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Official campus statistics for sexual violence mislead

A school with a lower rate may just be better at discouraging students from reporting assault

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by [Jennifer J. Freyd \(/profiles/f/jennifer-j-freyd.html\)](#)

Last month, The Washington Post released (<http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/local/sex-offenses-on-us-college-campuses/1077/>) a compilation of reported rates of campus sexual assault nationwide. Such reports, which colleges and universities are required to release each year, are generally thought to be useful to the public. Parents of college-bound high school students who read that School A has a higher rate of reported sexual violence than School B can make more informed decisions about where their children will be safest. And they might very reasonably think that School A is a more



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dangerous school. However, the higher rate of reported sexual violence at School A likely indicates the opposite: that it is actually safer than School B. It means that School A is making it possible for — even encouraging — students to report sexual violence.

As a social scientist researching campus sexual violence, I know that even the highest rates of official reported victimization on campuses are substantially lower than what social science data suggest are the real rates of sexual assault. The best national estimate is that approximately 1 in 5 women experience sexual violence in college. But the reported rates are nothing like this, even at those colleges with the highest rates.

Why? Victims of abuse are often reticent about making official reports because they fear the consequences, including being stigmatized or not being believed. This tendency to remain silent is then amplified by institutional barriers to reporting. Colleges and universities have a perverse incentive to discourage sexually victimized students from reporting assault, due to the reputational hit colleges experience if their reported rates of violence are higher than those of their competitors. It's a profoundly dangerous status quo, because encouraging reporting is one of the key ways colleges can make campuses safer.

Institutional cover-ups

Part of the challenge of tackling campus sexual assault is that sexual abuse typically starts in adolescence, prior to the beginning of college. Perpetrators have often been victimized themselves. Many college victims also have a prior history of abuse. These are important factors that my laboratory has studied for years. Ultimately we must address the underlying society-wide problem of child sexual abuse that contributes to college sexual violence. But in the meantime, college campuses offer a remarkable intervention point for sexual assault: They have resources. They are limited in number (thousands of institutions of higher education versus millions of families, for instance). They influence young people on the cusp of adult responsibility.

But only when such violence is reported can victims access services and colleges hold perpetrators accountable. For most colleges and universities, however, discouraging reporting appears to remain the norm. Colleges can make it difficult to determine how to report; they can also make life harder for students who do report by shaming, invalidating and even punishing them. This is why the reported rates likely tell us more about the campus climate than about underlying rates of sexual violence.

When schools discourage reporting, they collude with many societal forces to cover up sexual violence. Sexual violence thrives on secrecy; if students do not feel they can safely



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report, the assaults will continue unchecked.

Even worse, the institutional behavior involved in discouraging reporting appears to cause additional harm to sexual assault victims. Doctoral candidate Carly Smith and I discovered (and reported in 2013 in the *Journal of Trauma Stress* (<http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/institutionalbetrayal/index.html>)) that colleges' failure to prevent sexual assault or respond supportively when it occurs — what we call institutional betrayal — can exacerbate post-traumatic distress. We found that students who were sexually assaulted and also experienced institutional betrayal on average showed higher rates of sexual abuse trauma, anxiety, sexual dysfunction and dissociation.

The most prevalent explanation for college rape culture is that it comes hand in hand with an alcohol-infused party culture that objectifies and sexualizes women. These elements of campus culture are indeed fundamental to the creation and maintenance of a rape-prone campus. But our research suggests that just as responsible is the institutional cover-up of the violence. When administrators implicitly or explicitly hide sexual assault on their college campuses, they are not simply failing to fix a problem; they are responsible for contributing to it and are thus guilty of promoting it. The institutional cover-up is at the root of a rape-tolerant culture.

To counter the dangerous incentives colleges have to minimize reports of sexual assault, we must incentivize exposure of the truth. We desperately need to collect good social science data on the true rates of assault at each school — and then make those rates publicly available.

Mapping behavior

In April, the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault recommended (http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/report_0.pdf) (PDF) that expert-created surveys of sexual victimization — what they called campus climate surveys — be administered at each college. (In March I had been at the White House to consult with task force staff, and I returned for the report's release.)



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“ Each college and university now has a choice: nervously guard its reputation at the profound expense of student well-being or courageously invest in student safety, health and education. ”

My students and I had already been working for months to develop a survey to be administered to college students to assess their experiences of sexual violence and related institutional betrayal. If such a survey were to be administered at multiple campuses — or even every campus — at the same time, the discovered rates of sexual victimization and perpetration and related institutional behaviors could be compared in a meaningful way. It’s important to get beyond the national average, which is based on research conducted at a small set of mostly large public universities, as actual rates likely vary from school to school — a function of unique campus climates, programs and even student demographics. With such detailed data, researchers — and eventually school administrators — would be able to relate variation in rates of violence to different features of the campuses, such as the role of athletics, fraternities, sororities, dormitories, off-campus independent living and various campus programs. This knowledge would then inform appropriate interventions.

One example of data’s usefulness: In my laboratory we measure not only sexual victimization but also sexual perpetration. For instance, there is good reason to think that those oft-touted problems of alcohol, parties and poor communication skills do not alone account for the majority of serious assaults on campus. In our ongoing research, about 11 percent of the total sample of college men we have surveyed have committed multiple acts of perpetration, whereas a smaller number committed just one. This suggests that sexual assault is not just a mistake or the result of drunken sex, but rather an intentional and repeated violation. It means that the danger for students lies largely in serial perpetrators who may be planning and manipulating situations to facilitate assaults. This is consistent with research at other universities. In addition, our studies and many others indicate that most assaults are committed by acquaintances rather than by strangers. Furthermore, these serial assaulters are often apparently upstanding members of the campus. Only by understanding the behavior of perpetrators will we be able to intervene effectively.

It is not trivial to measure sexual victimization or perpetration, because these are stigmatized behaviors. People don’t readily admit to abusing others or being abused themselves. Researchers have worked for decades to discover how to ask behavior-



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oriented questions that avoid charged language and pick up underlying experience. We are now equipped to assess sexual violence experiences through careful social science survey methodology using a representative sample of students. Eventually these campus violence surveys should be standardized and administered at the same time on campuses across the nation.

However, the first step will be to test various versions of such a survey on individual campuses. This pilot work will provide useful information to the local school and help the national effort to create a standardized survey. Currently, however, those of us researchers willing to perform such surveys are meeting a vast amount of administrative resistance at our universities.

Warming the research climate

That resistance — combined with a tendency for colleges to retaliate against faculty who speak up about sexual violence on their own campuses — has created a difficult climate for sexual violence researchers.

For example, when I requested help from my university to conduct such a survey, officials turned down my request and then, in explaining that decision, speculated to the press about my supposed bias due to my personal opinions. Those personal opinions were presumably related to my criticism of the university regarding its response to campus sexual violence. This public attack on my reputation and integrity as a scientist was unfounded and irresponsible. Unfortunately, for those of us who have criticized our universities or attempted to collect data about the rates of sexual assault on our own campuses, it's not unusual. I worry about the chilling effect this sort of institutional response has on individuals who want to speak honestly but lack my job security and credibility.

Each college and university now has a choice: nervously guard its reputation at the profound expense of student well-being or courageously invest in student safety, health and education. College campuses need to know what they are fighting. Enabling the methodical collection of data — and encouraging their transparent distribution and study — will signal to campus communities across the country that institutional betrayal can be replaced by institutional courage.

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