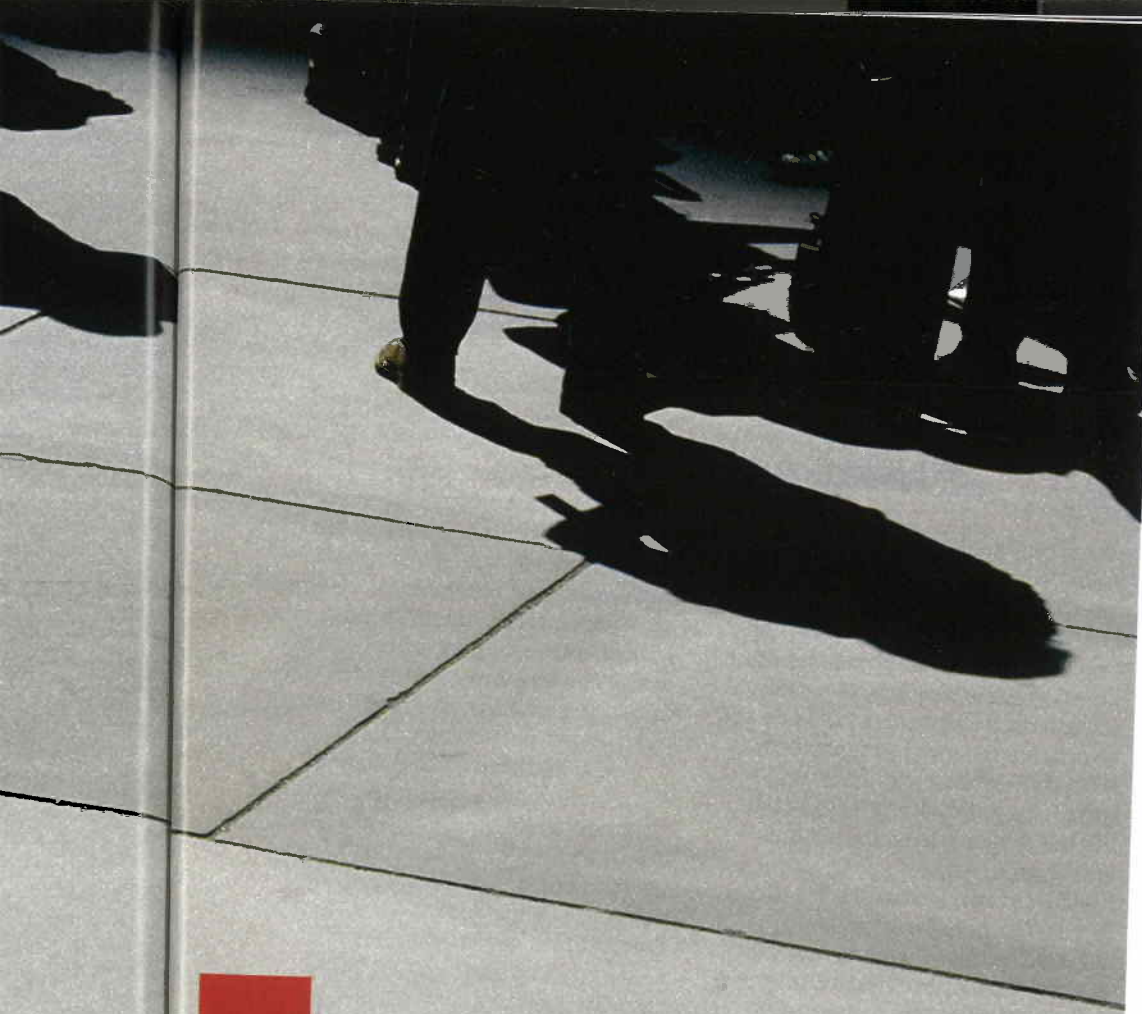


Need to  
Know

# The Sex Crime No One Talks About

It happens to women all the time—you're in a crowded place and, all of a sudden, a strange man touches or rubs up against you inappropriately. Don't brush off the experience. Experts now realize that groping can have lasting effects on your self-esteem and sense of safety. Here's why this so-called harmless offense should be taken seriously.

**By Stephanie Booth**



ast August, on a red-eye flight from Los Angeles to Chicago, Dana LaRue awoke to find her male seatmate's hand resting on her upper thigh. Instantly, she jerked her leg away. But he appeared to be sleeping, so she didn't call him out. "I shrugged it off as an accident, since the plane was so cramped for space," recalls the 34-year-old wedding blogger.

Dana drifted off again, waking an hour later. This time, the man's blazer was draped over her torso, and she felt one of his hands creeping over her breasts, the other on her lap. Horrified, she jolted upright—causing him to move his coat and hands off her body quickly. His eyes remained shut, as if he'd been asleep the entire time.

"I felt violated and wanted to confront him, but I was in shock and I didn't want to make a scene," says Dana. For the rest of the flight, she stayed quiet—even during the plane's descent, when her seatmate

opened his eyes and began making small talk.

Once out of the airport, however, "it suddenly sunk in that this guy wasn't sleeping—he was groping me," she says. Although she immediately called the airline to tell them what had happened, a rep explained that since it wasn't reported during the flight, there was nothing they could do.

Dana's experience was no isolated incident, as most young women can attest. In fact, a Cosmo web poll found that 77 percent of respondents said they too have been groped by a stranger at least once, with an astounding 39 percent victimized on four or more separate occasions—on airplanes and trains, at parties, nightclubs, and public parks, and even on the street in daylight.

Of course, groping isn't a new crime. And since there are no national statistics on it, experts aren't sure if there's been an

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increase in the misdemeanor some states call forcible touching and others deem a lesser sexual offense. But criminologists do agree that in the past few years, the number of groping incidents reported to police has climbed, and that has resulted in a surge of media attention.

"Young women today are more confident and take-charge, and they're not afraid to inform authorities if it happens to them," explains Patricia J. Aletky, PhD, a clinical psychologist and forensic consultant in Minneapolis who specializes in sex-related cases. Also, thanks to smartphones, women can now easily capture gropers on camera, providing instant evidence for law enforcement...and digital images for headline-grabbing news stories in print and online.

Women often have a tendency to shrug off groping. After all, an incident lasts only a few seconds. But it is a form of sexual assault, one that can have lasting repercussions for victims. Here, experts explain what motivates a man to put his hands on you without permission—and the right way to fight back.

## WHY MEN DO IT

A hand on your ass; a squeeze of your breast; a man brushing or pressing his body against yours—

anytime you're touched in an unwanted sexual way, that's groping, says Aletky.

Surprisingly, although gropers often target the sexual regions of a woman's body, experts say the crime is not typically motivated by sex at all. "Gropers are often men with low self-esteem who crave power and control over females," explains Brent E. Turvey, a criminal profiler in Sitka, Alaska, and coauthor of *Rape Investigation Handbook*. "Grabbing or rubbing against a woman proves to a groper that he's capable of putting her in a submissive position." In other words, he gets a high out of humiliating you...and knowing he'll likely get away with it.

Instead of seeking victims in isolated areas, the way a serial rapist does, gropers generally target women in crowded places where they have more opportunity to flee: busy streets, trains, and buses and packed clubs and concerts. Venues that serve alcohol are prime stalking grounds. "These men know that women who have been drinking may not notice a stranger edging into their personal space," says Turvey. "Once the crime has been committed, they can disappear into the crowd before she's fully aware of what's happened."

To complicate matters, gropers aren't all sketchy-looking guys. Many are successful, well-groomed professionals. Or they're seemingly regular guys who fit right into any nightspot frequented by hip young adults—as Monique Bosjolie, 29,



Dana LaRue pushed for justice.

found out last Halloween, when she was at a crowded bar in her hometown of Ogdensburg, New York. "My girlfriends and I were celebrating and having fun, and this boisterous, popular guy with a goatee sidled up to both me and one of my friends at two different times and grabbed us both between the legs," she remembers. "My friend laughed it off, but it spoiled my night and I went home early."

Most gropers' compulsion to control and humiliate women is satiated by the occasional attack. But experts believe that a small percentage of offenders are actually rehearsing for a more sinister crime. "As they keep getting away with groping, they escalate their behavior," says Turvey. They may start searching for victims in isolated areas, so they can draw out their assault to include violence and rape.

## THE SURPRISING WAY GROPING HARMS YOU

Once the immediate shock of the crime wears off, "victims typically feel embarrassed that they were

singled out, and they often second-guess their emotions and convince themselves they are overreacting," explains Chip Stone, a clinical and forensic psychiatrist in Orange County, California, whose clients include both sex offenders and trauma victims.

Those emotions may be reinforced if a woman goes to the police. In addition to the fact that there is usually a lack of forensic evidence or witnesses, an old-school attitude typically exists among police officers that groping is no big deal. "That means investigating the incident is low on the priority list of most cops," says Turvey.

The assault can also trigger a deeper, more insidious response. "Women tend to feel robbed of their strength and resilience, forcing them to reevaluate how safe they really are," says Turvey. Adds Dr. Stone: "If you were brought up to feel confident and capable, being groped—and then unable to take action against the offender—is an unsettling, disempowering feeling."

That sense of powerlessness continues to haunt Shawna Potter, 29. While she was walking down a bustling, well-lit New York City street one night with a male friend, a 20something guy going the opposite way closed in on her, grabbed her butt and gave it a squeeze, and then sauntered off. "My friend suggested I forget about it, but I couldn't," she recalls. "For a long time, it made me feel like a target or an object, and I still feel this weird passivity and weakness

## MORE CREEPY SEX CRIMES

Like groping, these pervy offenses are often played down by law enforcement as well as by women who are victimized. But they are all gateway crimes that may lead to more violent behavior, like rape.

### Flashing

Clinically known as exhibitionism, it's when a guy reveals his privates in public view of a woman or women hoping to elicit shock, embarrassment, and/or fear. Generally speaking, flashers don't want to make contact with their victims; they just get a quick sense of power from exposing themselves and then watching your reaction.

when I'm on the street or in a public place. I'll walk past a group of men I don't know and worry, *Which one of these jerks is going to be the next one to grope me?*"

## THE RIGHT WAY TO DEAL WITH A GROPER

Recent news reports about groping have spotlighted young women who went ballistic on their assailant or sought to emasculate the offender by posting a cell-phone photo of him all over Facebook. The thing is,



**Shawna Potter is still working to regain her confidence in public.**

no matter how kick-ass you might feel, experts say it's not smart to go that far. If your groper is still nearby and you feel threatened, ask for help from those around you.

Another strategy: Leave the scene immediately, and go in the opposite direction of the groper. Head someplace where you feel safe and can collect yourself, says Holly Kearl, author of *Stop Street*

*Harassment* and founder of [stopstreetharassment.org](http://stopstreetharassment.org), a women's safety organization.

Next, report the incident to the police—the sooner the better, since details will be fresh in your mind and your offender might still be in the area. And although cops may seem to play down the crime, the more often it is reported, the more seriously police will start taking it. Also, reach out to other authorities where the crime occurred—for example, the manager or owner of a bar or dance club—and give them the details on what happened, providing the best physical description

you can of the groper, so they can keep an eye out for him.

If you're comfortable doing it, post details of the incident on Facebook (but a photo is not a good idea, because it could anger the groper on the off chance he knows who you are) and websites like [ihollaback.org](http://ihollaback.org), so you can alert women in your community and connect with other victims.

# If your groper is still nearby and you feel threatened, ask for help from those around you.

"Not only will these steps increase the odds that the groper is caught, they help you regain your sense of power," says Kearl. "Plus, by taking action, you're demonstrating that being a victim isn't something to be ashamed of."

That was Dana's response after the airline on which she was groped told her there was nothing they could do because the plane had already landed. Instead of letting them stonewall her, she took her case to airport police in Chicago, the Transportation Security Administration, and the FBI, where an agent decided to handle her case. He assured Dana they would get her seatmate's personal information from the flight manifest, pay him a visit, and inform him she had filed a complaint against him.

"They can't prove anything, so he won't face a trial or be convicted unless he confesses," she explains. "But he's on their radar now, which means if he tries anything like this again, they may be able to press charges for sexual assault. Hopefully, that will keep him from groping other unsuspecting women." ■

## Fetish Burglary

This crime involves the theft of intimate items, like bras, underwear, lingerie, and in some cases, even shoes or hairbrushes. The burglar will then use them to fuel fantasy and sometimes as a masturbation tool. The theft feeds into the perp's need for control or power over his victim, since she typically has no idea who stole her things.

## Peeping

The classic Peeping Tom seeks out opportunities to watch a woman's private or sexual activity—either in person, through a window, or using a hidden video camera (upskirting, which is taking photos up women's skirts without their knowledge, is a contemporary form of peeping). Voyeurs get off sexually on observing a woman's private life without permission.

SOURCE: CRIMINAL PROFILER BRENT E. TURVEY