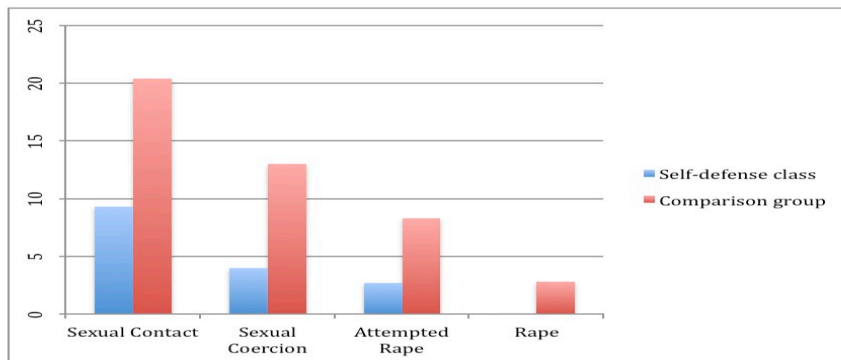




Are Women Safer When They Learn Self-Defense?

A UO sociologist finds that women who took a ten-week self-defense training were significantly less likely to experience unwanted sexual contact than those who didn't. *“Walking into a bar the other night, a man grabbed the back of my cowgirl hat and when I turned around [he] continued to screw with it. I looked him in the eye and said ‘We don’t know each other. Don’t touch me.’ This is huge for me, I didn’t used to look men in the eye, and most often when I say things, it’s too quiet for people to hear.”*

The young woman telling this story had taken a thirty-hour self-defense class at her university. She was reporting back, a year later, on her experiences since taking this course. Her story is part of a study designed by UO sociologist Jocelyn Hollander that looks at the outcomes for 117 college students who received this self-defense training versus a control group of 169 students who did not. Of those, seventy-five from the first group and 108 from the second agreed to take part in a follow-up survey or interview. **The results are clear: a much lower percentage of the women who took the self-defense class reported incidents of unwanted sexual contact than the women who did not take the class (see chart, Self Defense Statistic).**



The chart shows the percentage of female college students from two groups—those who completed a thirty-hour self-defense class (blue) and those who did not (red)—reporting different types of unwanted sexual contact over a one-year period. A significantly lower percentage of those who received self-defense training reported incidents of any kind. None of the women who took the training reported a rape (versus 3 percent from the other group). Overall, 12 percent of the women in the self-defense group reported some form of sexual intrusion during the follow-up period, versus 30 percent in the control group. This latter figure (nearly one in three) is consistent with the rate of sexual victimization of female college students nationwide. Hollander’s study—the first of its kind that looks at women taking an extensive course that spans an entire college term, and that also evaluates outcomes over a full year—will be published in an upcoming edition of the journal *Violence Against Women*.

It must be noted that this was a feminist-oriented self-defense course, specifically designed for women, with a focus on the strengths of women’s bodies (lower-body versus upper-body strength) and techniques to counter the holds and moves often made when a woman is attacked.



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“A man at the bus stop was invading my space and . . . using ploys to see if I would do what he asked. He acted like he was joking with me and grabbed my arm near my wrist. I used the wrist release I learned and said loudly for him to leave me alone. . . . I think if I had been less resistant he would have taken it further.” Perhaps more important than the physical techniques, says Hollander, is the philosophy of this course, which assumes that women are not helpless and can effectively resist (but with the caveat that women’s ability to defend themselves doesn’t mean they are responsible for stopping violence.)

The empowerment philosophy further assumes that even when physical defense isn’t called for—when women are faced with obnoxious or harassing behavior that may not be imminently dangerous—they can also learn to set clear boundaries. The importance of the boundary-setting dynamic is crucial, says Hollander, because “most unwelcome sexual contact doesn’t involve a stranger jumping out of the bushes.” In fact, it more often involves an acquaintance or even someone closer. But no matter whether it’s a stranger or a friend, it’s also important to recognize that unwanted sexual contact spans a range of behaviors; those shown in the chart are based on a set of legal definitions: sexual contact (unwanted touching), sexual coercion (unwanted sexual intercourse as a result of pressure or use of authority), attempted rape (an unsuccessful attempt at forced intercourse) and rape (forced intercourse).

As a result of this increased awareness, *“a number of interviewees commented that they had reevaluated past experiences and recognized them as assault after taking this class,”* said Hollander. Hollander’s interest in this topic began when she took a self-defense course as an undergraduate at Stanford University. *“It made me much less afraid,”* she said, and this insight inspired her to ponder *“the role of violence in women’s lives, and the role of fear—how fear shapes women’s lives.”*

“I was at a football game and this drunk guy was stomping all over the place and he put his arm around me. Normally I wouldn’t say anything. I was just like, ‘Oh, whatever, you know, he’s just drunk. Let it go.’ But I actually spoke up and said, ‘Get your hand off of me.’ That’s something I would have never done before. He was, ‘Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .’ So it worked. That’s a really small thing, but to me it was just so empowering.”

A particularly valuable feature of a feminist approach to self-defense training, Hollander says, is that “it does not constrain women’s lives or restrict their freedom—as do many other prevention strategies and advice to women.” Many trainings focus on the statistics that state the likelihood of a woman being raped in her lifetime, and these indeed are frightening. But while this data is important, it’s only a starting point, says Hollander. Most important are techniques to build confidence, as well as verbal and physical resistance skills—all of which Hollander credits for the low rate of incidents for those who took the class. With the right kind of training, “women are better able to discern the warning signs of assault. They are clearer about their own desires in an interaction, and more willing to speak and act on their own behalf.” Taken together, she says, “these are all elements that reduce the odds of an assault.”

Source: [University of Oregon](http://www.universityoforegon.edu)

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