Campus Sexual Assault and Campus Climate

The prevalence of sexual assault has not changed in over 30 years. Rape and other forms of sexual violence exact tolls on victim’s mental health, physical health, and academic achievement.

Sexual misconduct has a significant negative impact on learning and achievement and compromises students’ ability to complete college and contribute to society as expected. Sexual assault experiences before entering or during secondary education years threaten to hamper or derail student development and success beyond higher education—a reported 34 percent of college students who experience sexual assault drop out of college, and many of them experience mental and physical health effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, there are economic costs associated with sexual assault including dropped or failed courses, prolonging time to graduation and making the goal of completion illusive.

Congress must tackle the issue of sexual violence at institutions of higher education by making targeted improvements to the Clery Act, the Violence Against Women Act, and Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 to address the disclosure of crime statistics, campus safety, prevention initiatives, and discrimination on the basis of sex.

Campus Sexual Assault Federal Policy Recommendations

1. **Address campus sexual assault and campus climate in the Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization and ensure that there is an evidence base for policies adopted in the HEA.**
   a. Invest in better data collection on campus climate and support open access tools for measuring campus climate.
   b. Improve supportive measures for victims.
   c. Fund research and support for alternative resolutions, including restorative justice.
   d. Raise awareness of societal and cultural influences on sexual violence risk.

2. **Support, evaluate and expand evidence-based campus sexual assault prevention and education programs.**

34% of college students who experience sexual assault drop out of college

15–20% of women report experiencing rape or attempted rape during their college career

In 2019, APA passed a resolution on campus sexual assault that calls on national leaders to monitor and address campus sexual assault incidence, response and prevention efforts.
Psychological science tells us that effective education, prevention, and responses to sexual assault are critical in supporting student wellness and academic achievement.

In February of 2019, APA passed a resolution on campus sexual assault which serves as an extensive research resource on this critically important topic. The resolution affirms APA’s commitment to education the public, promote awareness and disseminate research on this important topic. It also calls on national leaders to monitor and address campus sexual assault incidence, response and prevention efforts, in the interests of protecting potential victims and caring for the mental health of those who have been victimized, particularly the underserved and understudied.

Highlights from psychological research on campus sexual assault

- Sexual assault is a significant barrier to academic achievement and creates a hostile learning environment.
- Campus sexual assault is linked to a range of negative psychological outcomes. Victims need to be believed, validated, and supported in order to enhance disclosure, adaptive coping, and control over their recovery.
- The developing literature points to the promise of preventing campus sexual assault by changing social norms.
- Mental health treatment offered to sexual assault survivors and perpetrators should be trauma-informed and evidence-based.
- Due to several factors the current process only captures a portion of sexual assault on campuses. There is a need for regular, standardized data collection on campus climate.
- Some victims fear making official reports for fear of not being believed or being blamed, fear of reprisals, cultural norms that inhibit interaction with law enforcement and legal authorities, fear of being cited for other forms of student misconduct or illegal behavioral such as underage drinking or drug usage. These and other barriers to disclosure and reporting are likely to suppress estimates of rape incidence and prevalence.
- There is a need to better understand the campus sexual assault experiences of diverse groups, especially those who are marginalized such as gender and sexual minorities, racial and ethnic minorities, and women with disabilities.
- Campus climate should be measured using reliable and valid measures that have been evaluated and published in peer reviewed literature.
- Professionals on campus, including psychologists, are in positions to effect change at multiple levels.