

2023

TEN RAPE MYTHS IN MEDIA

A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN FILM & TV

**“WHEN YOUR RAPE IS ENTERTAINMENT,
YOUR WORTHLESSNESS IS ABSOLUTE.”
– ANDREA DWORKIN**

Over half of women and transgender individuals in the US face sexual violence during their lifetime, and 7% of men experience this. Many survivors are retraumatized by harmful societal myths that prevent them from receiving justice. This report is part of The Representation Project's *End Rape Campaign* to raise awareness about the causes and consequences of the sexual violence epidemic in the US.

This is the first quantitative assessment of the most common rape myths in entertainment media. We are interested in knowing what role popular films and TV shows play in promoting and perpetuating harmful rape myths. To this end, we analyze depictions of sexual violence in the top criminal justice shows and films from 2022 to see how many reflect or challenge common rape myths. We find that the most-watched entertainment media mostly perpetuate rape myths, promote misinformation about the criminal justice system, and uphold rape culture in the US.



THE
REPRESENTATION
PROJECT



MAJOR FINDINGS

We analyze popular films and TV shows and find they reinforce ten common rape myths that shape the hearts and minds of viewers. Media play an influential role in “educating” viewers about sexual violence and what survivors can expect when they report this crime.

In the *reel world* created in film and TV, most survivors are raped by strangers. Then they report their rape immediately to sympathetic law enforcement officers, they have a chronological memory of what happened to them, get a rape kit tested right away, go to trial, and have a decent shot at getting a conviction. This is how the system should work for survivors, but it does not.

In the *real world*, most survivors are raped by someone they know, they don’t report their rape for fear of stigmatization or retaliation, and the few who do report often wait years to do so. When they finally report, survivors are typically met with callous, unsympathetic law enforcement officers who don’t believe them, perhaps because their memories are muddled and they can’t remember details in chronological order. If they are able to get a rape kit, it is not likely to get tested right away. A survivor has almost no chance of her case advancing to court, and if all the stars align and she gets a trial against her rapist, she is not likely to get a conviction.

Media creates unfair expectations that prevent survivors from receiving justice in the real world. Here is a breakdown of our major findings, myth by myth.

RAPE MYTHS

#1

The Myth That Most Survivors Report Their Rape

#2

The Myth That Survivors Report Rape Immediately

#3

The Myth of the Sympathetic Law Enforcement Officer

#4

The Myth That Survivors Remember All The Details

#5

The Myth That False Rape Accusations are Common

#6

The Myth That They Were “Asking For It”

#7

The Myth That Stranger Rape is Common

#8

The Myth That Sex Workers Are To Blame For Their Rape

#9

The Myth That Rape Kits Are Tested Immediately

#10

The Myth of High Conviction Rates for Rape

THE REAL WORLD

A minority (34%) of survivors report rape to law enforcement.

Most survivors wait (sometimes years) to report rape due to fears of stigma and retaliation.

Virtually every survivor who reports rape to law enforcement experiences betrayal and retraumatization.

Most survivors experience memory issues when it comes to recalling the rape, including remembering the chronological order of events.

Only 2.5% of rape reports are confirmed to be false.

Nobody “asks” for a felony to be committed against them by the clothes they wear or alcohol they consume.

Three-in-four (75%) rapes are committed by someone the survivor knows.

Sex workers have the same rights as everyone else when it comes to consent and sex.

The United States has a alarming backlog of approximately 400,000 rape kits awaiting testing.

Only 5.7% of rape reports lead to an arrest, only 1.1% are referred to a prosecutor, and fewer than 1% are convicted.

THE REEL WORLD

A majority (63%) of survivors report rape to law enforcement.

A majority (57.4%) of survivors report sexual violence within 48 hours of the crime.

Nearly every police officer (89.2%) believes the survivor from the start and only 3.3% of survivors are shown as facing hostility or retraumatization from police.

Virtually all (94.6%) survivors are shown remembering the details of their assault, and most (80.4%) remember them in chronological order.

One-in-four (24%) claims of sexual violence in film are depicted as false.

Nearly one-in-ten (8.5%) survivors are blamed for their assault by friends, family members, or officials.

A majority (57.5%) of rapes are depicted as “stranger rape.”

Sex workers are twice as likely to be blamed for their assault than other survivors (14.3% compared to 7.7%).

The vast majority (82%) of rape kits are tested immediately and increase the rate of conviction.

Half (49.2%) of all sexual violence reports lead to an arrest and one-in-four (29.4%) result in a conviction.

FULL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

This report examines depictions of sexual violence in the most watched criminal justice television shows and films from 2022. Our primary question is, how does entertainment media represent ten common rape myths? Rape myths are widely held misconceptions about sexual violence that perpetuate harmful stereotypes about survivors, promote victim-blaming, and minimize the seriousness of rape that discourage survivors from speaking out or seeking help. These common beliefs have a major impact on the way survivors are treated by law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and society at large. We find the top criminal justice TV shows and films portray sexual violence in ways that normalize rape culture.

We begin this report with a look at rates of sexual violence in the US, followed by sections detailing rape culture in the US, and the costs of rape. We then present our analysis of depictions of ten common rape myths in entertainment media. We close this report with recommendations for content creators who want to do better.

RATES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

About half of women and gender non-conforming people have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime, including sexual harassment, battery, assault, and rape. One-in-four women face attempted or completed rape.² Native American and Indigenous women face the highest rates of rape (34.1%), followed by Black (18.8%), white (17.7%), Latine (11.9%), and Asian/ Pacific Islander (6.8%) women.³ Women in certain settings are at a higher risk of sexual violence, including the military and college. The Department of Justice reports that 6.2% of women in the US military experience sexual violence during the years they are on active duty.⁴ Women who attend college face a 50% higher chance of being raped than their counterparts 18-24 who are not in college.⁵

Men are also survivors of sexual violence, with 7.1% experiencing rape or sexual assault during their lifetime. Native and Indigenous and Black men are most at risk for rape (12.4% and 12.0%, respectively), with white (7.5%), Latine (7.4%), and Asian/ Pacific Islander (3%) men also experiencing this form of violence.⁶ Men in prison are especially vulnerable to rape, with an estimated 80,600 incarcerated individuals raped each year.⁷ The majority (60%) of these sexual assaults are committed by jail or prison staff.⁸

Transgender individuals face high rates of sexual violence, with half experiencing sexual assault or rape at some point in their lives.⁹ Some transgender people of color are at a higher risk of sexual violence. An alarming two-thirds (65%) of Native and Indigenous transgender people will experience sexual violence,¹⁰ while about half of transgender individuals who are Black (53%)¹¹ and Latine (48%)¹² will face this form of violence.

1-IN-3
NATIVE AMERICAN
& INDIGENOUS
WOMEN
EXPERIENCE RAPE

80,600
INCARCERATED
INDIVIDUALS ARE
RAPED EACH YEAR

1-IN-2
TRANSGENDER
INDIVIDUALS FACE
SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Two-in-five (41%) Asian/Pacific Islander transgender people face sexual violence.¹³ Transgender folks are especially vulnerable to rape when they interact with the criminal justice system.¹⁴ One-in-three (32%) Black transgender people report sexual violence while in policy custody or jail.¹⁵

Rates of sexual violence against women and transgender individuals are at epidemic levels in the US, but this crime has low rates of reporting, arrests, convictions, and prison time compared to other violent crimes. Most murders, aggravated assaults, and robberies are reported to law enforcement,¹⁶ but only 34% of survivors report their assault.¹⁷ Sexual violence has such a low rate of reporting because the US has an entrenched rape culture.

RAPE CULTURE IN THE US

Rape culture is defined by a society that normalizes and trivializes sexual assault. In other words, a rape culture is a society that does not take rape seriously. We see evidence of rape culture in many parts of US society, including public opinion about rape. For example, one-in-four (26%) Americans think media spend too much time covering high-profile rapes,¹⁸ and one-in-three college men say they would rape if they knew they would not get caught.¹⁹ In this section, we provide an overview of how rape culture appears in popular pornography, stand-up comedy, music, classic films, entertainment media, and laws addressing sexual violence. This overview demonstrates the ubiquity and invisibility of rape culture in America. Andrea Dworkin notes that “when your rape is entertainment, your worthlessness is absolute.”²⁰

RAPE CULTURE IN PORN



Physical and sexual violence is so common in porn that it is fair to say the porn industry is premised on selling the violent abuse of women. Rape is a highly popular genre of porn, with approximately 12% of porn consumed featuring some form of rape, and one-third of videos feature sexual violence.²² Beyond rape, nine-in-ten (88%) popular porn videos contain some sort of physical aggression and half (49%) contain verbal aggression, virtually all of it targeting women.²³ An important element of physical and sexual violence in porn is the fantasy that women enjoy the violence enacted against them during sex. A recent study finds that 95% of the targets of violence in porn appear either neutral in the face of this violence or respond with

“SEXUAL VIOLENCE HAS SUCH A LOW RATE OF REPORTING BECAUSE THE US HAS AN ENTRENCHED RAPE CULTURE.”

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1-IN-3
PORN PORN VIDEOS
FEATURE
SEXUAL VIOLENCE

pleasure.²⁴ Given that porn is now the top source of sex education for young adults,²⁵ it is no wonder that one-quarter of heterosexual women in the US now report feeling scared during sex.²⁶ This new fear is mostly driven by a shocking increase in unexpected (nonconsensual) choking and anal sex during sexual encounters, both of which are popular trends in porn.²⁷ For millions of young people, sexual violence in the bedroom has been normalized through porn.

The sexual violence that happens in porn is not always “fantasy violence.” Pornhub, the most popular porn site in the world with 3.5 billion visits a month,²⁸ has been monetizing actual rape videos for years and is settling scores of lawsuits from girls and women who were trafficked.²⁹ Pornhub made it easy for human traffickers to post videos of their victims without verification or checks, and in a rape culture, videos featuring rape are profitable. When the *New York Times* broke this story in 2020, Pornhub immediately purged 13.5 million unverified videos, which suggests a high rate of monetizing rape. The largest porn company making enormous profits off the rapes of human beings can only happen in a rape culture where there is an appetite for seeing the rape of women and children.

Porn is also rife with racism. Several recent studies confirm a high rate of racial slurs in porn titles and racist themes in content. Black women are often shown in rundown urban settings, and reenactments of the slave rape narrative with titles including “Black Slave Punished by White Master” and “Black Slave Girl Brutalized.”³⁰ The Ghetto Gaggers series shows Black women being humiliated, choked, and beaten, with the tagline “join to see white boys conquering Angry Black women.” A recent study of the most watched online porn finds that Black and Latine women face higher rates of aggression than other women, and Black and Latine men are significantly more likely to be shown as perpetrators of aggression.³¹ Latine women are stereotypically depicted as promiscuous and always ready for sex, and degraded in racist ways. For example, the “Border Sex” genre that eroticizes the power imbalance between migrant women and Border Patrol agents and other men through sexual violence as they attempt to cross from Mexico into the US.³² Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) women are typically stereotyped as quiet and submissive, and as having less agency in sex acts, in the most watched porn.³³ A 2019 study of the top 25 searches on Pornhub finds that 40% are racially charged, for example, “Japanese wife” and “Korean.”³⁴ White women are featured the most in porn, but women of color are more likely to appear in special interest porn, including the categories “rape,” “bondage,” “anal sex,” “sex with children,” and “sex with animals.”³⁵ The sexism and racism that exists in porn is no longer socially acceptable in other forms of media, but porn continues to get a pass, despite its profound influence in shaping US culture.

Despite well-funded efforts from the porn industry to promote this form of entertainment as liberating and empowering for women, numerous studies find links between the consumption of misogynistic porn and the dehumanization of women,³⁶ greater acceptance of

PORN IS NOW THE TOP SOURCE OF SEX EDUCATION FOR YOUNG ADULTS



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violence against women,³⁷ greater intent to rape,³⁸ and a significantly higher likelihood of engaging in sexual violence.³⁹ But we don't need these studies to tell us that porn that normalizes and eroticizes violence against women is harmful.

RAPE CULTURE IN COMEDY



We also see rape culture in our entertainment with banal rape jokes in online forums, social media, and comedy routines. Rape jokes are so popular in stand-up that they are a category of jokes. Bill Cosby, who has 64 public reports of sexual violence against him, had a “Spanish Fly” bit in his stand-up routine for years in which he joked about drugging and raping women. In 2016, comedian Jim Jeffries included Cosby in his comedy routine:

“If someone drugged my drink, I would take it as a compliment. I’d be in the back saying ‘I’m getting sleepy. Who likes me? Who is it?’ So he drugs the drink and then you pass out for about four hours. And the you wake up...and the first thing you would see is that hysterical face of his. And he’s had a couple of fingers in ya...”

After popular comedian Daniel Tosh told his audience he thought rape jokes were funny, and a woman in the audience yelled, “actually, rape jokes are never funny.” Tosh replied, “Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like, five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...” Dozens of fellow comedians came to his defense, including Louis C.K., who admitted to multiple acts of sexual misconduct in 2017. Women asked to sit in public places and laugh at rape jokes get the message that society condones this crime; the epitome of rape culture.

Not all rape jokes are equal. Feminist comedians use rape jokes to expose and criticize perpetrators of sexual violence and the culture that condones this behavior, most notably, Cameron Esposito, Hannah Gadsby, and Samantha Bee.

Comedy is a powerful vehicle for normalizing rape because humor gets the audience into a joking, non-serious mindset that makes it easier to accept prejudices, including the dehumanization of women and joking at their pain. Rape jokes creates a culture where violence against women becomes unimportant, “locker room talk,” that is easy to dismiss. Rape culture humor influences the hearts and minds of everyday men. A recent study finds that men who are exposed to sexist jokes are significantly more likely to blame

**“WOULDN’T IT BE FUNNY
IF THAT GIRL GOT RAPED
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NOW? LIKE RIGHT NOW?
WHAT IF A BUNCH OF GUYS
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DANIEL TOSH

**“AND I DON’T TOTALLY
REMEMBER WHAT
HAPPENED THAT NIGHT. I
HAVE A LOT OF FLASHES OF
WHAT HAPPENED. I KNOW
THAT I DIDN’T SAY ‘YES.’”**



CAMERON ESPOSITO

the survivor in a hypothetical rape scenario.⁴⁰ Men exposed to sexist jokes are also more tolerant of sexual misconduct and view rape as a less serious crime.⁴¹ Men exposed to sexist jokes are also less able to identify obvious rape scenarios as rape.⁴² Rape jokes, whether in stand-up routines, blockbuster films, mimicked in locker rooms, or posted on social media, make it okay to laugh at the pain and suffering of sexual assault survivors. In short, humor is a tool to normalize rape in a rape culture.

RAPE CULTURE IN POPULAR MUSIC



Music has long contributed to rape culture through “rapey” lyrics. There are countless overt and subtle examples of lyrics that promote and condone rape in popular musical genres. Dean Martin and Doris Day have a disturbing duet exchange in “Baby It’s Cold Outside” (1944):

Doris: but maybe just a half a drink more
 Dean: put some records on while I pour
 Doris: the neighbors might think
 Dean: baby it’s bad out there
 Doris: say what’s in this drink?
 Dean: no cabs to be had out there

The hook in the classic Rolling Stones song “Brown Sugar” (1971) uncritically references the rape of enslaved women:

Gold coast slave ship bound for cotton fields
 Sold in the market down in New Orleans
 Scarred old slaver knows he’s doing alright
 Hear him whip the women just around midnight
 Brown sugar, how come you taste so good?
 Uh huh
 Brown sugar, just like a young girl should, uh
 huh, oh (Woo)

The uber-popular “Summer Nights” (1978) song from *Grease* includes the following rapey line:

Pink Ladies: Tell me more, tell me more. Was it love at first sight?
 T-Birds: Tell me more, tell me more. Did she put up a fight?”

Bad Company’s popular rock song “Can’t Get Enough” (1974) opens with a rapey line:

Well I take whatever I want
 And baby, I want you



Oingo Boingo frontman Danny Elfman, who would later settle a sexual assault case against him, penned the following lyrics in the hit “Little Girls” (1981):

I love little girls
they make me feel so good
I love little girls
they make me feel so bad
When they're around
they make me feel
Like I'm the only guy in town
I love little girls
they make me feel so good

Later in the song, Elfman sings about getting in trouble because she was “just too little” and then sings “I don't care what people say.”

In 1998, rapper and actor DMX came out with his debut album with the following lyrics on the hit song “X Is Coming” depicting the rape of a minor that went uncensored on radio play:

And if you got a daughter older than 15,
I'ma rape her
Take her on the livin' room floor,
right there in front of you
Then ask you seriously,
whatchu wanna do?

“Just The Way You Are (Drunk At The Bar)” (2011) was a hit for Irish pop singer Brian McFadden, despite its overtly pro-rape lyrics:

I like you just the way you are
Drunk as shit dancing at the bar
And I can't wait to get you home
So I can do some damage
I like you just the way you are
Jump in the back seat of my car
And I can't wait to get you home
So I can take advantage

Robin Thicke's hit song “Blurred Lines” (2013) is about blurred lines of consent and includes suggestively rapey passages, including:

I hate these blurred lines
(Everybody get up)
I know you want it (Hey)
I'll give you something big enough to tear
your ass in two
Swag on 'em even when you dress casual
I mean, it's almost unbearable

Rick Ross drew criticism from feminists for his overtly pro-rape lyrics in the popular song “U.O.E.N.O.” (2013):

Put molly all in her champagne,
she ain't even know it
I took her home and I enjoyed that,
she ain't even know it

Eminem has built a career on songs glorifying violence against women, including “Love Game” (2013) that



contains the following explicitly pro-rape lyrics:

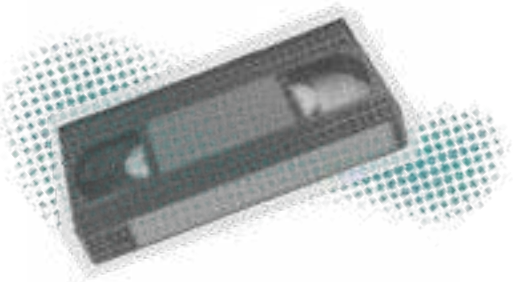
Snatch that bitch out her car through the window
She screamin', I body slam her on the cement
Until the concrete gave and created a sinkhole
Buried the stink ho in it, then paid to have the street repaved

Maroon 5's pop hit "Animals" (2014) uses animal imagery in its rapey lyrics:

Baby, I'm preying on you tonight
Hunt you down, eat you alive
Just like animals

One could fill a book with the overtly pro-rape and more subtle rapey lyrics that have appeared in popular songs over the years, and the fact that so few draw criticism and they keep coming speak to the persistence and invisibility of rape culture in the US.

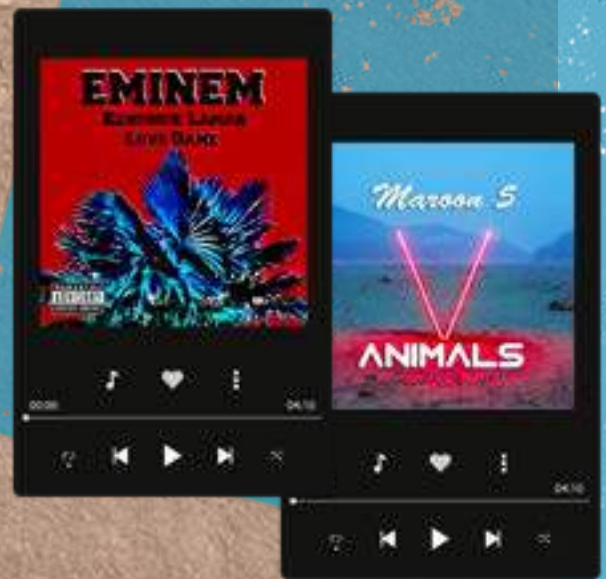
RAPE CULTURE IN CLASSIC FILMS



Rape culture is also evident in classic films. Feminist artist Daena Title did a series of paintings featuring shocking rape scenes from films we hold as the gold standard of entertainment. In *Gone With the Wind* (1939), Scarlet pushes away her inebriated husband, but he forcibly carries her upstairs, saying "This is one night you're not locking me out." The next morning, Scarlet is shown as happy and excited to have had "sex." As Title notes, a key part of rape culture is women being shown to enjoy sexual violations against them.

In the Oscar-winning film *Rocky* (1976), Rocky physically overpowers his future wife Adrian to kiss her, despite her objections. The film reframes this as Rocky doing what was best for Adrian since they end up together. The wildly popular *Animal House* (1978) comedy includes a "peeping Tom" scene in which the lead, Bluto, posts a ladder on the side of a sorority house and catches the women in the middle of a topless pillow fight. He then moves the ladder to a room with a single woman, who catches him peeping and instead of being alarmed, proceeds to undress and pleasure herself. In *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), the film lead pretends to be the boyfriend of a sorority girl by disguising himself in a Darth Vader costume and mask. When she discovers his treachery, she giggles and commends her rapist for tricking her.

In the high school classic *Sixteen Candles* (1984), the leading man, Jake Ryan, positions his longtime drunk girlfriend, Caroline, to be raped by a younger student after Jake decides he does not want to date her. When



Gone With The Wind, 1939



Revenge of the Nerds, 1984



Animal House, 1978



16 Candles, 1984

Jake finds Caroline passed out at a party, he comments, "I could violate her ten different ways if I wanted to... I'm just not interested anymore." Later, as he lowers a passed out Caroline into a car with her soon-to-be rapist, Jake jokes "have fun." As with the other rapey scenes, Caroline wakes up just long enough to ask who he is and to tell this stranger "I love you," again validating the rape that is sure to occur.

Women enjoying their own violation is a key part of rape culture, whether in mainstream pornography, classic films, or other content. This validation makes rape culture both invisible and palpable for the millions of people who consume this content without a thought about the sexual violence.

RAPE CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY TV AND FILM



In the early days of film and TV, rape was sometimes used as a plot device emblematic of "true love" until feminist critiques made this unpopular.⁴³ The 1980s saw an increase in television shows about sexual violence, most of which promoted the idea of an "ideal rape victim" who is white, middle-class, young, and attacked by a stranger, and is therefore worthy of justice.⁴⁴ Feminists pushed back against these depictions, and 1990s content did a better job humanizing a diversity of survivors. The rise of third wave feminism in the 1990s thankfully prioritized intersectionality, but also virtually silenced critiques of sexual objectification.⁴⁵ Since that time, rape has become routinely eroticized in film and TV, and rape victims are commonly sexualized and objectified. With the relaxation of restrictions for streaming services, and the ratings creep in film, scenes of sexual violence in this mainstream content look similar to scenes of sexual violence in popular porn.

While contemporary content does a better job of telling complex survivor stories, it centers the male gaze through sexualizing rape and objectifying victim's bodies. Many of the *Law & Order: SVU* episodes use The Sexy Corpse Trope showing a dead woman's sexualized body. This is a staple of the TV crime genre. The wildly popular *Game of Thrones* (2011 - 2017) series featured rape scenes in which the survivor is sexually objectified, eroticizing rape for millions of viewers. *Game of Thrones* also asks the audience to view perpetrators, such as Khal Drogo, as admirable "bad boys" instead of rapists. The first two seasons of *True Detective* (2014 - 2015) were full of scenes with close



Law & Order SVU



Law & Order SVU



Game of Thrones



True Detective

up shots of the sexualized bodies of women who were raped then murdered. *Criminal Minds* (2005 - 2020) specialized in extremely sexualized rape scenes. The ubiquitous eroticization of rape in TV and streaming content is another brick in the rape culture wall.

On a more positive note, we have seen a spate of films and TV shows centering the stories of survivors since the rise of the #MeToo Movement in 2017.⁴⁶ These stories feature humanizing, complex survivor characters and storylines that are often critical of the failures of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. *Unbelievable* (2019), *I May Destroy You* (2020), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), *She Said* (2022), and *Women Talking* (2022) feature complex characters, deeper portrayals of diverse survivor experiences, and thoughtful critiques of the justice system. This positive trend exists alongside the highly problematic trend of sexualizing rape and objectifying survivors of sexual violence.

RAPE CULTURE IN NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE



When it comes to news media coverage of sexual violence, researchers find that victim blaming has increased in print media in the last decade.⁴⁷ One study finds that news photos reinforce the myth that only attractive women are the targets of rape and advance the myth that most rapes happen in outdoor, secluded areas.⁴⁸ An analysis of print media coverage of three high-profile trials (Brock Turner, Bill Cosby, and Harvey Weinstein) finds that reporters used euphemisms to describe perpetrators that downplayed the significance of their crimes and were more skeptical of survivor accounts than perpetrator claims.⁴⁹ News coverage of these trials also unnecessarily sensationalized rape by publishing gratuitous, salacious details of the crimes. From these few academic studies on sexual violence coverage, we see that news media reinforce common rape myths.

RAPE CULTURE IN LAWS



Rape as entertainment is an important component of rape culture, but the most obvious evidence we live in



She Said, 2022



I May Destroy You, 2020



a rape culture are our laws and their enforcement. In short, this felony crime is not taken seriously by the state. For example, over 32,000 women are impregnated through rape each year in the US,⁵⁰ but in 31 states, rapists can sue for custody.⁵¹ When it comes to reporting, survivors almost universally report negative experiences with law enforcement and the justice system. For example, while disassociation is a common response to trauma events like rape, which causes survivors to have memory issues, police officers and detectives often treat survivors with suspicion when they had difficulty remembering certain events or the order of events.⁵² Survivors often feel betrayed when they report. For example, even when a rape kit is administered, there is no promise it will be tested. The United States has a troubling backlog of about 400,000 sexual assault kits awaiting testing across the country.⁵³ The rare survivor who makes it through substantial challenges with law enforcement may be put on the stand where they are badgered by defense attorneys who play upon rape myths and character assassinations.

Survivors who report sexual violence are almost always failed by the system, and may be retraumatized—what researchers Lee Madigan and Nancy Gamble call “the second rape.”⁵⁴ They encounter callous police officers who know little about trauma, prosecutors who rarely take cases to a jury, and combat in the courtroom where defense attorneys attack their reputation. Rape survivors rarely receive justice. Only 5.7% of sexual violence reports lead to an arrest, only 1.1% are referred to a prosecutor, and less than 1% are convicted.⁵⁵ The fact that only 1% of rapists will see a day inside a jail cell is the most telling evidence that we live in a rape culture where we simply do not take this crime seriously.⁵⁶

THE COSTS OF RAPE

Rape costs everyone. The trauma of rape has profound effects on daily living for survivors. Nine-in-ten (89%) survivors experience emotional and physical consequences, the most common being physical injuries, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse.⁵⁷ Rape can change the trajectory of a college student’s life when she cannot maintain her GPA or drops out of school. Rape can alter one’s educational experiences, parenting quality, and work performance. It can put stress on the family unit, especially if the trauma goes unaddressed. Rape survivors are particularly susceptible to death by suicide.⁵⁸ This crime costs society an estimated \$127B a year in lost educational opportunities, diminished job performance, earnings, and health care and counseling costs.⁵⁹

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ANALYSIS

Rape myths are societally determined ways of understanding sexual violence that dismiss the significance of or justify rape. This section analyzes how ten common rape myths are depicted in entertainment media:

1. The Myth that Most Survivors Report Their Rape
2. The Myth that Survivors Report Rape Immediately
3. The Myth of the Sympathetic Law Enforcement Officer
4. The Myth that Survivors Remember All The Details
5. The Myth that False Rape Accusations are Common
6. The Myth That They Were “Asking For It”
7. The Myth That Stranger Rape is Common
8. The Myth That Sex Workers Are To Blame For Their Rape
9. The Myth that Rape Kits Are Tested Immediately
10. The Myth of High Conviction Rates for Rape

This analysis is based on 301 sexual violence “events” depicted in the top fifteen criminal justice-related cable/broadcast and streaming TV programs, and the fifteen top-grossing criminal justice-related films of 2022. We analyze the most-watched content in order to capture the storylines that the most people see.

We now examine gaps between the “real world” and the “reel world” when it comes to ten prominent rape myths.

#1: THE MYTH THAT MOST SURVIVORS REPORT THEIR RAPE

The first myth we measure is the idea that survivors generally report sexual violence. In reality, an overwhelming majority do not report this crime because they feel shame in our rape culture; they blame themselves in our rape culture; they are worried about disaffecting or being stigmatized by family and friends; they do not believe law enforcement will help them; and/or they fear retaliation from their rapist.⁶⁰ In the real world, only one-third (34%) of survivors report rape to law enforcement,⁶¹ but in the reel world, two-thirds (63%) of survivors report sexual violence (see Figure 1). This gap gives viewers the impression that most survivors report sexual violence when they do not.

The media myth that most survivors report their rape is important because going to the police gives claims of rape more legitimacy in a rape culture that is generally skeptical of survivors. So when a survivor chooses not to report their rape, they are met with even greater skepticism since reporting is shown as the norm.

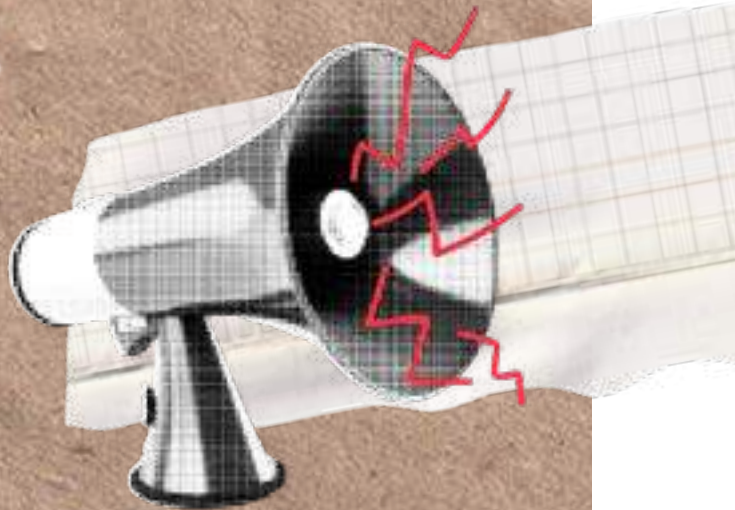
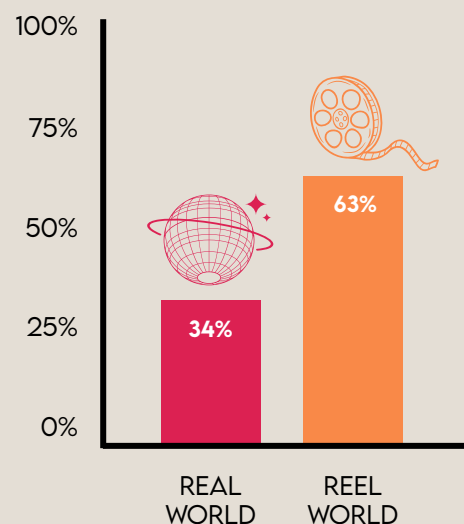


FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS WHO REPORT THEIR RAPE TO LAW ENFORCEMENT



#2: THE MYTH THAT SURVIVORS REPORT RAPE IMMEDIATELY

The second myth we examine is the idea that survivors do and should report this crime immediately. Society expects survivors to report a sexual assault or rape immediately to authorities, deeming anyone who waits to report or seek help as dishonest. In the real world, two-thirds (66%) of rape crimes are never reported to law enforcement, and rapes that are reported are often reported many years later due to fears of stigma and retaliation that many survivors face. In the reel world, a majority (57.4%) of survivors who report sexual violence to authorities do so within 48 hours of the crime (see Figure 2).

The myth that survivors immediately report rape matters because actual survivors who typically wait years to report, if ever, are seen as dishonest instead of the norm.

#3: THE MYTH OF THE SYMPATHETIC LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER

The third myth we examine is the idea that survivors will encounter trained, sympathetic law enforcement officers who will work diligently to bring them justice. In reality, many survivors who go to law enforcement experience “secondary victimization,” where officials cause additional trauma by blaming survivors and questioning their integrity.⁶⁴ Virtually all survivors who interact with law enforcement and the justice system report feeling betrayed by these institutions.⁶⁵

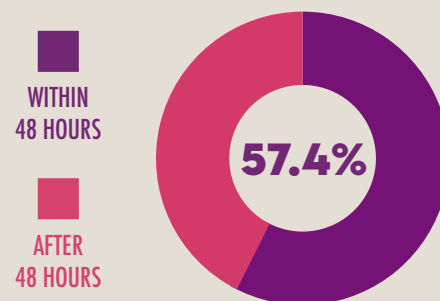
Furthermore, a multi-year investigation from *Reveal* reporter Rachel de Leon uncovered a troubling pattern of young women reporting sexual assaults to police who would then arrest these survivors for filing a false rape report, even though de Leon’s found evidence they were telling the truth. The documentary film *Victim/Suspect* (2023) exposes this pattern, driven by a desire for law enforcement to expediently close cases without having to invest time for an investigation. De Leon found that officers would often (legally) lie to survivors to break them down, for example, telling them that their account of the rape was contradicted by video footage. Emma Mannion, a teenager who was charged with filing a false rape report, told a reporter, “half of my nightmares are of the assault, and the other half is court.”⁶⁶ Emma’s false reporting charge was later overturned by an appeals court that took into consideration evidence of her rape.

In the real world, almost every survivors who reports their rape to law enforcement experiences betrayal and retraumatization, and could even face arrest. In the reel world, nearly every police officer (89.2%) believes the survivor from the start and only 3.3% of survivors are shown as facing hostility or retraumatization from a law enforcement officer.

The myth of the sympathetic police officer matters because it sends a false message to survivors that they will be believed and supported if they report, and it sends the message to society more broadly that the

MOST SURVIVORS WAIT (SOMETIMES YEARS) TO REPORT RAPE DUE TO FEARS OF STIGMA AND RETALIATION.

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN MEDIA REPORTED WITHIN 48 HOURS



VIRTUALLY EVERY SURVIVOR WHO REPORTS RAPE TO LAW ENFORCEMENT EXPERIENCES BETRAYAL AND RETRAUMATIZATION.

FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS IN MEDIA BELIEVED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT

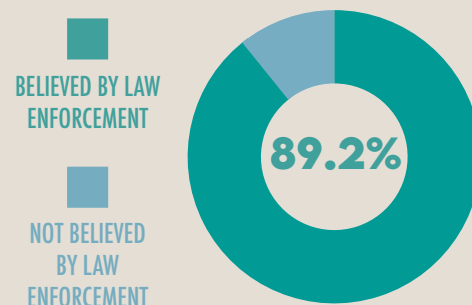
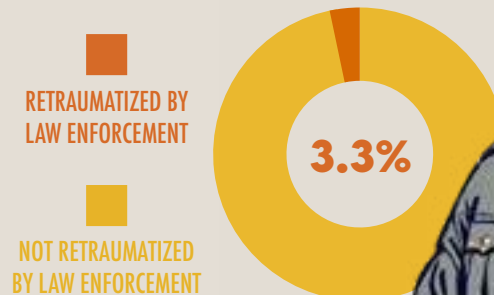


FIGURE 4: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS IN MEDIA RETRAUMATIZED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT



THE MYTH OF THE SYMPATHETIC POLICE OFFICER MATTERS BECAUSE IT SENDS A FALSE MESSAGE TO SURVIVORS THAT THEY WILL BE BELIEVED AND SUPPORTED IF THEY REPORT.

criminal justice system works for survivors. As noted above, fewer than 1% of rapists will ever see a day inside a jail cell, which means the system does not work, starting with police officers who are the first point of contact for survivors.

#4: THE MYTH THAT SURVIVORS REMEMBER ALL THE DETAILS

The fourth myth we examine is the notion that sexual violence survivors remember all the details of the crime and in order. Society in fact expects victims to remember the details of their assault, but the reality is that trauma often causes people to forget the details and order of a traumatic event, or to remember the details sporadically over time. In the real world, disassociation is a common response to traumatic events like rape. Dissociation is a “mental escape” where the mind essentially goes somewhere else because a person becomes too emotionally overwhelmed to cope with what is happening to them. About 70% of people dissociate during rape,⁶⁷ and this often causes the central memories of the trauma and the order of events to become inaccessible to the person who experienced it.⁶⁸ In short, most rape survivors experience memory issues when it comes to recalling this crime. This doesn't mean it didn't happen.

In the reel world, virtually all (94.6%) survivors are shown remembering the details of their assault when they report, and most (80.4%) remember them in chronological order (see Figures 5 and 6). In other words, entertainment media perpetuates the myth that survivors can and should remember all the details, chronologically, which suggests that if they can't, they must not have been raped.

#5: THE MYTH THAT FALSE ACCUSATIONS ARE COMMON

The fifth common rape myth we examine is the idea that false rape accusations are common. This myth fuels the belief that survivors lie about rape out of regret or to enact revenge. Research shows that false rape accusations are incredibly rare.

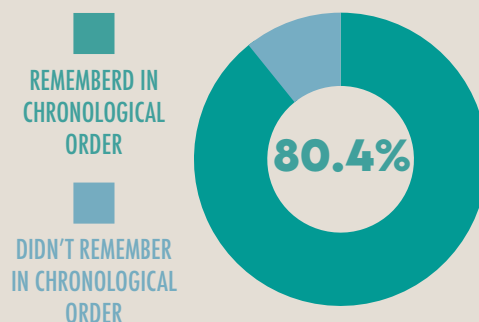
In the real world, only 2.5% of rape reports are confirmed false.⁶⁹ In the reel world, 6.8% of rape reports are false (see Figure 7)— 4.8% in TV and 24% in film. This means that popular films in particular are primary drivers of the false rape reporting myth. Depicting false rape reports as common in the reel world sends the message that survivors are not to be trusted when they come forward in the real world.

MOST RAPE SURVIVORS EXPERIENCE MEMORY ISSUES WHEN IT COMES TO RECALLING THE RAPE, INCLUDING REMEMBERING THE CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF EVENTS.

FIGURE 5: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS IN MEDIA REMEMBERING THE DETAILS

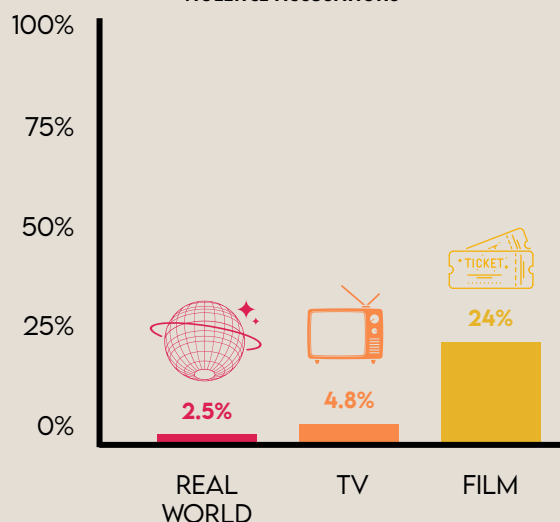


FIGURE 6: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS IN MEDIA REMEMBERING THE DETAILS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER



ONLY 2.5% OF RAPE REPORTS ARE CONFIRMED TO BE FALSE.

FIGURE 7: PERCENTAGE OF FALSE SEXUAL VIOLENCE ACCUSATIONS



#6: THE MYTH THAT THEY WERE “ASKING FOR IT”

The sixth myth we address is the idea that rape survivors were “asking for it.” Rape is a felony crime, the only one we commonly blame on the victim. Victim-blaming occurs when friends, family, law enforcement, and others ask the survivor what she did to put herself in the situation, or what she could have done differently to prevent a felony crime from being committed against her. Family, friends, law enforcement, and others routinely ask whether the survivor was wearing revealing clothing, got drunk, walked alone at night, etc.

In entertainment media, nearly one-in-ten (8.5%) survivors are blamed for their assault, reinforcing the myth that the survivor was “asking for it.” This victim blaming could have come from a law enforcement officer, friend, family member, attorney, or other characters in the show. Additionally, about one-in-five portrayals of sexual violence in film and TV depict survivors in revealing clothing (15.8%) and under the influence of alcohol (19.9%), subtle suggestions that she was at least partially responsible for her rape. We want to live in a world where wearing revealing clothing and drinking alcohol are not weaponized against survivors. But we live in a rape culture where subtle media queues, like attire and state of inebriation, fuel the myth that rape survivors were “asking for it.”



#7: THE MYTH THAT STRANGER RAPE IS COMMON

The seventh common rape myth we analyze is the idea that stranger rape is common. In the real world, 75% of rapes are committed by someone the survivor knows,⁷⁰ but in the reel world, 42.5% of rapes are by someone the survivor knows. In other words, a majority (57.5%) of sexual violence in film and TV is depicted as stranger rape (see Figure 10).

The “stranger rape” myth was popularized in the 1990s during the first peak of the Campus Anti-Rape Movement in order to differentiate stranger rape from sexual violence perpetrated by a person known to the survivor. This myth reinforces the idea that only stranger rape is “real rape.” Media depictions of stranger rape also wildly overstate the threat of sexual violence from strangers while minimizing the threat from friends and family members. This myth not only serves to make women less prepared to navigate a world rife with sexual violence, it can make it even harder for survivors to seek help or justice when they are assaulted by a family member, friend, or romantic partner.

NOBODY “ASKS” FOR A FELONY CRIME TO BE COMMITTED AGAINST THEM BY THE CLOTHES THEY WEAR OR THE ALCOHOL THEY CONSUME.

FIGURE 8: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS IN MEDIA WITH REVEALING CLOTHING OR ALCOHOL

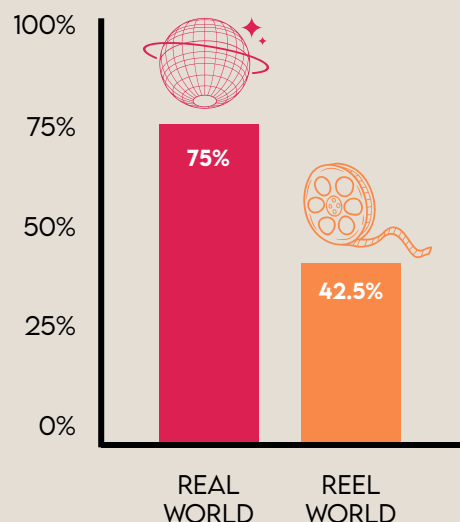


FIGURE 9: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS IN MEDIA UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL



MEDIA DEPICTIONS OF STRANGER RAPE WILDLY OVERSTATE THE THREAT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE FROM STRANGERS WHILE MINIMIZING THE THREAT FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS.

FIGURE 10: PERCENTAGE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE WITH KNOWN PERPETRATOR





#8: THE MYTH THAT SEX WORKERS ARE TO BLAME FOR THEIR RAPE

Our eighth rape myth is the belief that prostitutes/sex workers are to blame if they are raped. The underlying idea is the myth that sex workers cannot be raped because of their profession, or can't be raped while performing sex work. This myth is rooted in the harmful stigmatization of sex work and wrongfully suggests all sex workers have consented to any and all sexual activities. An astonishing 75% of sex workers report experiencing sexual violence on the job, and women of color, immigrant women, and transgender sex workers face the highest rates of sexual violence.⁷¹

In popular films and TV shows, on the rare occasion that sex workers are depicted as survivors, they are twice as likely to be blamed for the assault than other survivors (14.3% compared to 7.7%) and their perpetrators are far less likely to be found guilty (6.5% compared to 32.1%) (see Figures 11 and 12). Sex workers in the reel world are also five times more likely to be shown making a false allegation of rape than other survivors (24% compared to 4.8%) (see Figure 13). These depictions send a clear message that claims of sexual violence from sex workers are less serious and less believable than claims from other survivors.

#9: THE MYTH THAT RAPE KITS ARE TESTED IMMEDIATELY

The ninth myth we examine is the idea that rape kits are tested immediately. Rape kits are used by medical professionals to collect evidence of sexual violence by way of a forensic medical exam. The beliefs that rape kits are frequently administered and quickly tested fuel misinformation about how the process actually works (or doesn't work).

Even when a rape kit is administered, there is no promise it will be tested, let alone right away. The United States has a troubling backlog of approximately 400,000 rape kits awaiting testing across the country.⁷² In TV and film, one-in-five (20.7%) survivors are administered a rape kit, and the vast majority (82%) are tested immediately (see Figures 14 and 15).

The myth that rape kits are tested immediately fuels the fiction that law enforcement respond effectively to rape reports.

FIGURE 11: PERCENTAGE OF SEX WORKERS AND OTHER SURVIVORS IN MEDIA BLAMED FOR THEIR ASSAULT

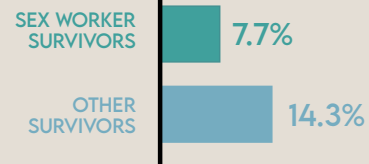


FIGURE 12: PERCENTAGE OF SEX WORKERS AND OTHER SURVIVORS IN MEDIA WITH GUILTY VERDICTS

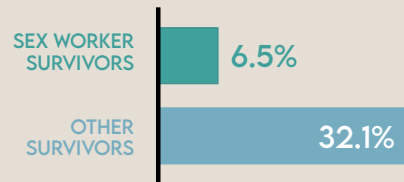


FIGURE 13: PERCENTAGE OF SEX WORKERS AND OTHER SURVIVORS IN MEDIA WITH FALSE ACCUSATIONS

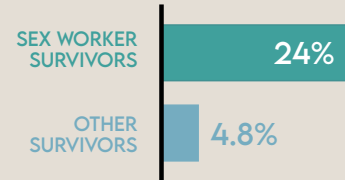


FIGURE 14: PERCENTAGE OF SURVIVORS IN MEDIA BEING OFFERED A RAPE KIT

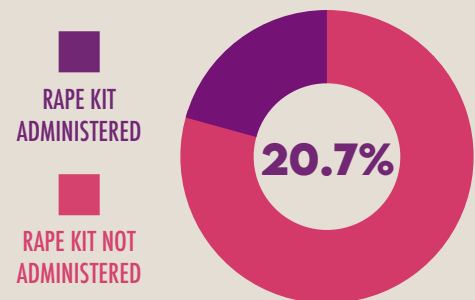
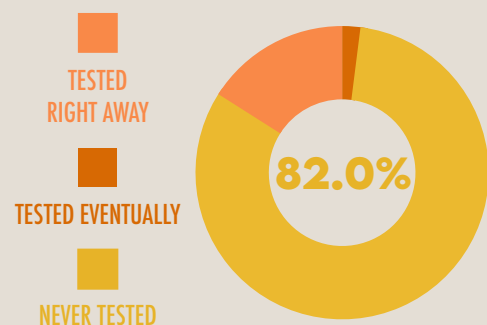


FIGURE 15: WHEN RAPE KITS ARE TESTED IN MEDIA



#10: THE MYTH OF HIGH CONVICTION RATES FOR RAPE

Another myth promoted in entertainment media is the idea that once reported, sexual violence cases commonly end in a conviction. In reality, conviction rates for rape are far lower than any other felony crime.⁷³

In the real world, only 5.7% of rape reports lead to an arrest, only 1.1% are referred to a prosecutor, and fewer than 1% are convicted.⁷⁴ In the reel world, half (49.2%) of all sexual violence reports lead to an arrest and one-in-four (29.4%) result in a conviction (see Figure 17).

While it may be cathartic for those who have experienced sexual violence to see survivors in film and TV get justice at a high rate, media are promoting the myth that the justice system works for survivors, when in reality, it fails virtually every survivor. If popular film and TV depicted actual rates of arrest and convictions for rape, the public would be more aware of how broken the system is when it comes to survivor justice.

FIGURE 16: PERCENTAGE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE REPORTS RESULTING IN ARREST

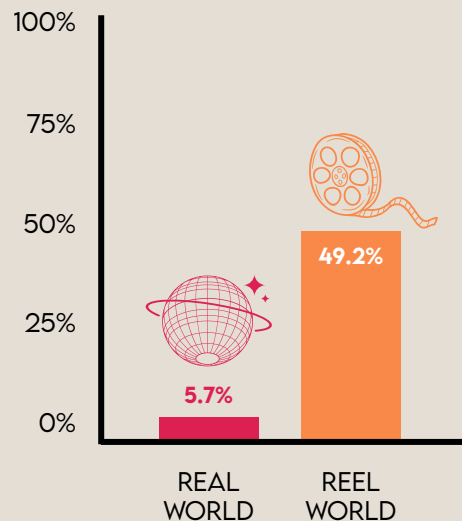
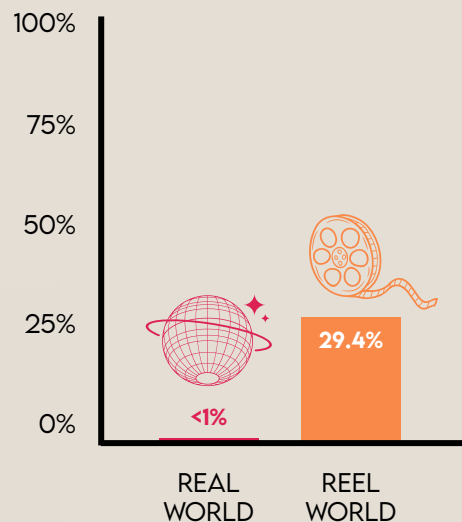


FIGURE 17: PERCENTAGE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE REPORTS RESULTING IN GUILTY VERDICT



ACTION STEPS

Rape myths are widely-held misconceptions about rape and sexual assault that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, promote victim-blaming, misrepresent the criminal justice system, and contribute to a culture of stigma around sexual violence. Rape myths thrive in a rape culture that fails to take sexual violence seriously. We find that the most popular crime-driven films and TV shows promote commonly held rape myths. Challenging these myths in entertainment media is an essential part of supporting survivors and promoting a culture that treats sexual violence with the same seriousness afforded other crimes.

Entertainment media can be a great source for information about sexual violence— the typical experience for survivors, the failures of law enforcement and the justice system, etc. By making an effort to better represent what actually happens with sexual assault, content creators can activate a misinformed public to take action to reduce rates of sexual violence and better support survivors.

#1 Depict more authentic survivor experiences to raise awareness about the challenges they face in seeking justice. For example, dive deep into why a survivor decides to not report their rape. Show their family shunning them for reporting a family member. Show them waiting years to report their rape. Show the typical encounter with callous law enforcement officials who do not believe them.

#2 Reveal the systemic failures in law enforcement and the legal system that prevent most survivors from getting justice. Provide a more realistic portrayal of untrained police officers, ambitious prosecutors who prioritize their win-loss record over taking a case to trial, and juries that are steeped in rape myths.

#3 Show other paths to justice for survivors, beyond just the legal system. For example, show a survivor and perpetrator going through a formal restorative justice process.



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**THE
REPRESENTATION
PROJECT**

METHODOLOGY

The methodology we use for this study is content analysis, a systematic analysis of communications, such as TV programs, films, advertisements, and video games. Social scientists use content analysis to quantify representations of different identity groups and themes. A team of researchers coded the television shows and films in this report. Prior to fielding the study, the team engaged in 52 hours of training on general coding procedures and for this specific project. At the end of the training period, the team achieved interrater reliability to ensure that the coding was uniform. The coders analyzed 301 sexual violence events in the top 15 broadcast, cable, and streaming criminal justice-related television shows, as well as the 15 top-grossing criminal justice-related films from 2022.

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The Representation Project is a leading global gender justice non-profit organization. We use films and education to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes. In 2011, Jennifer Siebel Newsom founded The Representation Project in response to the overwhelming public demand for ongoing education and social action in support of her first film, *Miss Representation*. Since then, Siebel Newsom has released three more acclaimed films, *The Mask You Live In* (2015), *The Great American Lie* (2019), and *Fair Play* (2022). The organization also runs a global youth empowerment program and is known for its impactful social activism campaigns, including #NotBuyingIt, #AskHerMore, #RepresentHer, #RespectHerGame, #Changelcons, and #EndRape.

FOR MORE, VISIT WWW.THEREPPROJECT.ORG