

# What Self-Defense Instructors Need to Know about Sexual Assault and Its Prevention

By Tom Lang

## Introduction

When it comes to self-defense classes, many martial artists make the mistake that the Chinese call the “rule of the hammer.” That is, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, soon all your problems begin to look like nails.” The “hammer,” of course, is our martial arts training: the techniques for countering a violent attack. The “problem” – that of teaching self-defense to prevent or counter a physical or sexual assault – begins to look like a nail when we begin to teach self-defense classes in the dojo. We teach strikes, kicks, blocks, locks, and escapes; try to improve self-concept; and provide common-sense advice on personal safety. And there is nothing wrong with any of these activities. But, they may not be enough, and there may be more that we need to be teaching.

I learned some valuable lessons about the nature of sexual assault some 30 years ago in Chico, California, when I was working with a rape crisis program, teaching jujutsu at the Nibukikan, and writing a college text on personal health, which included chapters on gender role development, sexual behaviors, and interpersonal communication. I ended up looking a little deeper at sexual assault and at approaches to self-defense. What I learned surprised me. Having recently found my notes on these lessons, I have updated them and present them here.

Statistics on sexual assault are notoriously variable and depend in large measure on who collects them for what purpose. The data cited here are as reliable as any, but interested readers are invited to conduct their own research and to arrive at their own conclusions.

## Questions

I have organized the article around the questions below. I suggest you consider them before continuing.

**Question 1: Who is most often sexually assaulted?**

**Question 2: What about the crime of sexual assault makes it legally unique?**

### Question 3: What is the most effective strategy for countering sexual assault?

## Answers

### Question 1: Who is most often sexually assaulted?

**Answer:** This is a tricky question, so I'll give you a hint: *it's not women*. It's young men in prison. The number of sexually assaulted prisoners is unknown, but a conservative estimate, based on extrapolations of two decades of surveys, is that more than 300,000 male prisoners are sexually assaulted every year. (By comparison, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that there are 135,000 rapes of women a year nationwide, although many groups believe that both numbers are much higher.) Now, I am *not* implying with these numbers that victims of one sex are more important than victims of the other sex: this is a truly horrible crime, irrespective of who is victimized. The point is that *both* sexes are victimized.

**The dynamics of violence between men differ from those between a man and woman and should be addressed separately. Here, I have focused on the more traditional women's self-defense classes.**

Among women victims, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 83% are younger than age 24, and 30% are under age 11. According to Bureau of Justice Statistics, about 81% of rape victims are White and 18% are Black. About half of all victims are in the lowest third of the income distribution. Victimization rates are about equal throughout the country, save for the Southern states, where they are slightly lower, and in urban areas, where they are slightly higher than in rural areas.

Other typical characteristics of the assault include:

- 40% to 60% occur in the victim's home, 20% in or near a friend's home.
- 18% occur at night on the street, in a public area such as parking garage.
- 68% of rapes occur between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.
- 45% of rapists are under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they commit the assault.
- 35% to 80% are committed by assailants known to their victims.
- 55% of women involved in date rape had been drinking or using drugs.
- Most gang rapes are committed by fraternity members or by group of athletes, and both victim and assailants are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

### Question 2: What about the crime of sexual assault makes it legally unique?

**Answer:** It's the only crime that is defined by the victim, not necessarily by the actions of the assailant. At issue of course is the concept of *consent*, giving it and honoring the decision not to give it. There are two implications of a definition that relies on consent. First, both women and men may be unclear about whether consent was or was not given. In one large study of university students, almost 75% of female rape victims did not initially identify what happened to them as rape. In the same study, 84% of male assailants said what they did was definitely not rape. The large number of unreported rapes may, in part, be the result of this ambiguity.

The second implication of the definition of sexual assault is that women may claim to have been raped when they have not, a criminal act in its own right with substantial consequences for those wrongly accused. Before you dismiss this statement as another rape myth, consider the findings of the Bureau of Justice Statistics report (NCJ-151658): DNA testing exonerated 30% of the 15,000 men convicted of rape in the study year. Further, every year since 1989, in about 25% of the sexual assault cases referred to the FBI, forensic DNA testing has excluded the primary suspect. Other studies of university students report that up to half of all rape allegations were eventually proven to be false.

The reason most often given by women for filing a false claim is regret or guilt at having a sexual encounter. (Even Ms. Roe, of "Roe vs. Wade," initially claimed that her pregnancy was the result of rape.) Again, by presenting these data, I am *not* saying that because some women lie about being raped that all reports should be suspect. *All* such reports should be taken seriously. I am saying that we, as a society, have a problem that affects both men and women and that these issues are appropriately addressed in self-defense classes.

Both of these implications reflect a widespread social reluctance to acknowledge and talk about sex and our sexual feelings and desires, especially with members of the opposite sex. Our society does not encourage this kind of openness, and we are paying a huge price for it. I suggest a good self-defense class will raise awareness of these issues and stimulate their discussion.

### **Question 3: What is the most effective strategy for confronting sexual assault?**

**Answer:** It depends, but it's probably *not* the approach favored by martial artists. There are two basic approaches to self-defense: the immediate-resistance and the delayed-resistance approaches. In the **immediate-resistance approach** (or the tactical approach), the victim is instructed to fight back as fast, as hard, and as viciously as possible to end the encounter as soon as possible. This is the approach favored by most martial arts-based self-defense classes. In the **delayed resistance approach** (or the strategic

approach), stratagems and negotiation are used to out-manuever the assailant. The strategic approach is well summarized by Frederick Storaska in his book, *How To Say No To A Rapist and Survive* (now out of print but widely available on used-book web sites).

### **The Immediate-Resistance Approach**

The immediate resistance approach with which we are so familiar is “tactical” because it is concerned with what is perceived to be a short-term encounter with an unknown assailant. It’s advantages are that it promises a quick resolution to a terrifying situation, it gives the assailant what he deserves, and it is consistent with the belief that women should and even must fight back to avoid a lasting sense of victimization. This approach is often associated with the notion that rape is a surprise, short-term encounter perpetrated by a stranger in what is called the “blitz attack.”

The immediate-resistance approach works best when the victim: 1) has a better-than-even chance of disabling the assailant long enough to either escape to a place where safety can be assured or to allow help to arrive that will be sufficient to subdue or scare off the assailant, and 2) when the victim does not need to fear later retribution from the assailant. This approach also works better against unknown assailants because the prohibitions against using violence are weaker and because retaliation may be less likely.

One of the biggest drawbacks to the immediate-resistance approach is the need for the assailant to inflict great bodily harm on another human being. Most people find it very difficult to intentionally maim or kill another human being. In a remarkable book, *On Killing*, an Army psychologist reviews what the military knows about how to get soldiers to kill enemy soldiers. Almost unbelievably, In WWII, only about 15% of soldiers in combat ever fired their weapons. Changes in training increased this percentage to 55% in the Korean War and to 95% in the Viet Nam War. The training techniques believed to be responsible for these increases were 1) depersonalizing the enemy, 2) desensitizing soldiers to the act of killing, 3) conditioning that made shooting a reflexive action, and 4) training in denial as a defense mechanism. The problem with this training is that it makes becoming a civilian again very, very difficult.

At one extreme is how realistic it is to expect that a 12-year-old step-daughter can put her thumbs through her step-father’s eyes or that a 12-year-old boy will crush the testicles of an abusing priest. At the other extreme, is what it takes for an adult woman to drive the point of her hair brush into her assailant’s temple or to crush his larynx with the edge of her hand. If people are to use these techniques successfully, the four military training techniques listed above should be useful. (I asked a good friend – a board-certified emergency room physician and the Editor-in-Chief of a leading scientific journal in the field of emergency medicine – how often he sees common self-defense-related injuries in the ER. If the self-defense techniques we teach are useful and

effective I reasoned, the injuries caused by them would be well documented: eye damage caused by a finger-poke, a larynx crushed by a strike to the throat, a temple fractured by a strike with a blunt object. His response? In 35 years, he has never seen any of these injuries in the ER and knows of no articles that document them. In other words, either these techniques are not being used or they are not causing enough damage to send someone to the ER, which means that they are not being used effectively.)

## The Delayed-Resistance Approach

With the two exceptions noted below, the delayed-resistance approach does not advocate fighting with the assailant, at least initially. As described by Storaska, the approach has 5 principles:

- 1. Retain or regain your emotional stability:** victims should not submit passively but should stay involved in the situation so that they can be agents on their own behalf.
- 2. Treat the rapist as a human being:** this is a strategy, not a statement of approval. Most rapists have to dehumanize their victims to attempt and to complete the crime, so becoming a real person to the assailant greatly increases the chances of preventing assault and injury.
- 3. Gain the assailant's confidence:** again, this is a strategy to throw the assailant off guard.
- 4. Go along until you can safely react:** violent resistance often provokes violence, which can escalate the danger of the situation. Waiting for the right time to act can be a better option.
- 5. Use your imagination and your good judgment:** no two assaults are the same, so there are no formulas. The goal here is to outthink your assailant with the principles of psychological warfare. Examples include asking the assailant what he would do if someone were to assault his mother or daughter; acting crazy; taking the initiative away from the assailant by become sexually aggressive; exaggerating humility to make his contempt seem inappropriate; Storaska cites many examples.

The delayed-resistance approach might be preferable when:

- There are multiple assailants (as there are in 16% of all completed rapes and in 10% of attempted rapes)
- The assailant has a weapon (as there is in between 10% and 30% of cases, equally divided between knives and guns)
- The assailant is known to the victim (11% are fathers or step-fathers; 30% are husbands or boyfriends; 40% are acquaintances or other relatives)

- The victim is at an obviously physical disadvantage as a result of young age; small stature, or physical disability
- The encounter between assailant and victim lasts a long time (many rape encounters last 10 to 15 *hours*; not the 10 to 15 minutes assumed by many people who believe that the “blitz attack” is the most common form of sexual assault.)

The two situations in which fighting *is* advocated in the delayed-resistance approach is 1) when the victim’s life is in *immediate* danger (death could occur within seconds) and 2) when the victim is about to be tied up (at which point, the victim loses a great many options).

## **Discussion**

On the basis of the above information, one could make the case that martial artists should not be teaching how to counter sexual assault. I won’t go quite that far, but I will offer some additional suggestions. The first is that if you are going to teach a self-defense course, educate yourself about the problem. One of the reasons I presented some of the above data is to shock you into realizing how little most of us know about sexual assault.

I recommend that you give equal time and attention to both the immediate- and the delayed-resistance approaches. My students were adamant that *they* be the ones to choose which approach they would use; they did not want me to make that decision for them, by teaching only one approach. This advice may be especially difficult for women self-defense instructors to hear, especially if they have been assaulted. This issue is emotionally loaded, obviously. I won’t address it here, but I will note that research conducted in the 1970s found that rape crises workers and convicted rapists differed greatly in their advice on how to prevent sexual assault. This situation calls for reasoned appraisal of the evidence, not emotional reactions.

Finally, I recommend that the psychosocial aspects of sexual communication and sexual behavior be discussed openly when date rape is being considered. Most martial artists are as ignorant of these issues as our students, so we need to set a good example by addressing the issues head on. The references at the end of the article should help; there are many others.

## **Some Useful, if Dated References**

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