

## Constructing Victims: The Erasure of Women's Resistance to Sexual Assault

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*How do the news media portray women's resistance to sexual assault? We analyze articles from a systematic sample of 16 U.S. newspapers across 1 full calendar year to assess whether and how newspapers describe women's resistance. We find that in most cases, newspaper reports reinforce the belief that women are incapable of effectively defending themselves. Most articles fail to mention women's resistance or do so only to note its failure; the longer the article, the more likely it is to follow these patterns. Headlines exaggerate these patterns, presenting virtually no evidence that the articles that follow, or that assaults themselves, contain any female resistance or agency. In only a very small minority of cases are women described as strong, competent actors with the ability to defend themselves against violence. We conclude with a discussion of the potential individual and societal consequences of these patterns.*

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**KEY WORDS:** crime; gender; media; resistance; self-defense; sexual assault.

### INTRODUCTION

On April 25, 2008, Melissa Bruen, then a senior at the University of Connecticut, was sexually assaulted as she walked home from a party during the campus's Spring Weekend Celebration. The Hartford *Courant* reported that "a young man pinned her to a tree, thrust himself against her and began moaning as a crowd gathered" (Merritt 2008). Then, another young man pulled down her tube top and grabbed her bare breasts as the drunken crowd cheered. The *Courant* painted this episode as an assault on a vulnerable female victim. For example, it described the aftermath of the assault in the following way: "Bruen's friend Kevin Meacham found Bruen after the incident. She had collapsed on the ground and was frantically calling his name. 'She was hysterical,' he said. 'She was almost hyperventilating.'" The article also mentions the warnings Bruen had received that women should not walk alone at night, as well as her boyfriend's sense of guilt that he wasn't with her to protect her. In other words, the *Courant's* description of this assault fits well with our societal ideas about how assaults happen to women: they are attacked, generally by male strangers, in public places. They are vulnerable and helpless, and even if they do manage to escape rape or other serious assault, they are hysterical, weeping, and calling for male support.

But does this report portray what really happened? At the time of the assault, Bruen was the editor of the University of Connecticut's *Daily Campus*. In one of her final contributions to the paper, she published her first-person account of her

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experience. Here, in part, is how she describes what unfolded as she walked along a path nicknamed the “Rape Trail”:

When he came toward me, I grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him down to the ground. I held onto his shoulders and climbed on top to straddle him. He started thrashing side to side, but I was able to hit him with a closed fist, full force, in the face. A small crowd had gathered, mostly men. Now they seemed shocked. I was supposed to have been a victim, and I was breaking out of the mold. I hit him in the stomach, while clenching my legs around him to prevent another man from pushing me off. In all, it took three men to pull me off my assailant. . . . Another man, around 6'1", approached me and said, “You think that was assault?” and he pulled down my tube top, and grabbed my breasts. More men started to cheer. . . . I punched him in the face, and someone shoved me into a throng of others. I was surrounded, but I kept swinging and hitting until I was able to break free. (Bruen 2008)

This is a very different description than the one offered by the *Courant*. In her full account, Bruen does blame herself for walking alone at night. She focuses not on her escape but on what might have happened if she hadn't fought back. But regardless, she used her fists and determination to break free not just from one man, but from many. She sustained only bruises, not rape.

Bruen's case offers an unusual opportunity to compare two accounts of a single assault: a first-person narrative by the target of the assault and the news media's reporting of the same event. In this case, it seems clear that the *Courant's* writer re-framed Bruen's experience. In her own account, she is brave and powerful and ultimately successful—even if she was also, understandably, scared and shocked. In the *Courant's* description, she is only vulnerable and weak, with very little attention to her resourcefulness and strength in resisting a crowd of drunken and abusive men.

Most of the time, however, we do not have access to the intended victim's version of what happened, but are exposed only to the news media's account of an assault. As we discuss below, large-scale survey research over the past 2 decades has found that, as in Melissa Bruen's case, women resist sexual assault—and do so successfully—in the majority of attempted attacks. Of course, we do not expect the details of newspaper reports to perfectly mirror the findings of social science research. Media accounts of sexual assault are influenced by both patterns of police reporting and the perceived “newsworthiness” of a particular incident. Nonetheless, the news media are an influential source of information for the public on crime and other events outside their own experience. The question we ask in this article is what information about women's responses to sexual assault is available to newspaper readers. Are readers exposed to information about women's resistance and successful self-defense? Or do news reports tend to emphasize a conventional storyline of vulnerability, as they did in the Bruen case, ignoring women's strength and highlighting their weakness? If so, these stories may reinforce the belief that women cannot defend themselves from men's violence, distorting readers' understanding of sexual assault.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Rape Resistance*

There is now an abundance of evidence that on average, actively resisting sexual assault reduces the risk of completed rape (see Ullman 1997, 2007 for a

comprehensive review of this literature). In particular, forceful physical resistance (e.g., kicking or hitting), nonforceful physical resistance (e.g., blocking an assailant's blows or fleeing), and forceful verbal resistance (e.g., yelling) are all associated with avoiding rape. Nonforceful verbal resistance (e.g., pleading or reasoning), on the other hand, does not seem to reduce the likelihood of rape. Moreover, it is now clear that women's physical or forceful verbal resistance does not, on average, increase their risk of serious injury beyond the sexual assault itself. Rather, while there is an association between victim resistance and injury, research that examines the sequence of assault finds that it is the injury that typically occurs first (Tark and Kleck 2004; Ullman 1998). In the most comprehensive study of this issue, Tark and Kleck (2004) concluded that in all types of crimes, including sexual assaults, victim resistance is nearly always the most effective course of action.<sup>3</sup>

National surveys find that women take self-protective action in the majority of assaults.<sup>4</sup> According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 66% of U.S. women who reported being sexually assaulted also reported taking some sort of self-protective action (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007). As noted above, other research suggests that this resistance is often effective in stopping assault (Clay-Warner 2002; Ullman 2007). These successful acts of resistance are likely underrepresented in national data on assault—as well as in media reports—because targets are less likely to report attempted assaults where no or minimal injury was sustained (Rennison 2002). Nonetheless, even in sexual assaults reported to the police, women's resistance is clearly visible. For example, in Zoucha-Jensen and Coyne's (1993) study of women who reported an assault to the police (a sample of assaults that may be similar to those reported in newspapers), 44.3% reported using physical resistance.

In addition to increasing women's likelihood of escape, resisting assault also confers other benefits. For example, women who resist assault report fewer post-assault symptoms, both physical and psychological (Koss, Woodruff, and Koss 1991). They also report more rapid psychological healing (Bart and O'Brien 1985) and less self-blame (Rozee and Koss 2001). Finally, fighting back can result in more compelling physical evidence for any later criminal justice process (Rozee 2005).

### *Media and the Social Construction of Reality*

These findings about women's resistance to violence stand in contrast to societal beliefs about women's ability to resist sexual assault. For example, women are believed to be naturally weaker than men and thus inevitably vulnerable to violence, especially sexual assault (Hollander 2001; McCaughey 1997). Men, in contrast, are believed to be both inherently dangerous and, paradoxically, the source of women's

<sup>3</sup> Of course, every assault situation is different, and in some situations resistance may not be the most effective response.

<sup>4</sup> Most women who resist sexual assault do so without any formal self-defense training. A growing body of research suggests, however, that such training can reduce women's risk of victimization (e.g., Brecklin and Ullman 2005; Hollander 2014; Orchowski, Gidycz, and Raffle 2008; Senn, Gee, and Thake 2011; Sinclair et al. 2013), as well as increasing their self-confidence and changing gender scripts that prescribe female passivity and vulnerability (Brecklin 2008; Hollander 2004; McCaughey 1997).

protection. These beliefs make the idea of women's resistance to violence literally unthinkable (Hollander 2009). If women are naturally weak and vulnerable and men naturally strong and aggressive, then how could any woman hope to stop a male assailant bent on rape? Of course, these stereotypes are social constructions, built partly on myth and partly on how beliefs about gender become inscribed in bodies (McCaughey 1997). As many authors have argued, victims are socially constructed; that is, they are defined and interpreted in particular ways for particular ends (Martin 2005). Indeed, Holstein and Miller (1990:103) suggest that there are no "objective" victims; victimization is an "interactional phenomenon," in that it is social processes that define someone as a victim and give that status meaning.

Past research has found that the news media present a picture of violence against women that diverges from the patterns reported in social science research. For example, Gordon and Riger (1989) found that newspapers report 13 completed assaults for every attempted but uncompleted one—even though, according to victimization surveys, women escape three-quarters of rape attempts. Schwengels and Lemert (1986), comparing newspaper reports of rape with the accounts in police reports, found that 62% of newspaper reports, but only 31% of police reports, concerned rapes committed by strangers. Self-report survey data put this figure even lower, as we discuss at greater length below. Moreover, coverage of violence against women is frequently sensationalized and often suggests that the victim is to blame (Franiuk, Seefelt, Cepress, and Vandello 2008; Soothill and Walby 1991). Of course, survey data and "official" statistics are themselves social constructions, the product of human choices and organizational needs (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963). Nonetheless, they provide important—and otherwise unavailable—insight into patterns of sexual assault and resistance.

News reports' distortion of real-world patterns is, of course, not unique to the problem of violence against women. Public understandings of all sorts of issues and events are socially constructed (e.g., Best 2008; Leverentz 2012). The news media's portrayal of social problems is shaped in part by the constraints of news work. For example, the economic and time pressures that push journalists to prioritize "news-worthy" items produces a bias toward the sensational (Best 2008; Gans 1980). In addition, news workers often share the public's taken-for-granted beliefs about the social world, and draw on those beliefs when describing news events (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson et al. 1992). As Best (2008:142) argues, "News workers want to assemble coverage that seems sensible to themselves, and that will also seem sensible to their audiences. Their stories, then, incorporate the culture they take for granted—values, symbols, worldviews, and so on."

How the media portray social problems can have real consequences. The news media provide information about events that we have not personally experienced and frame that information for us, suggesting particular interpretations and meanings (Heath, Gordon, and LeBailly 1981). Media framings of social issues influence public opinion and perception (Berns 2004; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Holbert, Shah, and Kwak 2004; Leverentz 2012; Lowney and Holstein 2001; Repogle 2011; Wozniak and McCloskey 2010). For example, Sheley and Ashkins (1981) found that the public's view of crime was closer to media reports than to the picture painted by police statistics. In addition, media portrayals of violence can desensitize

readers or viewers to actual violence, reduce sympathy, and facilitate victim blame (Anastasio and Costa 2004; Franiuk, Seefeldt, Cepress, and Vandello 2008; Franiuk Seefeldt, and Vandello 2008), provoke imitation, or normalize violence (Reid and Finchilescu 1995). For women in particular, media depictions of sexual assault and other forms of violence have been argued to disempower them (Reid and Finchilescu 1995), induce fear (Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz 1997), teach them the “victim role” (Gerbner and Gross 1976), and serve as a form of social control, instructing women on the boundaries of virtuous behavior as well as “safe” and “unsafe” environments (Meyers 1997). Through its influence on public perception, news coverage of violence against women can also affect public policy (Berns 2004; Carl 2003) and facilitate continued violence against women (Meyers 1997:ix).

Although there have been many analyses of the representation of violence against women in media and discourse (e.g., Berns 2004; Franiuk, Seefeldt, Cepress, et al. 2008; Franiuk, Seefeldt, and Vandello 2008; Meyers 1997; Soothill and Walby 1991), there have been very few assessments of how women who *resist* sexual assault are portrayed. One small study comparing reports of rape in a single newspaper with the corresponding police reports found that the newspaper articles almost never noted whether a victim had attempted to defend herself, although most police reports included that information (Schwengels and Lemert 1986). Meyers (1997) analyzed television coverage of two cases in which a woman attempted to defend herself against an attacker. No research, however, has examined how the news media portray women’s resistance across a broad and systematic sample of reports.

This is a significant gap. Although there have been no analyses of how portrayals of resistance affect news consumers, the research summarized above suggests that these portrayals could affect women’s perceptions and beliefs about violence and resistance. As noted above, forceful resistance is often the most effective response to sexual assault. If the news media underreport women’s resistance, women may not know that they can successfully resist assault and, because self-efficacy predicts effectiveness (Bandura 1997), they may be less successful in doing so. If, on the other hand, the media report instances of women’s successful resistance to violence, women may be more willing to defend themselves if attacked—and it is clear from past research that such self-defense is often effective. Because news media are a major source of information about violence against women, for both women and men, it is important to understand the picture of sexual assault resistance presented by news reports.

## METHODS

### *Data*

We used the Lexis-Nexis Academic online database of U.S. newspapers as the source of data for our analysis. For each newspaper included in this database, we located the Audit Bureau of Circulations’ (2008) *eCirc* circulation averages for the 6 months ending March 31, 2008, and noted the Sunday circulation (or if no Sunday circulation was provided, the largest weekday circulation). Some newspapers

Table I. Final sample of newspapers.

Newspaper Name and Location	Region	Circulation	Articles Meeting Criteria for Inclusion
USA Today	National	2,284,219	3
New York Times (NY)	National	1,475,400	71
Washington Post (DC)	NE	890,163	267
Denver Post (CO)	SW	600,026	31
Minneapolis Star Tribune (MN)	Midwest	534,750	73
Seattle Post-Intelligencer (WA)	W	409,231	34
San Antonio Express-News (TX)	SW	315,959	34
Omaha World Herald (NE)	Midwest	219,795	58
New Orleans Times-Picayune (LA)	SE	199,647	60
Las Vegas Review-Journal (NV)	W	199,602	26
Boston Herald (MA)	NE	105,629	39
Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City, UT)	SW	75,022	102
Huntsville Times (AL)	SE	71,786	28
Patriot Ledger (Quincy, MA)	NE	60,953	32
Eureka Times-Standard (CA)	W	20,963	2
Capital Times (Madison, WI)	Midwest	17,479	62

on the Lexis-Nexis list were not included in the *eCirc* database; we eliminated those from potential inclusion in the sample. To capture a diverse group of newspapers, we stratified the sample by region (Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and West) and circulation (over 1 million, 400,000 to 1 million, 100,000 to 400,000, and below 100,000). We included the two newspapers with over 1 million circulation, *USA Today* and the *New York Times*, because they command a national audience. We then used a random number generator to choose one newspaper from each of the remaining geographic area/circulation size groups.<sup>5</sup> The final sample included 16 newspapers from communities of various sizes around the United States (see Table I).

We then returned to the Lexis-Nexis database to search for articles in these newspapers that focused on the sexual assault of women. We used three search terms: *sexual assault*, *sex offenses*, and *rape*. Because there may be seasonal differences in rates of sexual assault, we searched for all articles on these topics over a full calendar year, January 1–December 31, 2007. We scanned each article and selected for inclusion those articles that involved male assailants and female targets, focused on a particular incident, and included some description of the sequence of the assault (thus providing an opportunity for writers to include details about women's resistance to attacks). We eliminated those articles in which sexual interaction was described by both parties as consensual, even if there were clear differences in power and age between target and assailant, reasoning that if the woman or girl in question was a willing participant, there would be no reason for resistance. When we found duplicate articles (e.g., in the morning and evening editions of a newspaper), we included only the first article. However, we included all unique articles about a single incident because our interest is in the information to which readers are

<sup>5</sup> Because there were no newspapers in the southeast region with a circulation between 400,000 and 1 million, the sample includes no paper from this geographic/circulation group.

exposed. We reasoned that people often read follow-up articles about an incident that interests them, but are unlikely to reread duplicate articles.

The final sample included 922 articles that described 1,084 incidents of assault. Because some articles described more than one incident of sexual assault (involving different victims or the same victim at different times), we developed a second database in which the unit of analysis was the incident, rather than the article. All information common to multiple incidents described in a single article was included in each set of incident codes (e.g., the type of article or a description of a perpetrator who committed multiple assaults). We use both our Articles and Incidents databases in the analysis below.

Because the *Washington Post* has a regular “crime report” feature that includes very brief descriptions of local crimes, its articles dominated the data set. We therefore repeated our analyses excluding the *Washington Post* articles. Because the vast majority of our findings did not change, we include all articles in the analysis. We discuss the one circumstance where eliminating the *Washington Post* articles changed the results of the analysis in the relevant section below.

It is important to be clear that the assaults reported by newspapers are not a random sample of all sexual assaults. The vast majority of the assaults that come to the attention of the news media do so because a police report was made. Most sexual assaults are not reported to the police—estimates of the percentage that are reported range from 5% (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000) to 42% (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007), with most estimates tending toward the lower end of that range. In addition, women are more likely to report completed rapes than attempted rapes, especially if they involve serious injury, and they are more likely to report stranger rapes rather than those committed by acquaintances or intimates (Rennison 2002). Our focus here is not on characteristics of all sexual assaults but on the depiction of sexual assault in newspapers—and thus, the representation of sexual assault to which news consumers are exposed.

### *Coding and Analysis*

We developed a coding scheme to capture descriptions of women’s resistance, as well as representations of the assault, the perpetrator, and the target. We distinguished between two types of resistance based on previous discussions of women’s self-defense in the research literature. *Active resistance* includes what other scholars have described as forceful physical and verbal resistance, and is characterized by targets using their own physical or verbal resources to assertively attempt to prevent an attack in progress. This may mean striking an assailant, yelling, or simply running away. *Passive resistance* includes nonforceful reactions that convey that the sexual interaction is unwanted but do not assertively refuse victimization, instead relying on the perpetrator or outside intervention to stop the assault. Examples include crying, pleading, or going limp. We also coded other characteristics of the article and assault; most relevant for this analysis are the type of article, the relationship between target and perpetrator, and the outcome of the resistance (successful or unsuccessful at ending the assault).

All coding was conducted by the two authors. After developing the coding scheme, we tested it by each independently coding a selection of articles. We then compared our codes, discussing any discrepancies until consensus was reached, and refined the scheme to clarify ambiguities and reduce coding differences. We repeated this process until we no longer had significant differences between our individual coding of the same articles. Tests of inter-rater reliability indicated strong agreement (Cohen's kappa values between .85 and .98 for the various codes discussed in this article). We then used that much-revised scheme to code the full set of articles. Overall, we both coded 11.2% of the articles; the remainder was equally divided between us. We used HyperResearch (ResearchWare, Inc., Randolph, MA) qualitative data analysis software to facilitate coding and analysis.

We focused our analysis on two questions. First, did the article mention women's resistance to assault? And second, if it did so, what was the outcome of this resistance and how was it described? We also compared reporting of resistance across different types of articles (e.g., length of article and circulation of newspaper). We analyzed both the text and the headlines of the articles for their descriptions of violence against women, returning to the full articles to understand the coded excerpts in context. Because past research has found that media reports of violence against women tend to mirror societal beliefs about gender, we hypothesized that newspapers would neglect to include information on women's resistance to violence, especially when it is successful at stopping an assault.

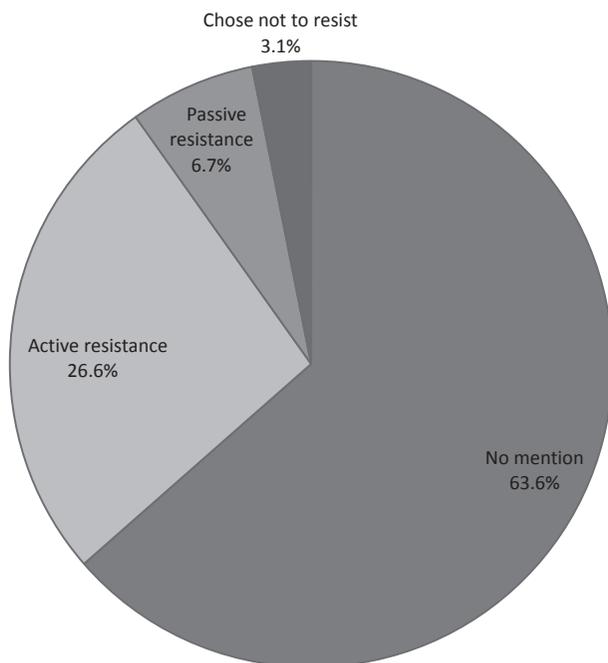
## RESULTS

### *Do Newspapers Report Women's Resistance?*

Of the 1,084 incidents in our sample, 689, or 63.6%, included no information about resistance by the target of the assault (see Fig. 1), leaving readers to draw their own conclusions—and perhaps, given societal narratives of women's vulnerability and weakness, to assume that she did not resist or that her resistance was unsuccessful. In 34 incidents (3.1%), the writer noted explicitly that the target chose not to resist. Of those articles that did mention resistance, 73 cases, or 6.7% of all incidents, mentioned only passive resistance; as noted above, passive resistance has been found to be associated with completed rape. Of these mentions of passive resistance, approximately three-quarters were verbal (e.g., crying or begging) and one-quarter were physical (e.g., going limp). In only 26.6% (288 cases) of all incidents did the newspaper article mention women's active resistance. These cases were fairly evenly divided between physical resistance (12% of all incidents), verbal resistance (14%), and escape (10%).<sup>6</sup>

In only about one-third of the total sample of incidents, then, did the newspaper report mention any kind of resistance on the part of the target of the assault. We noted that those newspapers with the largest circulations, the *New York Times*

<sup>6</sup> Note that the number of descriptions of resistance sum to more than the number of incidents mentioning resistance because in some incidents women used more than one resistance strategy. In addition, in some incidents women initially resisted but then decided to submit to the assault; in others, the assault had multiple parts, some of which the woman resisted.



**Fig. 1.** Newspaper reports of resistance to sexual assault.

and *USA Today*, reported the least active resistance; only 14 (13.6%) of 103 incidents described in these papers included a mention of active resistance, compared with 420 (35.8%) of the 1,174 incidents in papers with smaller circulations. A chi-square test of goodness of fit showed that this difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2[1] = 9.68, p = .002$ ).

### *Resistance Outcomes*

When women resist a sexual assault, what happens? Survey research has found that active resistance reduces women's risk of rape. According to Clay-Warner's (2002) analysis of NCVS data, for example, there is an 87% reduction in the probability of completed rape when women use any form of self-protective action. In newspaper accounts, however, resistance is not strongly associated with avoiding completed rape. Of the 361 incidents for which some form of resistance was reported, that resistance was successful in stopping the assault in only 42% of the cases.<sup>7</sup> In the other 58% of incidents, the woman's resistance was described as unsuccessful (38%), the assault outcome was unclear (14%), or the assault was ended by outside intervention (6%). Women's active physical and verbal resistance

<sup>7</sup> This is the one circumstance in which analyzing the data without the *Washington Post* yielded different results. When *Washington Post* articles were excluded, the proportion of incidents in which successful resistance was mentioned fell to 33%. As we note below, crime reports, which dominate the *Washington Post* articles, are much more likely to portray successful resistance than are other types of articles.

was more frequently reported as successful (48.2% of 311 incidents) than unsuccessful (35.4% of incidents). In contrast, passive resistance (nonforceful physical and verbal resistance) was reported as unsuccessful (64.6% of 73 incidents) more frequently than as successful (12.3% of incidents). These results mirror the findings of social science research, which also find active resistance to be more effective than passive resistance (e.g., Clay-Warner 2002; Ullman 2007).

When articles did report women's resistance, the power of those actions was frequently diluted by the way they were described. For example, reporters often wrote that resistance or escape was something women "managed" to do, implying that it was not easy and that women were lucky, rather than skillful, if they achieved it. In other cases, a strong action such as escape was modified by descriptions of weak emotions, such as a description of a target who "ran into the house crying" (Anon 2007a). Only rarely was women's forceful resistance described with unmodified verbs such as "fought," "hit," or "resisted."

Descriptions of unsuccessful resistance often vividly emphasized women's vulnerability, as in this example:<sup>8</sup>

According to [the police], [the assailant] tried to pull the woman toward the river. When she resisted and began to scream, he choked her and repeatedly punched her in the face before flinging her to the ground behind bushes. (Sweet 2007)

Here, the woman's attempts at self-protection (resisting and screaming) are overshadowed by the multiple descriptions of the assailant's violence (pulling, choking, punching, flinging). Remember, too, that resistance was mentioned in only 34% of incidents. Overall, fewer than 15% (154 of 1,084) of the incidents described in newspaper articles included any description of women's successful resistance. In the remainder, women's resistance was either absent or present but unsuccessful.

### *Relationship Between Perpetrator and Target*

In about one-third of all incidents (31.9%), the newspaper report did not specify the relationship between the perpetrator and the target. Of the remainder, slightly more than half (51.7%) involved perpetrators who were described as strangers to the target, 41.0% involved acquaintances and other known assailants, and 7.3% involved intimate partners or family members. Again, these percentages diverge from those found by national surveys, whose estimates of the proportion of rapes and sexual assaults committed by strangers range from 13.8% in the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS; Black et al. 2011) to 42.2% in the NCVS (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007).

Interestingly, there were few differences in the reporting of women's resistance across different types of perpetrators. Women's resistance was mentioned in 22.6% of articles reporting an assault by an intimate or family member, 27.7% reporting an assault by an acquaintance, and 29.6% reporting an assault by a stranger (see Fig. 2); this difference was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2[2] = 0.96, p = .62$ ). This finding is surprising given that most research has found that women are much more

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A for all newspaper articles quoted in the text.

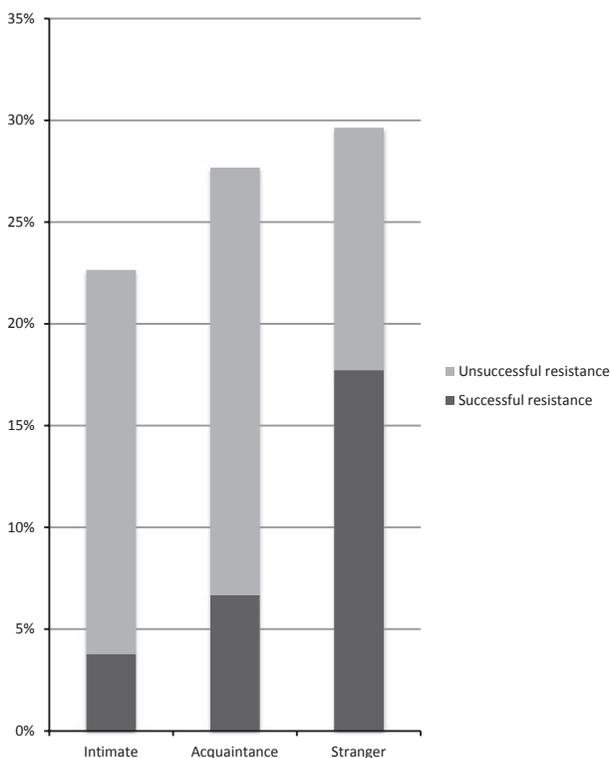


Fig. 2. Mentions of women's resistance, by relationship between perpetrator and target.

likely to resist attacks by strangers than by known assailants (see Ullman 1997, 2002).

However, *successful* resistance was much more frequently reported in incidents involving strangers: 60% of these incidents, compared with 24% of incidents involving acquaintances and 16.7% involving family members, described women's successful resistance to violence. A chi-square test of independence showed that resistance outcome and type of relationship were significantly associated ( $\chi^2[2] = 12.46, p = .002, Cramer's V = 0.39$ ). Although there is little research on the efficacy of resistance to strangers versus known perpetrators, the few studies that do measure this find forceful resistance to be equally effective in both situations (Ullman and Siegel 1993).

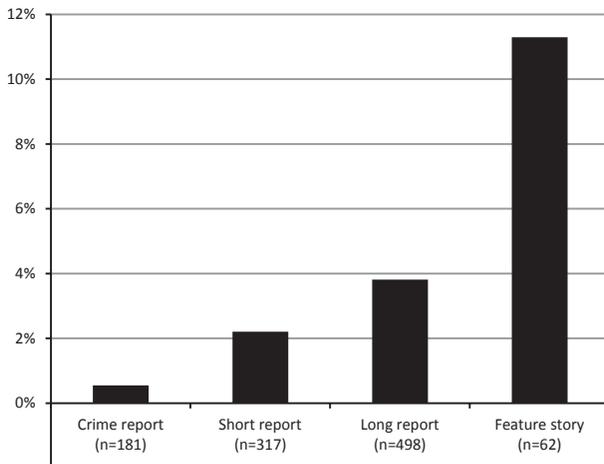
It is impossible to be certain *why* newspapers overrepresent stranger rapes but underreport resistance to them, or why they underreport the effectiveness of resistance to assaults by acquaintances and intimates. One possibility is the fact that newspapers often obtain information about sexual assaults from police reports, and women are more likely to report assaults by strangers than acquaintances or intimates. Another possibility is that reports of assaults by strangers are seen as more "newsworthy," either because they fit with widespread stereotypes about rape or because they are more sensational. Whatever the reason, these patterns distort the

information available to readers and thus may perpetuate myths about sexual assault.

*Variation by Type of Article and Type of Newspaper*

Although the patterns described above held true for virtually all articles in the sample, we found some variation by article type. The articles fell into four categories based on length, level of detail, and focus. *Crime reports* (18% of the 922 articles) are brief, formulaic descriptions of reports made to the police, and average 48 words per article. They are generally contained in their own section, labeled “crime reports” or “law and order,” with no individual headlines. *Short reports* (31%), which average 163 words per article, are concise descriptions of a specific, very recent event. *Long reports* (46%) also focus on a single crime or series of related crimes but tend to be longer (averaging 547 words per article) and more detailed, often following up on a short report and providing context or interview quotes. *Feature stories* (6%), in contrast, tend to be much longer (1,576 words per article, on average) and focus not on a single event but rather on a larger story or issue (e.g., sexual assault in the military), embedding accounts of specific assaults within this larger context. The attacks described in feature stories also tend to be located further in the past, whereas the three types of reports are usually about very recent incidents.

The four types of articles varied substantially in the way they reported women’s resistance to sexual assault (see Fig. 3). As noted above, about two-thirds of all incident descriptions contained no mention of any resistance by the target of the assault; this was true, with some minor variation, for every type of article. In a small percentage of incidents (34 of 1,084 incidents, or 3% overall), the writer explicitly noted that the target chose not to resist, but here article type made a difference: the longer the article, the more likely that this kind of explicit nonresistance was



**Fig. 3.** Explicit mentions of women’s submission, by type of article.

mentioned. Feature stories were particularly likely to make explicit mention of women's submission, with 11% of incidents described in this way. In contrast, only one-half of 1% of incidents described in crime reports, 2% in short articles, and 4% in long articles included this type of mention. These differences were statistically significant ( $\chi^2[3] = 13.56, p < .01$ ).

The tone of these mentions also varied by type of article. Feature stories tended to report women's submission with descriptions like these:

I remembered hearing once that the best way to survive a violent sexual assault was to give in, so I did. The guilt of doing so haunted me for years. (Weitzel 2007)

She decided to become submissive, worried that he had a weapon and he'd kill her. . . . A hammer and a razor blade—tools she had used when moving into the apartment—were on her nightstand during the attack. But she couldn't reach them during those two hours. "I just felt so useless," she said. (Whaley 2007)

What is notable about these descriptions of submission is the detail about the women's decision-making process and, in particular, the emotions surrounding such decisions. These accounts emphasize women's feelings of guilt, fear, and uselessness; these are not emotions associated with power and agency.

Compare these accounts from feature articles with the way submission is discussed in crime and short reports. The single instance of explicit nonresistance reported in a crime report reads, in full:

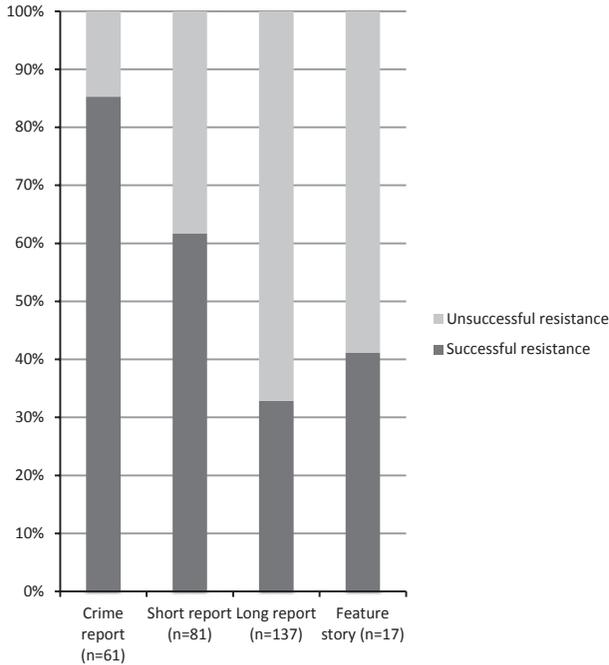
A boy at a swim club asked a girl, 6, to touch him under his swim trunks. The girl was hesitant but complied. (Bolton 2007)

This description contains no extra detail about the emotional turmoil of making the decision to submit. Short reports are similar, as in this example:

The second woman did not fight back. (Scallan 2007)

Again, the article provides a simple reporting of the facts, rather than a detailed narrative about why she chose not to fight back. Of course, longer articles inevitably provide more details than short crime reports. What we found notable, however, was that only some types of information were elaborated in longer reports. There were virtually no lengthy or detailed descriptions of women's resistance, for example, even though resistance was reported much more frequently than submission. Descriptions in different article types, then, differ in both quantity and quality: Longer articles not only more frequently report women's submission; they also include additional detail that focuses on women's vulnerability and fear.

The four types of articles also varied in the way they reported the outcomes of women's resistance. About one-third of all types of articles noted a resistance outcome. Overall, longer articles were less likely to report successful resistance (see Fig. 4). When crime reports included details about the outcome of women's resistance, it was described as successful 85% of the time; for short reports, the rate of successful resistance was 62%. In contrast, only 33% of the resistance described in long reports and 41% in feature stories was successful. These differences were statistically significant ( $\chi^2[3] = 51.02, p < .001, Cramer's V = 0.42$ ).



**Fig. 4.** Outcomes of women’s resistance, by type of article.

*Note:* This figure includes only those incidents in which women’s resistance to assault was described. Incidents in which the outcome of the resistance was unclear are not included in this graph, nor are incidents that were resolved by outside intervention.

Longer articles also tended to emphasize the ways in which outsiders helped facilitate a woman’s escape or resistance, downplaying her own efforts at self-protection. One article, for example, reported that a woman fought off an attacker in an elevator but concluded by noting that “Workers chased him down and held him until police arrived” (Cooper 2007b). There was only one incident, among the 60 described in feature articles, in which a woman was portrayed as strong and capable in her successful resistance to assault: a woman “ferociously fought back,” leaving her assailant’s blood at the scene (Johnson 2007). Instead, feature stories and long reports tended to describe passive resistance such as begging, ignoring, or going limp; passive resistance was mentioned in 10% of long reports and 12% of feature reports, compared with only 3% of crime reports and 4% of short reports ( $\chi^2[3] = 18.80, p < .001, Cramer’s V = 0.13$ ). Again, passive resistance has been found to be the *least* effective form of resistance in research on sexual assault (Ullman 2007).

At the other end of the spectrum, shorter articles were not only more likely to report successful resistance, but also tended to frame this resistance in more empowering ways. For example, some short articles describe women as “fighting,” rather than “struggling,” and some even provide details about the resistance, as in this example:

She elbowed the man, who fell to the ground. She kicked him and ran away. (Mack 2007)

Depictions of unsuccessful resistance, unsurprisingly, follow the opposite pattern: longer articles provide more detail about unsuccessful resistance, while shorter articles provide less. A notable pattern here was that in longer articles, women were portrayed as being overwhelmed by men's strength and speed. In one feature article, the woman recalls, "I fought him until he punched me" (Weitzel 2007). In another, the writer reports that "She awoke one night to a man standing over her on the couch. She first got away from him, but he caught up with her, took her to a bedroom and raped her" (Olson 2007).

Crime reports, however, describe the opposite pattern: although women's initial attempts at resistance may be unsuccessful, they keep trying and often get away or escape greater harm. For example, one crime report described this interaction:

When she tried to leave, he held onto her arm and fondled her. She broke free and returned to her apartment. (Orton 2007)

This portrayal fits the pattern found in research on sexual assault: when women keep fighting, even if unsuccessful in their initial attempts at resistance, they are more likely to eventually avoid rape (Bart and O'Brien 1985).

Overall, the longer the article, the closer the story adhered to conventional narratives of female vulnerability and weakness. In the brief, "just-the-facts" articles, women's resistance was more evident, though still less frequent than victimization surveys report. This pattern is particularly striking because one might expect longer stories to describe more, not less, female resistance. Longer stories present the writer with the greatest opportunity to elaborate the details of the assault, and might be expected to describe the actions women took to protect themselves. Instead, however, writers appear to use this extra space to sketch a conventional picture of sexual assault, emphasizing women's weakness and minimizing or ignoring their agency. It is notable that resistance is virtually invisible in this type of reporting. Our data cannot tell us, of course, whether the focus on women's vulnerability in these articles reflects the types of incidents that feature stories choose to focus on or the writers' interpretation of these incidents. In either case, however, these stories serve to make conventional narratives of women's vulnerability more available to readers.

### *Scanning the News: Headlines*

The analysis above suggests that newspaper articles on sexual assault tend to underreport women's resistance. But what if readers only scan the article's headline? The nominal purpose of a headline is to summarize the article that follows. However, a brief headline can never fully represent the entire article (Andrew 2007; Tannenbaum 1953). Headlines are thus simplifying devices, framing the text that follows them; they may also be designed to attract attention and, thus, readers (Berns 2004). Experimental research has demonstrated that the content of headlines affects readers' interpretations of articles (e.g., Franiuk, Seefeldt, and Vandello 2008). Headlines may also replace the text entirely if readers do not continue further in the article (Condit et al. 2001); although research on headline reading patterns is

sparse, there is some evidence that many people scan headlines without reading full articles (Dor 2003). If readers scan headlines, rather than closely reading entire articles, what do they learn about women's resistance?

Of the 922 articles we analyzed, only 13 headlines (1.4%) described any sort of female agency. Moreover, most of these descriptions of agency were very weak: two described escape *after* a completed rape and four described agency that took place after the assault (e.g., helping to catch the perpetrator or trying to help other survivors). Two articles described resistance during an assault itself, but the resistance was unsuccessful, including one case in which the target was ultimately killed. Overall, only 5 of the 922 headlines described resistance that stopped an assault. Four of these headlines described active resistance (three physical, one verbal); one described passive resistance (talking a man out of rape). Thus, while 16% of all articles (150 of 922) had at least one mention of successful resistance, only 0.5% of headlines (5 of 922) did; this difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2[1] = 13.24, p < .001$ ). If newspaper readers scanned only headlines, they would learn about only 3% of the successful resistance that was reported in the news, which itself likely underreports women's resistance. It is worth noting that all three incidents of active physical resistance reported in headlines were in short reports; articles whose headlines mentioned verbal and passive resistance were both in long reports.

Even when a newspaper article reports resistance, the fact of women's agency is often weakened by the way it is reported. In some instances it is deemphasized by placing it in a subheadline, as in the following cases:

*DOCUMENT DETAILS RAPE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST U OF M PLAYERS;*

The woman's statement offers details of the assault and how she tried to identify the alleged attackers before she left the scene. The football players deny the allegations. (Chanen 2007)

*MAN IS ACCUSED OF MOLESTING GIRL AT WAL-MART;*

9-Year-Old Escapes by Kicking Suspect, Who Posed as Police Officer, Authorities Say (Jackman 2007)

In both headlines, the actions taken by the girl or woman are literally subordinated to the abusive actions of the attackers. In other cases, the woman's resistance is buried in details about the ferocity and trauma of the attack, as in this headline:

*LINCOLN MAN SENTENCED FOR 2006 RAPE*

Richard Olinger III sexually assaulted and brutally battered an Omaha woman, but she managed to escape. (Cooper 2007a)

The target's escape is mentioned only at the end of the long headline, after the reader has learned that the assault was brutal and violent.

Besides these 13 mentions, the only kind of female agency ever noted in headlines was the target's reporting an assault to the police. Note, however, that this action is often framed as "accusing" or "alleging" assault, which carries the

implication that the accusation may be untrue. Overall, women's agency and self-defensive resistance are invisible in newspaper headlines about sexual assault.

## CONCLUSIONS

What information do newspapers present about women's resistance to sexual assault? According to our analysis of a representative sample of 16 newspapers across 1 full year, newspaper reports of sexual assault reinforce a conventional narrative that assumes women's vulnerability to assault and their inability to respond to it effectively. About two-thirds of the newspaper descriptions contain no mention of women's resistance. When newspapers do report women's self-defensive behavior, they often do so only to note its failure; this was especially true when the assailant was known to the victim. The variation by article length multiplies this effect: shorter articles more frequently depict women's successful resistance, while longer articles more often describe unsuccessful resistance, which means that there is far more space devoted to women's vulnerability than to their agency and resistance. Descriptions of active resistance were least common in the largest circulation national newspapers, meaning that many more readers are exposed to these conventional portrayals of assault. Headlines, too, exaggerate these patterns, presenting virtually no evidence that the articles that follow, or that assaults themselves, include any female resistance or agency. And in the relatively few cases when successful resistance is described, the fact that the woman defended herself is frequently undermined by the language used to describe it. In only a very small minority of cases are women described as strong, competent social actors who possess the ability to protect themselves from men's violence.

Of course, these data do not tell us what readers make of these patterns. Newspaper consumers are active rather than passive recipients of information (Gamson et al. 1992) and their own social contexts may affect how they interpret news reports (Eschholz, Chirocos, and Gertz 2003). It is also important to note that these patterns are due not only to writers' and editors' choices, but also to newspapers' reliance on police reports, which include only a subsample of all sexual assaults, and their quest for the most "newsworthy" stories that will increase their readership. Nonetheless, these patterns remain important because many readers derive their understanding of sexual assaults from news reports.

Depictions of women's resistance in U.S. newspapers fit well with conventional gender expectations for women. In Western cultures, gender is conceived as difference; masculinity and femininity are understood to be mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed (Lorber 1993). To be masculine is to be strong, dominant, and competent. Femininity, then, implies the opposite: physical and emotional weakness. These differences are socially constructed, but they are not inconsequential: they serve to create, justify, and reproduce structural inequalities between men and women.

The myth of women as the weaker sex is manifested in widely shared beliefs about sexual assault. Women learn that they are vulnerable to sexual assault but not how to fight it off (Hollander 2001; Meyers 1997). They are taught, by media

and other agents of socialization, that to survive a rape they must be passive; if men are inevitably stronger than women, then to fight back is to risk being killed. The 922 articles we analyzed reinforce this gender ideology, painting a picture that rarely diverges from essentialist notions of masculine strength and feminine vulnerability.

Holstein and Miller (1990) have argued that “victims” are socially constructed via interactional processes. “Victimization” serves useful social functions; for example, calling someone a victim may absolve them of responsibility or create sympathy for their injury (Berns 2004). At the same time, however, “victimizing” a person has negative consequences in that it “‘dis-ables’ that person to the extent that victim status appropriates one’s personal identity as a competent efficacious actor” (Holstein and Miller 1990:119; see also Barry 1984; Loseke and Cahill 1984). We argue that it is not simply *victims* who are constructed through newspaper reports of violence against women, but also *gender*. Newspaper descriptions of victims of sexual assault, as we have described, nearly always conform to interpretations of women as weak, vulnerable, and dependent on others for their safety. This is true even for women who resist violence: although these situations present writers with the opportunity to deviate from the typical gender script, they virtually never do so. Newspapers “victimize” the targets of sexual assault even when they fight back, constructing them as victims (and particular kinds of *feminized* victims) rather than resisters.

Past research on the effects of media violence on women suggests that the consequences of these patterns are not trivial. The consistent presentation of women as powerless victims reinforces women’s place in social hierarchies, substantiating their feelings of vulnerability (Henley, Miller, and Beazley 1995; Lamb 1999; Lamb and Keon 1995; Reid and Finchilescu 1995) and creating an environment where sexual violence can thrive (Cermele 2010). If women are presented with a barrage of information confirming their vulnerability, why would they believe themselves capable of fighting off a male attacker?<sup>9</sup> These patterns may also affect women’s everyday behavior outside of assault situations. For example, if women believe self-defense to be impossible, they are left only with infantilizing options for preventing assault: limiting their participation in public life (though of course this may not protect them, since so much violence against women is perpetrated by acquaintances and intimates) or relying on others, particularly men, for protection (Hollander 2009; Meyers 1997; Stanko 1995). Conversely, potential attackers may learn from newspaper reports that women are vulnerable and unlikely to resist assault; this portrait of weakness may actually encourage sexual assaults (Reid and Finchilescu 1995).

An alternate presentation of sexual assault, however, could have very different effects. Presenting full accounts of women’s active resistance could challenge gender expectations, according agency to women and making resistance a more cognitively available response to assault (Cermele 2010). Melissa Bruen’s firsthand account of her assault, with which we began this article, is a good example of how newspapers could report sexual assaults in ways that are empowering to women. Although

<sup>9</sup> Of course, the large-scale survey research discussed above reports that women often *do* fight back when they are attacked. Our argument here is not that women do not resist sexual assault, but that the patterns of newspaper reporting we discuss here may reduce their belief that they can be successful in doing so.

Bruen does not discount the fear and pain she suffered, her account makes clear that she was not a passive victim. She fought back ferociously and ultimately succeeded in escaping her attackers. We found a similar description of resistance in the Salt Lake City newspaper the *Deseret Morning News*. Below the headline “Woman fights off attackers at film fest,” the article described the assault in this way:

PARK CITY — A woman fought off two would-be rapists as she left a nightclub during last week’s Sundance Film Festival. Park City police said the 25-year-old woman left a Main Street club last Wednesday and was walking down Park Avenue when she noticed two men following her. She quickened her pace, police said, but the men continued to follow. When she started running, the woman told police that the men caught up to her in a field. “She claims that when they threw her down, one climbed on top of her and pulled up her shirt and jacket,” Park City Police Lt. Rick Ryan said Wednesday. “She kicked him in the groin and he fell off, moaning and groaning.” When the other man climbed on top of her and broke her bra clasp, police said the woman punched him in the face. The men then took off running. (Anon. 2007b)

Unfortunately, this powerful description of resistance was the *only* such article among the 922 articles in the sample.

This research is limited by the relatively small sample of newspapers analyzed; although we stratified the sample by region and circulation size, regional particularities may have influenced our results. Our conclusions are limited by our focus on the reports themselves, rather than on how the reports are produced or how readers consume and interpret the information available in newspapers. Future research could look more directly at the effects of portrayals of women’s resistance (or non-resistance) to sexual assault on readers’ ideas about gender, violence, and resistance. Future research might also compare a sample of police reports of sexual assaults to the way those assaults are described in local newspapers; such research would provide more information about the information available to news reporters and the ways that news reports portray this information. Finally, we suggest that future research examine the portrayal of resistance in other media, including television news, online news, magazine articles, and fictional portrayals across media platforms.

Although we believe that newspapers should more fully report women’s resistance to violence, it is important to acknowledge the potential pitfalls. As other writers have argued, encouraging women’s resistance can be used to blame victims by implying that women should resist assault or that they are at fault if they are unable to do so effectively. Moreover, focusing on women’s resistance can reduce sympathy for victims or reinforce myths about “real rape” as occurring only when a woman resists and is physically overpowered. In our view (see Hollander 2009 for a more extended discussion), saying that women *can* effectively resist sexual assault does not imply that women *should* resist or that they should be blamed if they could not do so. Responsibility for sexual assault always lies squarely on the shoulders of the assailant, not the target. Moreover, as the recent revision of the definition of rape in the Uniform Crime Reports makes clear (U.S. Department of Justice 2012), women’s resistance is not necessary for “real rape” to have occurred.

Despite these risks, we speculate that if depictions of women’s resistance became more widespread, they could both encourage women to resist attackers and discourage men from attempting such attacks. Women, armed with the knowledge

that they have both the power to defend themselves and a good chance of succeeding, would be able to participate more fully in social life. Empowering women in this way could not only prevent sexual violence but would also “challenge the status quo by encouraging women to break with traditional role expectations” in all areas of their lives (Meyers 1997:82). Reporting women’s resistance to violence against women, in other words, could play an important role in deconstructing gender inequality.

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## APPENDIX A: NEWSPAPER ARTICLES QUOTED IN TEXT

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