

Major Article

Sexual Assault Reporting Procedures at Ohio Colleges

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Abstract. Objective: To assess how Ohio colleges conform to recommendations that address barriers to reporting sexual assault. **Participants:** A study sample of Ohio 4-year colleges ($N = 105$). **Methods:** College Web sites were examined between March and November 2011 for their availability of sexual assault policies using 8 measures. **Results:** Of the colleges in the sample, 66% had an online sexual assault policy. Less than 1% of colleges included definitions for applicable sexual offenses in the Ohio Revised Code. All colleges with a policy included on-campus personnel to whom a victim could report. Approximately 25% and 31% of colleges included confidential or 24/7 reporting options, respectively. **Conclusions:** Many colleges are failing to offer basic reporting options to victims of sexual assault. Having a clearly labeled sexual assault policy on a campus Web site that includes 24/7 reporting options and defines acts of sexual assault can aid victims in the reporting process.

Keywords: Ohio, policy, reporting, sexual assault

Research continuously highlights that crimes, especially sexual assault, are grossly underreported.¹⁻³ Sexual assault is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as the perpetration of a physical sexual act against a person's will or in a circumstance where the person is either unable to give consent due to age, illness, or physical/mental impairment or who is unable to refuse due to physical assault or threats.^{4,5} Sexual assault includes a range of behaviors from harassment to rape.

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A national study of female college students estimated that 95% of rapes went unreported to the police.² Without accurate data on the prevalence of sexual assault, key stakeholders, such as university officials, are unlikely to allocate necessary resources so that prevention efforts are encouraged and reaction services to victims are easily accessible. Additionally, victims who report are more likely to obtain medical, legal, and psychological support.²

It is also evident that college campuses are environments conducive to sexual assault.⁶ To understand more fully the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses, Fisher and colleagues¹ completed a landmark study in which more than 4,000 female college students nationwide were surveyed regarding experiences of sexual victimization. Although examining only incidents of rape and not all forms of sexual assault, the victimization rate was 27.7 per 1,000 students. As the reference period was only 7 months, a calculated projection of victimization over an entire college career would result in approximately 5% of college women being raped each year. The study also found that the number of women who experience other forms of sexual assault (unwanted touching or sexual intercourse through sexual coercion) was higher than the number of women experiencing rape.

The initial response a victim receives is extremely important in whether a victim seeks further assistance or blames herself for the assault.⁷ When a sexual assault occurs on a college campus, there are many possible outlets for reporting: campus security, campus police, city police, residential life staff, a dean of students, student health services, or a psychologist from a student counseling center. However, few victims report to the police, which, in this study included "on-campus police or security departments, off-campus local or city police, county sheriff, or state police" or other entity whose primary responsibility was ensuring the physical safety of students. Additionally, victims also did not report to other

campus authorities whose role on campus was not primarily related to safety or security. Other campus authorities may include deans, residence hall advisors, and professors.² In a follow-up publication to their 2000 study, Fisher et al² found that 2.1% of their sample reported an act of sexual assault to the police and only 2.8% reported to a campus authority, such as a dean or faculty member. Thus, 95% of victims either did not report their assault or told only friends or family members.

Yet, most victims do not remain silent. Almost 70% of victims of sexual assault tell someone (friends, family members, intimates, etc).^{2,3} These numbers suggest that victims wish to share their experiences but are not communicating with formal authorities. There are many reasons why victims may choose not to report to police or campus agencies. These reasons include a victim's uncertainty that a crime has been committed, unawareness of reporting procedures, fear of retaliation by the perpetrator, lack of any physical proof, and fear of hostile treatment from the police.^{1,2,8,9}

In order to lessen barriers to reporting, adjustments are needed to improve college sexual assault policies. Recommendations from substantive research that was supported by the US Department of Justice include confidential and anonymous reporting options, inclusive language for definitions of the various forms of sexual assault, and inclusion of contact information for on-campus alternatives to police, such as victim advocates.¹⁰ Karjane et al assessed almost 2,500 colleges around the country on a variety of topics related to sexual assault, including efforts regarding prevention.¹⁰ The authors also analyzed existing policies that outlined protocol for responding to sexual assault reports. They found that many institutions technically comply with federal requirements under the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act¹¹ to produce annual security reports that include statistics on sexual assault, but levels of compliance with other portions of the requirements varied. For example, there are inconsistencies for the definitions of "college," "student," and "sexual assault." Accordingly, the manner in which these words are defined tends to undercount the actual occurrence of sexual assault. For example, many schools do not count sexual assaults that did not occur on campus property, even if both parties are students. This leads to differences in deciding which incidents to include in the annual report and how to classify them.¹⁰ Another recent study examined the availability and the quality of content of online sexual assault resources to students among a random sample of Midwest colleges. This study found that many colleges barely provided even the most basic information suggested by legislature and research.¹² The majority of the colleges included in the sample did not have accessible or adequate information for sexual assault victims.

Based upon both what is known about the characteristics of campus sexual assaults and the barriers that exist for victims to report, a number of elements of a campus sexual assault policy can enhance the probability that a student will report. Having a separate policy related to sexual assault that

includes all of the identified behaviors that fall under this category is important because more than 40% of rape victims do not identify the behavior that was inflicted upon them as a crime.^{1,2} This statistic may be similar for victims of other crimes of sexual assault.

In addition to having a specific sexual assault policy, an outline of the reporting procedure is necessary.^{2,10} A reporting procedure should include a named contact person, such as a victim advocate, who is available 24 hours a day. This is important because the majority of rapes take place between the hours of 12 AM and 6 AM.¹ Also, as victims are unlikely to report sexual assault to the police and slightly more likely to report to a campus authority, it is recommended that there be an on-campus alternative to reporting to the police.¹⁰ Contact information that is provided in the body of the policy allows the victim to reach a campus authority without having to search out additional information in the aftermath of a sexual assault.

There are multiple barriers to reporting that sexual assault policies need to take into account in order to be effective and efficient. One such barrier is fear on the part of the victim that a perpetrator will retaliate if she goes to the authorities. In one study, more than 30% of victims cited that fear was the reason why they did not report the assault.² This fear is rational as the perpetrator is most often known to the victim and may have the opportunity to enact revenge; in 96% of sexual assaults, the offender is an acquaintance, classmate, significant other, friend, or other known relation to the victim.¹ Therefore, due to fear of retaliation and the likelihood that the victim and perpetrator know each other, affording and emphasizing victim confidentiality in a policy can overcome such a major barrier to reporting.¹⁰

Two more recommendations for a sexual assault policy that address reporting barriers are relevant for the accurate generation of crime statistics: third-party reporting options and anonymity.¹⁰ Third-party reporting allows witnesses or those known to a victim to report that a crime has been committed on campus. Anonymous reporting allows anyone, victim or other, to report a crime. This option further encourages the reporting of a sexual assault when the statement "all measures to ensure a victim's confidentiality" that exists in some policies fails to reassure a victim that her identity is safe. Again, these options allow for an accurate understanding of the scope of sexual assault on a college campus.

Building upon previous literature on the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses^{1,6} and the corresponding policy recommendations,¹⁰ the current study assessed sexual assault reporting procedures at colleges in the state of Ohio for the 2010–2011 academic year. The goal of this research is to highlight the performance of Ohio colleges in conforming to recommendations for reporting.

METHODS

Sample

A complete listing of Ohio 4-year colleges was obtained through the US Department of Education Institute of

Education Services for the year 2009–2010 (<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/Default.aspx>). This included 93 colleges, with an additional 12 regional campuses, for a total sample of 105 colleges.

Procedure

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The Ohio State University deemed that the study did not require IRB review. Two independent coders conducted coding on all universities using a 3-stage coding protocol. Initial Cohen’s alpha for interrater reliability was .4695. A third reviewer settled on the coding disagreements. The 3 stages of coding include (1) searching the term “sexual assault” using the college’s search engine; (2) searching the student handbook using terms “sexual assault,” “safety,” and/or “crime”; and (3) searching the term “safety” or “crime” using the college’s search engine. Although students may still only be familiar with the term “rape” in reference to sexual assault, the decision not to search for this term was deliberate. As mentioned previously, a great number of victims are unwilling or unaware that what was inflicted upon them was rape. Additionally, in the State of Ohio, “rape” is a specific legal term that addresses only 1 type of sexual assault. Policies that address sex offenses on a college campus were expected to cover more than the act of rape. Finally, in setting up policies on college campuses, research promoting the usage of sexual assault over rape has prompted a widespread preference for the more inclusive terminology.¹³

Measures

Publicly Available Sexual Assault Policy

If the campus has a specifically designated statement or policy with a heading of sexual assault (not simply sexual harassment) on their Web site, they were coded as 1 = present, 0 = absent. Sexual harassment was not included as part of the assessment because it is not a sexual offense listed in the Ohio Revised Code.

Sexual Assault Definitions

A list was compiled to include any terms related to sexual assault that were included in the policy. Using the Ohio Revised Code, this list could include rape, sexual battery, gross sexual imposition, sexual imposition, public indecency, and voyeurism sexual assault or sexual misconduct.

Reporting Procedure

Each campus was then scanned for mention of the procedures or options available for victims or witnesses to report a sexual assault. Examples of these phrases included “Students can make their report to . . .” and “If a sex offense occurs, a student should . . .”

On-Campus Alternative to Police

If an alternative to the police to whom victims could report their victimization was listed, this was coded as present = 1 and absent = 0. Examples of on-campus alternatives included

residential life employees, a dean of students, student health services, student counseling services, or a campus ministry official.

24 Hours/7 Days a Week Reporting Options

If it was mentioned in the reporting procedure that campus security, campus police, or one of the alternative reporting outlets was available 24 hours a day, this was coded as present = 1 and absent = 0.

Third-Party Reporting Options

If a procedure included third-party reporting options so that anyone other than a victim/victim could also report a sexual assault, this was coded as present = 1 and absent = 0.

Confidentiality

If the policy explicitly mentioned confidentiality or mentioned efforts to maintain a victim’s confidentiality through-out judicial procedures, this was coded as present = 1 and absent = 0. Potential confidential reporting options include college psychologists, campus ministers, and health service professionals who do not have a legal responsibility to report a sexual assault.

Anonymity

If a procedure included an anonymous reporting option or if there was an option, such as an incident report form, that could be mailed to a campus authority without mention of the victim’s name thus inferring anonymity, this was coded as present = 1 and absent = 0.

RESULTS

Study results are presented in 2 ways. First, in tabular format (Table 1), the results will reflect the proportion of schools that include reporting variables among the schools that had a sexual assault policy on the Web site. Results will then be described by the proportion of schools out of the entire sample that included a reporting variable. It should be noted that two-thirds of (66%) Ohio colleges, accounting for all regional campuses, had a publicly available sexual assault policy.

TABLE 1. Percentage of Schools With Reporting Variables Within an Online Sexual Assault Policy (N = 105)

Reporting variable	% Schools with a sexual assault policy
Sexual assault definitions	.04
Reporting procedure	100
On-campus alternative to police	91
24/7 reporting option	38
Third-party reporting option	20
Confidential reporting option	48
Anonymous reporting option	13

The total percentage of colleges that listed the 6 applicable sexual offenses was 0.03%. The offenses that were considered inapplicable because they did not apply to college-aged youth because the victims of these crimes must be under the age of 18 were unlawful sexual contact with a minor and importuning. Of all Ohio colleges, 60% had an on-campus alternative to whom a victim could report, and 13% of all colleges had a third-party option. A confidential reporting option was available in 31% of Ohio colleges. Only 1% of total colleges allowed for the anonymous reporting for sexual assault.

COMMENT

The present study offers an in-depth investigation of campus sexual assault reporting policies in Ohio. Sexual assault policies (or lack thereof) can have significant impacts for communities and victims because sexual assault is underreported^{1-3,6} and incomplete statistics may not effectively emphasize the need for resources. Overall, our findings suggest that colleges in Ohio are somewhat deficient in their accessibility of sexual assault policies on their Web sites. Specifically, even if schools have a policy, very few define sexual assault or have 24/7 or third-party reporting. Only half of schools with a sexual assault policy mention confidential reporting and the ability to submit a report anonymously is rare.

Due to legislative requirements,¹¹ colleges need to compile and publish campus crime statistics. An accurate profile of campus safety thus necessitates methods for which anyone in the campus community can report a crime. Recent research found that students are very likely to go to the Internet as their source of information on sexual assault.¹⁴ Therefore, including a comprehensive sexual assault policy that details reporting methods on a school Web site would aid schools in assisting victims and complying with federal legislation. The findings of the current study, however, suggest that many colleges are still not heeding the call to include a policy on the Web. Due to the confidential and anonymous nature of the Internet, a university Web site may serve as the most suitable outlet for victims attempting to find information.

Our results indicate that sexual assault definitions vary widely across different universities. Descriptive definitions make it easier for victims to define their own experience as a sexual assault. For example, within their policy, some universities listed the various forms of sexual assault with behavioral descriptions written under them. Others simply used the term "sexual misconduct" without any further clarification. Conclusions from research supports the use of more descriptive and inclusive definitions because many sexual assault victims do not report to police or campus authorities because they qualify their experiences as being a result of their own actions, rather than the criminal act of another.¹⁻³ When victims identify themselves as victims of a crime, they may be more likely to seek out support or report the incident.

With rape most often occurring between the hours of 12 AM and 6 AM,¹ 24-hour reporting options are necessary.

Currently, only about a quarter of Ohio colleges have this possibility. Making a 24-hour reporting option available to a victim during such vulnerable hours may increase the likelihood that a victim accesses medical treatment and support as soon as possible.

It is important for a victim's safety that sexual assault policies clearly state their limits of confidentiality and anonymity. Confidential reporting options may address the fear that many victims have of retaliation by their perpetrator,² thus alleviating another barrier many victims face. Additionally, the ability for an individual to anonymously report a sexual assault may be useful in cases when a victim had engaged in underage drinking at the time of the assault and fears repercussions.¹⁰ Thus, accurate statistics about the scope of sexual assault on a college campus can be maintained even when the victim has legitimate fears regarding the aftermath of making a report.

Even with the implementation of all the above recommendations, barriers will still exist for victims. Future research could address whether having the above-mentioned resources increases the amount of reporting and number of victims seeking support. Whether a victim decides to report to the police or to a campus authority, giving a victim support is paramount. Friends and other confidants are often the first or only person a victim confides in about their sexual victimization.^{2,3} Current research indicates that positive social support from peers can assist victims in their recovery from trauma.¹⁵ As such, if the campus community can be educated to dispel sexual assault myths and be informed about campus resources, there is a greater likelihood that these first points of contact will provide victims with support.

Limitations

This preliminary policy scan sought to interpret the current status of reporting procedures at colleges in the state of Ohio. Although all 4-year institutions were included in the study sample, these results may not be generalizable to all regions of the United States. Future research could examine whether these findings are common in other states, or if there are reporting differences by college characteristics, such as student population size.

Another limitation is that the present study cannot comment on a college's total efforts to recognize and respond to sexual assault. Future research could also expand beyond reporting procedures and examine prevention, investigation, and judicial efforts. Although reporting procedures are a necessary component of any response effort by a college to address this issue, it is possible that a campus has other components in place that address sexual assault that may be supportive of a victims healing.

Additionally, reporting procedures were only evaluated if they were contained within a sexual assault policy. If a campus had a designated policy for crime reporting in general, reporting procedures may have been listed. It is also possible that these institutions may have had a sexual assault policy that was not available online. Therefore, we cannot definitively state that those schools had no resources, simply

that they were unavailable on the Web site, meaning that the policy may be less accessible to students. Future research might also expand the terms used in their search to include “rape,” “sexual misconduct,” and “sexual violence.” This may further the field’s understanding of how universities choose to categorize these criminal acts on their campus and how this might influence help-seeking behavior.

However, the fact that most victims of sexual assault are unlikely to define it as a crime means that it is highly doubtful that they would seek out a crime policy for their information.^{1,2}

The interrater reliability for this study is moderate.¹⁶ Factors that may have contributed to this reliability assessment may have been due to the lack of a single complete listing of a campus policy written in clear and explicit language. For instance, multiple searches on a Web site were necessary and it was often the case that policies were not clearly specific to sexual assault, but general crime on campus. It was also possible that some policies were outlined for sexual harassment and sexual misconduct, without clearly differentiating between the two.

Conclusions

The results of this study contribute to existing knowledge regarding the reporting procedures of sexual assault on college campuses and can instruct universities nationwide on how to better serve sexual assault victims. To do so, college Web sites can direct all relevant sexual assault search terms to an online sexual assault policy. Second, the policy should not only mention all types of sexual assault that a victim may have experienced, but explicit descriptions of each act should be included. This will allow students to anonymously identify what they might have experienced as serious and worthy of attention by campus authorities. Finally, policies should have a specific section outlining the university’s protocol for reporting sexual assault. Detailed contact information of a non–security-related campus authority should be given, along with the acknowledgment that reports are taken 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Limits of confidentiality should be clearly explained.

Both Healthy People 2020¹⁷ and Healthy Campus 2020,¹⁸ frameworks for national and college health, respectively, emphasize focused attention on the promotion of safe and violence-free environments for college and university students. Given the prevalence of underreporting of sexual assault, it is essential that key college stakeholders, including college administrators, college mental health professionals, and campus security, become more familiar with sexual assault on their campus. A priority of the Violence Against Women Act is to support campuses in this endeavor through the Campus Grant Program, which “encourages institutions of higher education to adopt comprehensive, coordinated responses to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.”¹⁹ Our findings support the necessity for campus authorities to work together with local law enforcement and social services agencies to aid in the identification of

additional methods to support increases in reporting behaviors and to support victims.

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NOTE

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