

Sexual Assault Prevention & Awareness Center

Education • Advocacy • Activism for the U-M Community
Division of Student Affairs

The Myth of the Black Rapist

Myth: Black men target White women to sexually assault.

Fact: 93% of all sexual assaults are intra-racial. This means that White men are the primary perpetrators of sexualized violence against White women, and likewise African-American women and women of color are most commonly assaulted by African-American men and men of color. Of the 7% of sexual assaults that are interracial, 3.4% involve the assault of a Black woman by a White man, while 3.3% involve the assault of a White woman by a Black man (Menachem Amir, criminologist, 1991).

Given these statistics, it is clear that White women's historical fear of Black rapists lurking in bushes, waiting to attack White women, has no basis in fact. The myth is due instead to racist beliefs. The myth of the Black rapist was created during Reconstruction to justify the lynching of Black men. Today, lynching is much less common, yet the myth of the Black rapist still permeates our culture.

It is in the myth of the Black rapist that we see the intersection of sexual assault and racism. Oppression of any form is designed to control and exploit one group of people for the benefit of another group. In the case of rape, coercion, violation, and violence cause women to feel intimidated and helpless. In the same way, racism uses power and prejudice to attack the freedoms of people of color. The system of beliefs that leads to both rape and racism is passed on in our society from one generation to the next by myths and stereotypes.

The myths of race take the form of racial or cultural stereotypes, like "Jews are stingy" or "Latinos are short-tempered," while the myths of rape often involve victim-blaming statements about sexual assault, like "She wouldn't have gotten raped if she hadn't been walking alone at night", or "What did she expect would happen if she went upstairs with him?" These two different sets of myths meet in the myth of the Black rapists. Here, we see statements that engage stereotypes both about rape and about Black men. Some examples are: "Most rapists are Black" and "Black men rape White women because they want the forbidden fruit."

The end of these myths can only be achieved by an equal awareness of the sexism and racism in our society. No single system of oppression can be fought without an equal commitment to end all oppressions and the myths used to perpetuate them. By remaining silent about these myths, we allow them to continue. When we listen to someone blame a victim for a sexual assault, or listen to a racist joke, and choose to remain silent, we are denying the reality of the sexism and racism that exist in our society. Silence can be tempting, but the eradication of prejudice and stereotypes requires the courage to speak out.

SAPAC is a center dedicated to the elimination of sexual violence in all forms, including domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and stalking.

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