

Link between self-harm and rape

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Studies of rape victims reveal that 15 percent have scars from old self-harm injuries. The figure suggests a need for improved care of self-harming youths.

Girls who have been raped frequently suffer great traumas as a result of the assault.

But a new study shows that many rape victims actually have mental problems even before the sexual violation takes place.

“A review of statements from rape victims has revealed that a strikingly large share of them had scars from self-harm that was done prior to the actual rape,” says Anne Bugge, a doctor working at the Forensic Medicine Institute at the University of Southern Denmark.

“This suggests that self-harming youths form a vulnerable group that we should monitor better, so they can learn how to avoid situations they can’t cope with.”

Bugge has reviewed 387 social enquiry reports dealing with rape or attempted rape that occurred in 2007-2010.

Here she found scars from old self-harm on 59 victims, which is equivalent to 15 percent.

“In fact, photos showed that more than 59 had self-harm scars, but 59 of the women confirmed directly that the scars were caused by self-harm,” she says.

“That’s a pretty significant figure, and that made me want to take a closer look.”

Less than half of the victims knew the rapist

These 59 women were all aged between 13 and 20. Just under half of them knew the rapist – who was either a boyfriend, friend, ex-boyfriend or a colleague.

“These are usually young and vulnerable girls who find themselves in a situation where it can be difficult to know when to say no,” explains Bugge.

“Some of the assaults occur in connection with parties, where the victim and the rapist have both been drinking alcohol.”

More focus on self-harming youths

There is no single factor that makes them exposed to rape. The reports showed, for instance, that some 30 percent of the rape victims with self-harming behaviours actually experienced psychological problems such as schizophrenia, anorexia or depression prior to the assault.

This information may eventually help illustrate that youths with self-harming behaviour are a vulnerable group which should receive more attention in the form of guidance.

“Our hope is that this can help prevent self-harming youths to avoid situations such as rape,” says Bugge.

She has not yet published her findings as she has another 328 social enquiry reports about rape victims to go through. Here she will try to see if she can spot the same pattern of psychological problems in those rape victims who did not engage in self-harm.

[Read this article in Danish at videnskab.dk](#) [10]

 [When young people engage in self-harming, it is because doing so has become a solution to some difficult emotions that they struggle to deal with. They momentarily escape the difficult emotions by cutting themselves. But since this doesn't make the emotions go away, they need to continue cutting.](#)

(Photo: Colourbox) [11]

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Fact box

Self-harm is defined as the intentional, direct injuring of body tissue most often done without suicidal intentions.

The most common form of self-harm is skin-cutting, but self-harm also covers a wide range of behaviors including, but not limited to, burning, scratching, banging or hitting body parts, interfering with wound healing, hair-pulling (trichotillomania) and the ingestion of toxic substances or objects.

Source: Wikipedia

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Anne Bugge

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Anne Bugge

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Dann Vinther

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