(160)=6.10, p<.001, 95\%CI [-1.09, -0.55]$ , and judged peers to significantly underestimate their own vulnerability  $t(159)=4.86, p<.001, 95\%CI [0.40,$

0.95]. Controlling for gender, AUDIT did not predict judgements of own vulnerability,  $B=.02$ ,  $p=.49$ , 95%CI [-0.03, 0.06], but AUDIT hazardous drinkers were more likely to report experiences of sexual harassment than non-hazardous drinkers,  $\chi^2(2)=20.98$ ,  $p<.001$ .

### **Interpretation**

Prevalence rates for experiencing sexual harassment or assault were high, and participants underestimated their own vulnerability compared to peers. Whilst hazardous drinkers were more likely to report experiencing sexual harassment or assault, this was not reflected in their judged vulnerability, again suggesting a misperception. The role of alcohol and vulnerability misperceptions should be considered in future interventions. The study was limited by oversampling female first year students producing a non-representative sample.

Word Count = 350

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### **Author Contributions**

Conception and design of the study, and approval of the final draft - All authors

Survey analysis and abstract preparation - FGN

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

None.