After progress on college rape, why ignore sexual violence in high school?

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We have politicians trying to do something on campus. Now we need to do more on behalf of the nearly 50% of victims who are under 18

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This week, three star athletes were arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting a young woman at a post-prom party. It wasn't in Steubenville, or Torrington, or Maryville, or Louisville, or Grand Rapids, or a thousand other towns where the victims haven't and maybe won't come forward. But the new case from Calhoun High School in Georgia does bring together high schoolers, alcohol, bystander apathy and athletes once again.

It also arrives a little over a month after the Obama administration published its comprehensive report on curbing college rapes and during the same week that US Senator Claire McCaskill held the second in a series of roundtable discussions on how to stop sexual assault on campus.

The administration, politicians and campus activists have worked hard to put together recommendations for universities and students on how to prevent and appropriately handle sexual assault and rape cases – and they should be applauded for it. But in the wake of case after case of high school sexual violence, it's clear that we're taking action way too late – or, more accurately, when people are way too old.

Forty-four percent of US sexual assault victims are under the age of 18. And while we now have a White House task force to combat college rapes, and a willingness to at least propose legislation on the issue, we still have no national education, prevention and enforcement standards on dealing with sexual assaults that happen before students get there.

But rapists don't restrict themselves to targeting those with high school diplomas.

Though it might be easier for some to think of sexual assaults that happen in high school as misunderstandings between drunks kids – the lawyer of one the accused in Georgia already bemoaned how the alleged perpetrators' lives "are changed forever" – the truth is that such assaults are always brutal for victims regardless of the ages of the rapists.

The men at Calhoun High, for example, are charged with aggravated sexual battery under Georgia law: the three seniors allegedly decided to penetrate the unconscious teen girl with a foreign object as a fourth man held the door. Gilmer County Sheriff Stacy Nicholson said in a
press conference, "I've been here 23 years, and her injuries were substantial." As in many other high school rape cases, Nicholson also noted that other party-goers knew what was happening and didn't intervene to stop the assault.

How many times do we have hear another version of the same awful story before we do something to address the problem?

Yes, college campuses have specific needs around rape and sexual assault – particularly as it pertains to campus adjudication processes. But the Title IX protections that are now being used to protect college assault victims also apply to high school students. And the bystander intervention models that are so often taught as the gold standard at universities are badly needed in high schools across the country - because this is not the first time high school students stood by and watched a young woman be violated.

For instance, one of the witnesses in the Steubenville rape case walked in on the rape and didn't stop it because "it wasn't violent – I thought [rape] was forcing yourself on someone". And in 2009, as many as 20 onlookers watched and did nothing as a 15 year old was gang-raped outside of a homecoming dance in Richmond, California.

But not everyone is just standing by. When Ali Safran was sexually assaulted as a high school senior, she felt that going through the criminal justice system didn't offer her any justice. So on the third anniversary of the attack, she went to the spot where she was assaulted and hung a sign telling her story to urge readers that "we can stop this violence from happening".

Today, Safran is the Director of Surviving in Numbers, and helped implement an anti-rape curricula in two high schools in Massachusetts (where she just graduated from college).

"There is no focus on high school rape at all" Safran told me. "Part of it has to with people not wanting to talk to high schoolers about sex at all, let alone sexual assault – they prefer to ignore it all together." Safran's program focuses on bystander intervention, open discussions about consent and how to support your peers without victim-blaming.

Safran hopes that she can grow her program and that others do the same. "We can't pretend these things don't happen in high school," she said.

Sadly, cases like the one at Calhoun High remind us that rapes do happen in high school. Often. And if we can teach anti-bullying or sex education, there's no reason that we can't teach high schoolers about rape and sexual assault. After all, they already know it happens - sometimes, they're watching it right in front of their eyes.

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