

# The Effects of Resistance Strategies on Rape

## ABSTRACT

This investigation sought to clarify which resistance strategies were associated with rape avoidance and at what cost. Data were gathered from initial and supplemental police reports about 150 sexual assault victims, ages 16 and older, who were assaulted between June 1, 1988, and May 31, 1989, in Omaha, Neb. Although this analysis could not determine causality, it did indicate that forceful verbal resistance, physical resistance, and fleeing were all associated with rape avoidance, whereas nonforceful verbal resistance and no resistance were associated with being raped. Further, women who used forceful resistance were no more likely to be injured than women who did not resist. (*Am J Public Health*. 1993;83:1633-1634)

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### Introduction

A rape is reported in the United States every 6 minutes. Over the last decade, the rate of reported rapes increased four times as fast as the overall crime rate.<sup>1</sup> Although this statistic is alarming, it substantially underrepresents the true incidence of rape. Government estimates suggest that "for every rape reported to police, 3 to 10 rapes are not reported."<sup>2(p3)</sup> Because of these startling statistics, extensive research has been done in the area of rape prevention. However, past research has failed to identify what types of resistance strategies most effectively prevent rape and at what cost. This has led to conflicting advice being offered to women.

Siegel et al.'s interview study, which used randomly selected community residents, found that "resistance particularly verbal, reduces the probability of sexual contact. Physical resistance, on the other hand, is associated with increased likelihood of contact."<sup>3(p31)</sup> Several other researchers reported similar findings with samples of selected subjects who reported the rape to police or sought rape crisis services.<sup>4-6</sup> However, some researchers<sup>7-13</sup> who sampled similar populations found just the opposite to be true. Bart and O'Brien found that "strategies associated with avoidance were fleeing or trying to flee, yelling, and using physical force."<sup>7(p84)</sup>

Because past research about the effectiveness of various types of resistance has been inconclusive, this research was conducted to determine which resistance strategies were associated with rape avoidance and whether physical resistance in particular was associated with additional physical injury. It was hypothesized that more forceful resistance would be associated with rape avoidance but physical resistance would be associated with additional physical injury.

### Methods

Data were collected from the Omaha, Neb, Police Department's initial and supplemental reports. The sample consisted of 150 women, aged 16 and older, whose sexual assault occurred between June 1, 1988, and May 31, 1989, and was reported

to the Omaha Police Department. Nebraska law requires medical personnel to report to the police any injury sustained because of violence. The sample thus consisted of women who themselves reported the assault to the police or who sought medical attention and whose assault was then reported to the police by medical personnel. It is likely that attacks resulting in injuries, attacks by strangers, and attacks in which resistance was less successful were probably overrepresented in this sample.<sup>8</sup> Despite this inherent bias, however, a finding of a positive association between resistance and rape avoidance with women in this sample should allow us to infer that a similar association would hold for rape attempts not reported to police.

The independent variable, resistance strategy, was defined as any action taken to ward off the attack. This variable was divided into five categories: no resistance; nonforceful verbal resistance (pleading, crying and/or assertively refusing); forceful verbal resistance (screaming and/or yelling); physical resistance (wrestling/struggling, pushing, striking, biting, and/or using a weapon); and fleeing (running, walking away, and/or fleeing in a car). In cases in which several types of resistance were attempted, this variable was coded as the most forceful resistance strategy attempted.

The dependent variables were outcome of the assault and additional physical injury. Outcome of the assault was divided into two categories, raped and avoided rape. "Raped" was defined as having sustained penile, oral, or digital penetration or penetration by an instrument, in all cases under force or threat of force. "Avoided rape" was defined as having sustained no penetration. "Additional physical injury" was also divided into two categories, injured and not injured. "Injured" was defined as having sustained any apparent injury or complained of an injury. "Not injured" was de-

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TABLE 1—Resistance Strategy by Outcome of the Assault (n = 149)

Resistance Strategy	Outcome of the Assault <sup>a</sup>	
	Raped, % (n = 97)	Avoided Rape, % (n = 52)
No resistance	93.5	6.5
Nonforceful verbal resistance	95.8	4.2
Forceful verbal resistance	50.0	50.0
Physical resistance	45.5	54.5
Running/fleeing	55.0	45.0

<sup>a</sup> $\chi^2(4, n = 149) = 22.93, P < .001.$

financed as not having sustained any apparent injury and not complaining of an injury.

## Results

Of the 150 women in the sample, 64.7% were raped and 35.3% avoided rape, with 46.7% incurring an additional physical injury. Physical resistance was the most frequently selected resistance strategy (44.3%).

We analyzed resistance strategy by outcome of the assault using a chi-square test. Forceful verbal resistance, physical resistance, and fleeing were all associated with rape avoidance. No resistance and nonforceful verbal resistance were associated with being raped ( $\chi^2 [4, n = 149] = 22.93, p < .001$ ) (see Table 1).

We analyzed resistance strategy by additional physical injury using a chi-square test. There was no significant relationship between the two variables.

## Discussion

This study supports prior research that found an association between physical resistance and rape avoidance.<sup>7-13</sup> It also contradicts other prior research that found an association between less forceful verbal resistance (pleading, crying, etc.) and rape avoidance.<sup>3-6</sup> This study in fact found a negative association between nonforceful verbal resistance (pleading and crying) and rape avoidance but a positive association between forceful verbal resistance (screaming or yelling) and rape avoidance.

The findings of this study, in combination with some past research, provide professionals who are responsible for public health education with direction in planning public educational programs. These findings also counter some prior research on resistance strategies, research that has resulted in inaccurate advice to women to use only nonforceful verbal resistance, or no resistance at all, if faced with a sexual assault. Those types of resistance strategies were shown in this study to be associated with being raped, not with rape avoidance, and they did not reduce the incidence of physical injury.

Because of the contradictory results of past studies, additional research on rape prevention strategies is needed. Special attention should be paid to the temporal sequencing of resistance strategies, outcome, and additional physical injury so that these relationships can be understood. In addition, resistance strategies should be measured so that essentially different strategies are not artificially combined together. For example, if screaming and pleading had been combined into one measure called "verbal resistance," important differences would have been lost.

Lastly, future research needs to include women who did not seek medical attention for their injuries or report the assault to the police, women who were not injured, and women who were assaulted by people they knew. □

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