

# The Hunting Ground

By Rebecca Marshallsay

Imagine reporting a sexual assault or rape only to be asked, 'Well what were you wearing? Had you been drinking? What kind of message were you sending?' According to a new documentary, *The Hunting Ground*, this victim-blaming response is regularly experienced by women in many colleges across the United States.

*The Hunting Ground* is an expose of institutional cover-ups, rape culture and victim-blaming across hundreds of educational institutions around the United States. The film speaks to many survivors of rape and sexual assault and finds out how their schools dismissed their claims and failed to protect them in the wake of their traumatic experiences. The film also follows student survivors, Andrea Pino and Annie Clark, and their nationwide campaign to protect and seek justice for victims of rape and sexual assault under an anti-sex discrimination law Title IX.

*The Hunting Ground* draws on a number of studies from the past fifteen years to back the claim that one in five women in American colleges are sexually assaulted. Only a small fraction of these are reported and even fewer result in punishment for the perpetrator.

Whilst cases of sexual assault and rape committed against men are much lower (and reporting is believed to be even lower again), men who reported sexual assault to their colleges were dismissed with the same disregard. Rather than shaming them for their outfits or their drinking choices however, their masculinity and their status as a 'real man' was questioned, not only for having the misfortune of being victims of a crime but also for reporting and talking about.

Apart from the prevalence of the crimes themselves, there are two very shocking factors about *The Hunting Ground*; the first is the active role that these colleges are playing in deterring students from reporting and their failure to protect them. The documentary shows the institutions being driven by two factors, firstly the desire to suppress complaints in order to keep crime statistics low on their campuses (and maintain a false facade of safety and security), and secondly, the imperative to protect perpetrators who are of benefit to the school such as star athletes.

It is possible to wrap your head around this conspiracy of silence approach in broad terms but watching *The Hunting Ground* and seeing the victims, it is very hard to imagine the number of real individuals who are able to accept such a laissez faire approach to violent sex crimes, from school administrators and 'support' services through to board members and directors. This amounts to a lot of people who are comfortable essentially saying to victims (to their face in many instances), 'We don't care about you. You don't matter. Your needs are not more important than the needs of this school. Go away.'

Especially from an outside perspective, the second factor that is quite shocking, and only broadly touched on in the film, are the aspects of American college culture that lend themselves to these crimes. In 2015, Getamungstit looked at hazing in the US, and many of the same factors seem to be at play when it comes to attitudes about and prevalence of sexual assault in American colleges.

With most students living in residential facilities on campus, college life becomes very insular and often students are far away from their families and other support networks. The authority of the school becomes paramount and this is evidenced in *The Hunting Ground* by the tendency for students to report to the school (rather than the police as you might expect in Australia) and the willingness of school disciplinary bodies to make determinations on criminal cases. Again, in

Australia you would expect that any institution, (university, workplace or otherwise) would be led by the criminal justice system.

The fraternity culture also appears to play a disturbing role in normalising a predator-prey relationship between men and women. *The Hunting Ground* shows footage of students casually discussing how one fraternity received the nickname SAE, Sexual Assault Expected; or joking about how another fraternity had a reputation as a date rape fraternity. There is also footage of dozens and dozens of men on a campus chanting 'No means yes, yes means anal.' The implications of this statement are obviously abhorrent, and even more disturbing is the fact that such a large group of people felt comfortable to chant this in a public space without fear of repercussion.

Another element of college life is the superstar status of high profile athletes and a culture of privilege and entitlement that accompanies it. *The Hunting Ground* claims that while less than 4% of college men are athletes, 19% of sexual assaults are attributed to athletes. The film speaks to one student who was actively discouraged by police (the campus had its own police beat) from reporting because her rapist was a football star and they were in a 'football town'.

The documentary goes on to detail several cases (where victims would not be deterred), when sports stars were found guilty by the school and their punishment was held over or deferred until after they had played in 'the big game' or fulfilled their sporting commitments to the school.

In other cases where perpetrators were found guilty by school disciplinary bodies, punishments included suspension over the summer break, a \$75 fine, expulsion after graduation and making a poster board about appropriate behaviour with women. This means that victims may still find themselves seeing or even sharing a class with the perpetrators on campus, even if the perpetrator has admitted guilt. Woefully inadequate does not even begin to cut it when it comes to the college responses.

The good news to come out of this very distressing film is that ground roots campaigns such as the Title IX campaign led by Pino and Clark, and the education and awareness campaigns attached to *The Hunting Ground* itself have begun to spark change. This issue is slowly being dragged into the spotlight and approximately 100 American institutions are currently under federal investigation.

*The Hunting Ground* has been picked up in Australia and, with support of a number of partners including Good Pitch Australia, will form the basis of a broader campaign called The Hunting Ground Australia Project to start a collaborative approach between Australian universities and the broader community.

Campaign organisers are very aware that the university culture as a whole, as well as around reporting, is very different in Australia. Also, because of their structure, Australian universities do not have the same reporting infrastructure in place regarding crimes on campus and connected with the institution. As such, the campaign is hoping to develop an *Australian Universities' Sexual Assault and Harassment Survey* to find out exactly what Australian university students are experiencing and identify whether there are appropriate opportunities for universities to do more to assist their students in this area. This survey is expected to fill a knowledge gap so that Australia can ensure that it has best practices in place specific to our experience and situation.

Although our culture and attitudes to reporting might be very different, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *2012 Personal Safety Survey* confirms that in Australia women between the ages of 18-24 years old are the most likely to experience sexual assault. It is very important to note here that this is across Australia and does not look at students in particular. That said, it still suggests that

conversations about sexual assault are highly relevant to the university sector as many students fall within this demographic.

Universities Australia is working with The Hunting Ground Australia project to reignite conversations about what role higher education providers in Australia can play with regard to prevention as well as education of staff and students. They are also identifying opportunities to review policies and procedures to ensure that all students in Australia are protected.

*The Hunting Ground* will be screened as part of educational campaigns and campus screenings from February before being made available to the broader Australian community with a general release in mid-2016.

If you need support with regard to rape or sexual assault please contact one of the following:

1800 RESPECT

Call 1800 737 732

National counselling helpline for sexual assault, and domestic and family violence.

Queensland Statewide Sexual Assault Helpline

Freecall 1800 010 120

A free confidential helpline for men or women.

Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence

(07) 5591 1164

Free confidential counselling and advocacy for women.

Living Well

1300 114 397

Face to face and telephone counselling for men who have been sexually assaulted.