



Creating Assault & Sexual Assault Policies that Protect All New York Citizens:

Adopting the New Model Penal Code Section 213.10,
Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission

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Executive Summary

Currently, New York law is missing a definition of affirmative consent for adults who engage in force or restraint during erotic power exchange and roleplay. This has led to two public health issues that need to be addressed:

- 1) **The criminalization of common, consensual erotic behaviors.** Outdated U.S. case law has established, based on moral objections, that consent is not a defense to the use of force or restraint in an erotic context, including for mild non-injurious activities. Under New York case law, consent is not a defense to assault, specifically including the erotic use of force or restraint. This criminalization causes discrimination and stigmatization, which can lead to mental health issues and barriers to services for many State citizens.¹
- 2) **Sexual assault and assault are not prosecuted in this context.** Currently, law enforcement and prosecutors ignore this case law, and assume that someone who is injured or sexually violated during the use of erotic force or restraint “must have asked for it.”² New York needs a clear legal framework that differentiates consensual, non-injurious erotic activities from abuse and violence, so that reports of sexual assault and assault can be addressed.

Introduction

The American Law Institute grappled with these issues for six years and recently approved Section 213.10 of the Model Penal Code on Sexual Assault: “Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission.”³ Explicit Prior Permission requires that everyone involved is informed of the risks and freely agrees to specific acts and the intensity before engaging in erotic force or restraint. Also, there must be a way to stop at any time, and participants must be over 18 and of sound mind. Explicit Prior Permission prohibits serious physical injury, including permanent marks and impairment, or the risk of a life-threatening injury.

Adopting “Explicit Prior Permission” as New York law would help protect and educate millions of citizens. A cross-sectional survey found that 20-30% of adults in the U.S. have engaged in roleplay, power exchange, and/or restraint in an erotic context.⁴ However, only a fraction of these adults have received education about consent, with less than 4% of adults having taken an educational workshop on sex, and 4% attending an erotic event where they could learn about consent from other adults.

Adopting Explicit Prior Permission would also reduce harm by providing a framework to prosecute nonconsensual acts. The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) recently surveyed nearly 3,000 adults and found that 15% reported they had been sexually assaulted during erotic roleplay or power exchange, while 12% said they had been assaulted (i.e., slapped, punched, choked) during erotic activities.⁵ However due to the criminalization of erotic force and restraint as well as the attitudes of law enforcement, less than 4% of the respondents reported it to the police, even though 4% said they had been injured when they were assaulted.

Sexual Assault is a serious issue in New York. The New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault estimates that nearly 50,000 women are raped annually in New York City alone and that only about 1,500 of those are reported to the police.⁶ They also estimate that rape crisis centers in New York City see about 14,000 survivors a year. Their estimate is based on a national DOJ study which found 60% of sexual assault crimes are not reported to the police.⁷ Data on crimes reported to the police in 2020 from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services showed 5,610 rapes were reported.⁸ These statistics only account for rape and not other types of sexual violence and sexual assault which means far more than 5,610 people a year are experiencing sexual assault or violence in New York State.

Therefore, it is essential for the New York State Assembly to take advantage of this development by the American Law Institute, and adopt the provisions of Section 213:10 of the Model Penal Code on Sexual Assault into State law.

Current New York Law

The current consent statute in New York requires consent to be established via words or conduct at the time of the act, however there are no specifications for consent to the use of erotic force/restraint or threat of force/restraint. This standard could cause issues in cases involving BDSM activities because sometimes actions during an alt-sex encounter could appear to conflict with previously established consent and boundaries. For example, during erotic role play, someone may want to resist and/or mock-protest. Explicit Prior Permission would provide a definition of consent that would fix this issue.

New York Penal Code §130.05 defines what a lack of consent for sex offenses means and part of it states:

1. Whether or not specifically stated, it is an element of every offense defined in this article that the sexual act was committed without consent of the victim.
2. Lack of consent results from:
 - a. Forcible compulsion; or
 - b. Incapacity to consent; or
 - c. Where the offense charged is sexual abuse **or forcible touching, any circumstances**, in addition to forcible compulsion or incapacity to consent, in which the victim does not expressly or impliedly acquiesce in the actor's conduct;

Under S 130.00 Sex offenses; definitions of terms:

8. "Forcible compulsion" means to compel by either:
 - a. **use of physical force**; or
 - b. a threat, express or implied, which places a person in fear of immediate death or physical injury to himself, herself or another person, or in fear that he, she or another person will immediately be kidnapped.

Several of the sexual offenses statute also include "**forcible compulsion**" as grounds for determining nonconsent:

130.35 Rape in the first degree

A person is guilty of rape in the first degree when he or she engages in sexual intercourse with another person:

1. By forcible compulsion; or

S 130.50 Criminal sexual act in the first degree

A person is guilty of criminal sexual act in the first degree when he or she engages in oral sexual conduct or anal sexual conduct with another person:

1. By forcible compulsion;

S 130.65 Sexual abuse in the first degree

A person is guilty of sexual abuse in the first degree when he or she subjects another person to sexual contact:

1. By forcible compulsion; or

Current New York State law does not allow consent as a defense to charges of assault or battery. According to S 120.10 Assault in the first degree, a person is guilty of assault in the first degree when:

1. With intent to cause serious physical injury to another person, he causes such injury to such person or to a third person by means of a deadly weapon or a dangerous instrument; or
2. With intent to disfigure another person seriously and permanently, or to destroy, amputate or disable permanently a member or organ of his body, he causes such injury to such person or to a third person; or
3. Under circumstances evincing a depraved indifference to human life, he recklessly engages in conduct which creates a grave risk of death to another person, and thereby causes serious physical injury to another person; or
4. In the course of and in furtherance of the commission or attempted commission of a felony or of immediate flight therefrom, he, or another participant if there be any, causes serious physical injury to a person other than one of the participants.

Assault case law in New York, *NY v. Jovanovic* (1999), highlights the importance of Section 213.10 of the Model Penal Code, “Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission Explicit Prior Permission” and the legal benefit it could provide. The decision in the case affirmed that consent to the erotic use of force or restraint **could not** be a defense to assault, but it also involved a misapplication of the rape shield laws: during the initial trial, email exchanges containing discussions of their alt-sex interests between the victim and the accused were not allowed to be brought into evidence.[7] This case demonstrates that a clear legal framework that addresses alt-sex encounters would help provide a more transparent way to determine when an assault has occurred and proceed accordingly.

In New York, it is also against the law to cause someone to stop breathing or to obstruct that person's ability to breathe. In other words, it is a crime to choke or strangle another person regardless of consent. In the New York Penal Code choking another person is referred to as criminal obstruction of breathing or blood circulation. Under New York Penal Code § 121.1:

A person is guilty of criminal obstruction of breathing or blood circulation when, with intent to impede the normal breathing or circulation of the blood of another person, he or she:

- a. applies pressure on the throat or neck of such person; or

b. blocks the nose or mouth of such person.

In *People v. Figueroa*, 968 N.Y.S.2d 866 (2013), the defendant was convicted of criminal obstruction of breathing or blood circulation based on applying pressure to his girlfriend's neck causing her to struggle for air. Witnesses observed the man place his left hand on the woman's throat and his right hand on the back of her neck. The woman's color turned white, her eyes bugged out and she struggled for air. Witnesses stated that the choking lasted for about 2-3 seconds.

It's important to clarify in State law that consent is not a defense to choking during erotic activities due to the risk of serious physical injury. Erotic choking has become a serious public health issue, with 52.4% of the college-age students having been choked at least once during sex according to a recent study.⁹ Nearly 1 in 3 of the students who had ever been choked said that partners had only sometimes asked for consent or if it was okay; while 20.9% reported that they had never been asked for consent or if it was okay, that their partner(s) had just choked them.¹⁰ Many people are also unaware of the serious mental health and health risks that can result from being choked, including the risk of death, which is why State law should specifically address this issue.¹¹

Model Penal Code Section 213.10, Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission

The Model Penal Code is an influential model act for state criminal laws first issued by the American Law Institute (ALI) in 1962. In 2012, the ALI began a long-term project to revise the portion of the Code which addresses sexual assault, Section 213. To create a legal framework to distinguish consensual adult sexual behaviors from assault and violence, NCSF began assisting the ALI in 2016 with the creation of Article 213.10 to define affirmative ongoing consent for the use of force or restraint. After an exhaustive years-long effort with the input of dozens of subject matter experts, Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission, Section 213.10 of the revised Model Penal Code on Sexual Assault, was approved by the ALI membership in June 2021.¹²

A summary of some of the problematic case law involving alt-sex activities and charges of assault or battery (which Section 213.10 would address) can be found in *Consent to Harm* by Vera Bergelson, in Chapter 8 of *The Ethics of Consent: Theory and Practice*. According to Bergelson, criminalization of the erotic use of force and restraint was based on “moral judgments about the iniquity of the conduct,” with courts tending “to inflate the risk and harmfulness of an activity they want to denounce.”¹³

The Reporters' Notes in the ALI's MPC on Sexual Assault that accompany Section 213.10 states: "Social disapproval on moral grounds was once, and to some extent still is, widespread. Nonetheless, as long as the person giving consent is a competent adult, and as long as the force poses no risk of serious bodily injury, death, or harm to others, respect for individual autonomy requires deference to these choices, which the person may regard as a cherished vehicle for personal and sexual fulfillment."

The ALI's reasoning is based on *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), which holds that competent adults have constitutionally protected privacy and autonomy rights to engage in mutually consensual sexual activity, as long as it doesn't involve "persons who might be injured or coerced or who are situated in relationships where consent might not be easily refused."¹⁴

The Reporters' Notes to Section 213:10 also cites evidence that police and prosecutors are especially reluctant to investigate and file charges for sexual assault when the complainant has engaged in erotic use of force or restraint "because they assume that a person who is injured or sexually violated in such a case 'must have asked for it.'"

Section 213:10 states that under specific conditions and subject to specific limitations, Explicit Prior Permission from an individual to use or threaten to use physical force or restraint, or threaten to inflict harm on that individual, is an affirmative defense to criminal allegations of assaulting that individual in the manner specifically agreed to:

- (1) It is an affirmative defense to a charge under this Article that the actor reasonably believed that, in conjunction with the charged act of sexual penetration, oral sex, or sexual contact, the other party personally gave explicit prior permission to use or threaten to use physical force or restraint, or threaten to inflict harm.
- (2) Permission is "explicit" under subsection (1) when it is given orally or by written agreement:
 - (a) Specifying that the actor may ignore the other party's expressions of unwillingness or other absence of consent;
 - (b) Identifying the specific forms of extent of force, restraint, or threats that are permitted; and
 - (c) Stipulating the specific words or gestures that will withdraw the permission.

Permission given by gestures or other nonverbal conduct signaling assent is not "explicit" under subsection (1).

In summary: under Explicit Prior Permission, there must be an agreed-upon safe word or safe signal, which are specific words or gestures that withdraw the prior permission. There also needs to be a prior discussion and agreement if someone wants to mock-protest during roleplay

and not have those protests stop the action. Participants also have to discuss what they will do together and the risks involved before receiving consent to those specific acts. The level of intensity also needs to be discussed and agreed to, for example, spanking with hands or a paddle, or specifying light taps that don't leave a mark.

This is shown in Illustration #1 in the ALI's Reporters Notes: "Before a date, the accused sends the complainant a text asking, 'r u into BDSM?' The complainant responds, 'Maybe tonight?'" This would **not** be considered Explicit Prior Permission because the specific acts of force and restraint are not discussed and consented to before starting. In addition, there was no agreed-upon safe word to stop what is happening at any time.

Therefore, adopting Explicit Prior Permission would address the problematic "rough sex" defense, wherein currently an accused person can sometimes successfully argue that they obtained blanket consent for a wide range of behaviors that could cause serious physical injury, including choking (strangulation), punching, and slapping simply by asking "Are you into rough sex?" and being told "yes." Adopting Section 213.10 would make clear that in a variety of situations in which a person might have agreed vaguely to "rough sex," the affirmative defense of Explicit Prior Permission would not apply:

- (3) The defense provided by this Section is unavailable when:
 - (a) the act of sexual penetration, oral sex or sexual contact occurs after the explicit permission was withdrawn, and the actor is aware of, yet recklessly disregards, the risk that the permission was withdrawn;
 - (b) the actor relies on permission to use force or restraint or ignore the absence of consent when the other party will be unconscious, asleep, or otherwise unable to withdraw permission;
 - (c) the actor engages in conduct that causes or risks serious bodily injury and in doing so is aware of, yet recklessly disregards, the risk of such injury; or
 - (d) at the time explicit permission is given, the other party is, and the actor is aware of, yet recklessly disregards, the risk that the other party is:
 - i. younger than 18;
 - ii. giving permission while subjugated to physical force or restraint;
 - iii. giving permission because of the use of or threat to use physical force or restraint or extortion if that party does not give the permission;
 - iv. lacking substantial capacity to appraise or control his or her conduct due to intoxication, whether voluntary or involuntary, and regardless of the identity of the person who administered the intoxicants;
 - v. incapacitated, vulnerable or legally restricted;
 - vi. subjected to prohibited deception;

vii. subject to trafficking.

How Explicit Prior Permission Would Change New York Law

Consent is not a defense for the erotic use of force or restraint in New York, therefore adopting Explicit Prior Permission would assist law enforcement in determining whether ongoing, affirmative consent was obtained for the erotic use of force or restraint, or threat of force and restraint. It would also define exceptions to this definition, such as disallowing risk of serious physical injury, or engaging in the erotic use of force or restraint with someone under 18.

Because Section 213.10 was drafted as part of the section of the Model Penal Code on sexual assault, by its terms it only applies to incidences which involve “sexual penetration, oral sex, or sexual contact.” However, the problems which gave rise to Section 213.10 also apply to some charges of assault, not just sexual assault, and New York can and should adopt the explicit prior permission standard for assault, as well.

In regards to New York Penal Code § 121.11, § 121.12 & § 121.13, the adoption of Explicit Prior Permission would clarify that strangulation/choking is **not allowed** during erotic activities due to the risk of serious physical injury.

Recommendations

The NCSF is advocating for New York to adopt the substance of Model Penal Code Section 213:10, Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission, into the state’s laws of assault and sexual assault. This will allow those who engage in alternative sexual expression to follow the legal framework of Explicit Prior Permission and avoid the risk of criminal charges, while helping police and prosecutors to distinguish and focus on truly non-consensual acts.

For Further Reading

[Consent and BDSM: The State of the Law](#)

[Article 213.10. Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission](#)

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² American Law Institute. (2022). Model penal code on sexual assault: Tentative Draft No. 5. and explanatory notes: Section 213.10. Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission was adopted at the

2021 annual meeting of the American Law Institute at Washington, D.C., June, 2021. Philadelphia, Pa.: The Institute, p. 479.

³ American Law Institute. (2022). Model penal code on sexual assault: Tentative Draft No. 5. and explanatory notes: Section 213.10. Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission was adopted at the 2021 annual meeting of the American Law Institute at Washington, D.C., June, 2021. Philadelphia, Pa.: The Institute, 462-480.

⁴ Herbenick, D., Bowling, J., Fu, T. J., Dodge, B., Guerra-Reyes, L., & Sanders, S. (2017). Sexual diversity in the United States: Results from a nationally representative probability sample of adult women and men. *PLoS one*, 12(7), e0181198. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28727762/>

⁵ Wright, S., Bowling, J., McCabe, S., Benson, J. K., Stambaugh, R., & Cramer, R. J. (2022). Sexual Violence and Nonconsensual Experiences Among Alt-Sex Communities' Members. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 8862605211062999. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211062999>

⁶ New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault. <https://www.svfreenyc.org/research>

⁷ DOJ. (2012). *Victimizations Not Reported to the Police, 2006-2010*. Washington DC: Lynn Langton, Marcus Berzofsky, Christopher Krebs, and Hope Smiley-McDonald.

⁸ NY State Division for Criminal Justice Services (2021). *Index Crimes for NY State, 9/2021*.

⁹ Herbenick, D., Fu, T. C., Kawata, K., Eastman-Mueller, H., Guerra-Reyes, L., Rosenberg, M., & Valdivia, D. S. (2022). Non-Fatal Strangulation/Choking During Sex and Its Associations with Mental Health: Findings from an Undergraduate Probability Survey. *Journal of sex & marital therapy*, 48(3), 238–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2021.198502>

¹⁰ Herbenick D, Patterson C, Beckmeyer J, Gonzalez YRR, Luetke M, Guerra-Reyes L, Eastman-Mueller H, Valdivia DS, Rosenberg M. (2021) Diverse Sexual Behaviors in Undergraduate Students: Findings From a Campus Probability Survey. *J Sex Med*. 2021 Jun;18(6):1024-1041. doi: 10.1016/j.jsxm.2021.03.006.

¹¹ Bramlett, H. M., & Dietrich, W. D. (2004). Pathophysiology of cerebral ischemia and brain trauma: similarities and differences. *Journal of Cerebral Blood Flow & Metabolism*, 24(2), 133–150.

¹² American Law Institute. (2022). Model penal code on sexual assault: Tentative Draft No. 5. and explanatory notes: Section 213.10. Affirmative Defense of Explicit Prior Permission was adopted at the 2021 annual meeting of the American Law Institute at Washington, D.C., June, 2021. Philadelphia, Pa.: The Institute, 462-480.

¹³ Bergelson, Vera, '7 Consent to Harm', in Franklin Miller, and Alan Wertheimer (eds), *The Ethics of Consent: Theory and Practice* (New York, 2009; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Feb. 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335149.003.0007>

¹⁴ *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003).