

Sexual Assault: What Utahns Need to Know

RESEARCH SUMMARY

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

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Sexual assault is a serious social, criminal justice, and healthcare issue in Utah, with deep consequences for individuals, families, workplaces, and communities. Utah's rate of rape is higher than the national average, yet sexual assault remains significantly underreported. Research indicates that one in three Utah women has experienced sexual assault in her lifetime, and one in six has experienced rape. These experiences can create short- and long-term physical, psychological, emotional, and financial harms. Preventing sexual violence requires strong community awareness, better support systems, effective law enforcement responses, and policies that protect survivors and hold offenders accountable.

PREVALENCE

Sexual assault is a major concern in Utah. Thirty-three percent of Utah women report experiencing sexual assault in their lifetime, and 16.7% report experiencing rape. Rape is the only violent crime in Utah with a rate higher than the national average: 55.5 per 100,000 people in Utah compared with 42.6 per 100,000 people nationally. Utah is ranked 9th among the 50 states for rapes per capita. These numbers show that sexual violence is not rare and must be treated as a serious community issue.

UNDERREPORTING

Many survivors do not report sexual assault to law enforcement. In Utah, only 11.8% of individuals who experienced rape or sexual assault reported the crime. This means official crime data likely show only a small part of the problem. Survivors may not report because they fear they will not be believed, worry about their safety, feel shame, or do not trust the system. Improving survivor support and response systems is essential.

DEFINITION

“Sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim. Some forms of sexual assault include attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, penetration of the victim's body (also known as rape). Force doesn't always refer to physical pressure. Perpetrators may use emotional coercion, physical force, or manipulation to coerce a victim into nonconsensual sex.”

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network

VIOLENCE & IMPACTS

Sexual assault can involve physical force, threats, injury, and loss of awareness. In the Utah data, 61.0% of victims were grabbed or held, 37.0% were verbally threatened or coerced, 16.0% were hit, 15.4% were strangled, and 9.9% experienced weapon use. Almost half of victims, 48.6%, reported loss of consciousness or awareness. Visible non-anogenital injuries were documented for 71.0% of victims, and anogenital injuries were documented for 47.7%. These impacts can affect survivors' health, safety, memory, and emotional well-being.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Is widespread and underreported.
- Is shaped by personal and situational vulnerabilities.
- Often committed by someone the victim knows.

VULNERABILITIES

Some groups and situations are linked to higher vulnerability for sexual assault, but this does not mean victims are responsible for what happened. In Utah, between 2010 and 2020, 94.7% of victims were women, while 4.7% were men and 0.4% were transgender. Young women were especially represented, though victims ranged from ages 14 to 95. Black victims made up 3.6% of cases compared with 1.5% of Utah's population, and Native American victims made up 2.9% compared with 1.6% of Utah's population. Nearly one-quarter of victims had no permanent address data, 47.2% self-disclosed mental illness, and 9.6% had a physical or mental impairment.

Situational vulnerabilities also increase risk. In the Utah data, 16.2% of victims suspected they were drugged before the assault, which is called suspected drug-facilitated sexual assault. More than half of victims, 56.8%, had consumed alcohol or drugs, which can reduce awareness or judgment at different levels of intoxication. Another 12.6% were asleep and woke up to an assault. Sleeping itself creates vulnerability because a person cannot consent or protect themselves while asleep.



ASSAULT CONTEXT

Sexual assault often happens in familiar places and involves someone the survivor knows. In the Utah data, 62.6% of assaults happened in a house or apartment, followed by motels, bars, automobiles, and the outdoors. Most victims, 76.6%, knew their assailant, and the most common relationship was acquaintance at 58.0%. Strangers accounted for 18.5% of cases, while current spouses or partners accounted for 6.9% and ex-partners for 5.7%.

UTAH'S RESPONSE

Utah has made major progress in testing sexual assault kits, but prosecution remains low. Earlier research found that only 38.0% of collected sexual assault kits were submitted to the state crime lab, but after policy changes and House Bill 200, submission rates increased to over 95.0%. Utah also tested 11,193 backlogged kits, which led to 5,025 forensic DNA profiles entered into the national database. Even with this progress, prosecution rates remain low. Salt Lake County prosecution rates improved from 6.0% to 8.0%, with the possibility of reaching 10.0%, while Utah County's overall prosecution rate was 11.0%.

THE PATH FORWARD

Prevention education can stop sexual violence before it occurs. Community- and school-based education on consent, healthy relationships, boundaries, bystander action, and reporting can help people recognize harmful behavior and seek help. Challenging victim-blaming, teaching respect, and addressing conditions that increase vulnerability can also help communities prevent assault and support safer environments.

Improved identification connects survivors with support. Medical, school, social service, law enforcement, and criminal legal settings can use trauma-informed screening and clear protocols to recognize sexual assault and respond appropriately. Coordinated partnerships and victim-centered advocates can help survivors access safety planning, medical forensic exams, crisis care, therapy, case information, legal support, housing, and other assistance.

Justice system improvements help survivors heal and increase accountability. Continued investment is needed to strengthen investigations, improve prosecutor screening, support trained professionals, test and track sexual assault kits, and keep survivors informed about their cases. Utahns can help by believing survivors, learning about consent, supporting prevention programs, advocating for survivor-centered policies, and helping build communities where sexual violence is not tolerated.

HELP PREVENT SEXUAL ASSAULT IN UTAH

You can help prevent sexual harassment in Utah by increasing awareness, recognizing harmful behaviors, and speaking up when you see them. Learn how to support those who may be affected, build respectful workplace cultures, and take action in your community. See below for resources and steps to help create environments where all Utahns feel safe, valued, and able to thrive.

Data Source: [UWLP Snapshot No. 42 \(2022\)](#)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Learn More:** Explore resources in the UWLP Sexual Assault [Resource Kit](#).
- **Review:** Find goals, perceptions, and community partners on the Sexual Assault Spoke [webpage](#).
- **Get Involved:** Connect to the grassroots initiative, [A Bolder Way Forward](#).
- **Take Action:** Help move the needle and discover additional [Calls to Action](#) for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.



Learn more about how sexual assault is a significant social, criminal justice, and healthcare issue in Utah.



Educate yourself about the importance of believing and supporting sexual assault survivors by checking out [Utah's Start by Believing campaign](#).



Take the Start by Believing [Pledge](#) to join the movement and support survivors. Encourage others to share their commitment as well.

Learn more at www.utwomen.org

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