

# The way Kavanaugh's supporters are talking about sexual assault allegations can be dangerous, our new study finds

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September 27

Once again, the nation confronts a potential #MeToo moment, with accusations of sexual assault and misconduct against President Trump's nominee to the Supreme Court, Brett M. Kavanaugh. The case resembles [many others](#) that have surfaced over the past several years: Allegations of a long-ago sexual assault by a now-powerful man. Accusers who chose not to go to the police at the time and largely remained silent for years. Supporters of the accused arguing that the accusers' long silence undermines their credibility while expressing concern over harm to the accused's reputation and career.

["They are trying to destroy his life."](#) asserted Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.). President Trump expressed empathy for Kavanaugh, saying, ["This is not a man that deserves this,"](#) later adding ["if the attack on Dr. Ford was as bad as she says, charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents."](#) Trump dismissed the second accuser, Deborah Ramirez, as ["totally inebriated and all messed up."](#)

Some women's advocates have called this familiar pattern part of ["rape culture."](#) We undertook the [first-ever long-term study](#) of rape culture, defining it carefully and examining whether these patterns are in fact associated with incidences of sexual assault. Here's what we found.

## How we did our research

Rape culture is hard to measure. We argue that one reliable way of doing so is through examining how rape is covered by local newspapers, which reflect local community norms. We interviewed several dozen experts — academic researchers, journalists and activists — to determine what constitutes rape culture. From these interviews we created a local "rape culture index" consisting of 76 discrete language patterns that fall into four broad categories: blaming victims, empathizing with perpetrators, implying victim consent and questioning victim credibility.

We then used big data analysis and machine learning to measure the content of over 300,000 articles on rape from 279 mostly local U.S. newspapers between 2000 and 2013, looking for language that

reflected rape culture attitudes. For instance, providing irrelevant information like describing the victim's sexual history or the way she was dressed would suggest the reporter or local source was blaming victims, an indicator of rape culture. However, using a phrase like "the perpetrator needs to be held accountable, no matter the circumstances" or describing the violence associated with a sexual assault would suggest the reporter or source was focusing on the perpetrator's responsibility and the lack of consent, and would not be evidence of rape culture.

## **We didn't find a lot of rape culture language. But when we did, it seemed to matter.**

The good news is that we found evidence of rape culture in less than 5 percent of these 300,000 articles about rape. The overwhelming majority of articles generally stick to facts without downplaying the severity of the crime, blaming victims for their violations or expressing overt sympathy for the accused perpetrator.

The bad news is that where local coverage is consistent with rape culture, that language correlates with real-world behavior. Rape culture language in the media strongly predicted more sexually violent behavior. For instance, in a given year, counties with above-average levels of rape culture language in local newspapers have about twice as many reported rapes per capita as counties with below-average levels of such language in the local press. Such counties also see six additional rape cases per year for which no perpetrator is ever arrested.

That said, we found big differences across U.S. localities. Of 100 counties where the local newspaper's coverage was most consistent with rape culture, 52 were in Minnesota and Iowa, 13 in North Carolina and 10 in California. Conversely, the local newspapers in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan had relatively little rape culture language. Local press in Republican-leaning counties are slightly more likely to write about sexual assault in ways consistent with rape culture — but not by much. Overall, the geographic distribution does not divide neatly along red/blue lines.

What explains the positive association between rape culture and rape? A higher level of reported rapes might mean more victims coming forward, or it might mean more rapes being committed. Our data supports the second interpretation. We measured police vigilance by looking at the difference between [FBI](#)-recorded, county-level arrests and rape reports in all counties for which we had newspaper data. Looking at the difference between the numbers of county-level arrests and the numbers of rape reports, we found that in counties where newspapers used language consistent with rape culture, there were fewer arrests for each report of sexual assault than in counties where newspaper coverage lacked such language.

In other words, in counties where the local press used rape culture language more often, more rapes were reported — but fewer of those reports led to arrests. Sexual assault in these communities is more

common, yet law enforcement is less likely to respond to those assaults.

Many people, of course, do not read their local paper. We are not suggesting that how the news is reported influences victims, perpetrators or police officers. But local news reporting may reflect local cultural biases — and those local attitudes are likely to influence potential perpetrators, victims, and local law enforcement. If attitudes consistent with rape culture lead police to assume that victims rather than perpetrators are at fault, those officers may be less inclined to investigate or make arrests in response to victims' reports. A sense of impunity could embolden potential rapists, increasing the number of rapes. Further, knowing that police don't take sexual assault seriously could discourage victims from reporting. If that hypothesis is correct, the association between a local rape culture and the incidence of rape might be stronger than we've found in the crime statistics.

According to Politico, [a White House lawyer](#) said, in response to Dr. Ford's allegations, "If somebody can be brought down by accusations like this, then you, me, every man certainly should be worried." The link our research reveals between such rape culture attitudes and actual sexual assault suggests excusing sexually violent behavior or normalizing sexual assault allegations as something all men do may encourage a culture of impunity that increases sexual assault without consequences.

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