



AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
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# Campus Sexual Assault

## FACT SHEET FROM AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

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### What is Campus Sexual Assault (CSA)?

Sexual violence occurs when someone is forced into unwanted sexual activity without consent. Sexual violence is a significant health and human rights concern. It has extensive negative mental and physical health consequences (Campbell et al., 2009) and can also negatively impact academic performance (Jordan et al., 2014). Campus sexual assault (CSA) makes up the greatest proportion (43%) of total on-campus crimes in the United States (U.S.), resulting in approximately 8 forcible sex offenses per 10,000 students (NCES, 2022).

#### THE RED ZONE

The Red Zone is typically thought of as the beginning period of a new school year (i.e., mid-August to November), where there is a link between the increased frequency of social gatherings and rates of sexual assault (Kimble et al., 2008). Research has found that 50% of CSAs occur during the Red Zone, especially for students who are new to campus (Cranney, 2015; Kimble et al., 2008). Currently, there is an increased concern for CSA, as a great number of students are adjusting or re-acclimating to campus life following disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a crucial need for clear dissemination of campus-specific resources for students who experience sexual assault, either on campus or prior to arrival or return to campus post-pandemic.

#### COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CSA

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the mental health challenges of students who have faced CSA during the pandemic (Anderson, 2020). Despite most institutions of higher education transitioning to remote learning, students remained at risk of experiencing sexual violence regardless of the setting. At the height of the pandemic, global projections estimated that gender-based violence (GBV) would increase by 20% during periods of sheltering-in-place (Rieger et al., 2022). In addition, numerous media outlets have published reports indicating rising numbers of GBV incidents, hotline

calls, and homicides (Hladky, 2020). For example, the Connecticut Coalition against Domestic Violence saw a 52% increase in domestic violence hotline calls at the beginning of the pandemic (Hladky, 2020).

GBV has been exacerbated by increasing economic stress and decreasing social support brought about by the pandemic (Rieger et al., 2022). The following are several factors that have been purported to contribute to GBV:

- The Trump administration rescinded federal guidance from the Obama administration, replacing protections for victims under Title IX with new, restrictive regulations amidst the pandemic (Walker, 2020). This means that mental health professionals and students who have faced CSA may encounter more policy-related obstacles in preventing and responding to CSA (Bennett et al., 2021). Specifically, and most notably, the Trump administration redefined sexual harassment to a narrow range of actions that are “severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive,” thus reducing the number of cases universities can consider (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).
  - » In 2022, the Biden administration proposed new regulations which aim to revoke those changes to Title IX set in place by the Trump administration but those have not yet reached final approval as of April 2023.
- Stay-at-home orders and quarantine conditions increased social isolation and stress levels, affecting rates of violence, in part due to the requirement to quarantine day-after-day, which for some was with a violent partner and limited access to those who might provide care and assistance (Janse Van Rensburg & Smith, 2020).
- Economic constraints affected the ability of someone experiencing CSA to leave the same living quarters as the aggressor. For example, students’ loss of access to on-campus housing and retail and service sector jobs exacerbated financial instability (Most, 2020).

# Marginalized and Other Affected Populations

## **INTERSECTIONALITY**

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term, “intersectionality,” which means to encompass one’s unique lived experience given a person’s different identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, etc. Although understudied, students of more than one marginalized identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity) are more likely to experience CSA. For example, transgender People of Color are more likely to experience sexual assault than transgender White students (Staples & Fuller, 2021). However, gender nonconforming and Latino individuals are less likely to make a formal report (Cuevas et al., 2019; Menning & Hotlzman, 2014). This can also be seen with the intersecting identity of gender and ability status as women with a disability are more likely to experience college sexual assault than women without a disability (Campe, 2021). Although individual identities detailed below have an elevated risk of sexual assault, analyses of CSA should apply an intersectional theoretical framework to best understand experiences given multiple identity characteristics.

## **GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)**

Rates of sexual assault victimization are particularly high among female college students, where up to 25% of female college students reported being victims of CSA (Cantor et al., 2017). In addition, college women disproportionately experience CSA during the “Red Zone.” Specifically, college women in their first year have reportedly been at the highest risk for sexual assault compared to other college women after their first year, including drug-and-alcohol facilitated sexual assault as well as attempted or completed forcible rape (Krebs et al., 2007). The deleterious mental health consequences of sexual assault among college women have been documented. Zinzow and colleagues (2010) found that the odds of lifetime diagnoses of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression increased by two to four times based on having experienced rape. In addition, Carey and colleagues (2018) found that college women who experienced sexual assault during their first semester of college were associated with elevated rates of clinically significant symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Men also experience CSA, affecting 6.8% of undergraduate men and 2.5% of graduate student men (Cantor et al., 2020). Men enrolled in college are 78% more likely to experience CSA, when compared to other men of the same age not enrolled in college (Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

Both men and women on college campuses underreport experiences of CSA - it is estimated that 90% of assaults on campuses are not reported (Fisher et al., 2000). Moreover, there is a lack of a uniform measure to collect accurate, standardized

data across various demographic groups and when such measures are implemented, there is a lack of fidelity to reporting accurate numbers by schools (Yung, 2015). Additionally, barriers to reporting exist. Both men and women have reported such barriers, including shame, guilt, embarrassment, confidentiality concerns, and fear of not being believed (Sable et al., 2006). It was also found that males who experienced CSA reported a fear of being judged as gay and that females who experienced CSA were concerned about retaliation from their perpetrators (Sable et al., 2006).

CSA against transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming individuals is also gender-based violence and is included in the following section focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) students.

## **LGBTQ+**

LGBTQ+ college students experience an elevated risk of sexual assault compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Cantor et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016). The statistics are startling: Students who identify as sexual minority men are nine times as likely to have experienced sexual assaults as heterosexual male students, and students who identify as sexual minority women are twice as likely as heterosexual female students to have been sexually assaulted (Beaulieu et al., 2017). Gay and bisexual men reported similar rates of campus sexual assault as heterosexual women (Ford & Soto-Marquez, 2016). Transgender college students also face higher rates of sexual assault victimization than cisgender students (Beaulieu et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2017). In addition, exploratory research found that LGBTQ+ college students expressed doubt that LGBTQ+ survivors would receive the support and services they need within formal institutions, citing cisheterosexist barriers to accessing support (Hackman et al., 2022).

## **INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES**

Students with disabilities are more likely to be victims of sexual assault and may be particularly vulnerable due to a range of factors, including physical challenges, stereotypes about people with disabilities, and lack of opportunities for comprehensive sexual education. A study by the National Council on Disability (2018) showed that 31.6% of undergraduate females with disabilities reported non-consensual sexual contact involving physical force or incapacitation, compared to 18.4% of undergraduate females without a disability. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities and provides students with disabilities the right to reasonable accommodations. Yet, there remain barriers for students with disabilities to report sexual assault, as sexual violence has been employed as a means of displaying anti-disability prejudice. Students with disabilities

are six times less likely than their peers to report sexual assault (Krohn, 2014), often due to lack of accessibility to information on reporting as well as stigma surrounding disability and sexual assault (Parker, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, hate crimes based on disability increased by 35% from 2017 to 2019 (Smith, 2021), and the 2021 FBI Hate Crimes Report (2023), found that 1.4% of all hate crimes were based on disability.

## **RACE AND ETHNICITY**

Reported sexual assault experiences vary by race and ethnicity. The Association of American Universities 2019 Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct demonstrated higher rates of sexual assault reported by Hispanic students relative to non-Hispanic students (Cantor et al., 2020). Additionally, a separate study using cross-sectional survey data from the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey showed the highest rates of sexual assault for Black students, followed by those who reported “other” race/ethnicity, White, Hispanic or Latino/a, and Asian or Pacific Islander students (Coulter et al., 2017). Finally, variation in reported sexual assault experiences by race and ethnicity may be influenced by sociocultural values and experiences that shape the conceptualization, perception, and reporting of sexual assault (Cusano et al., 2021; Gomez et al., 2022; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003). More research is needed to understand the intersection of campus sexual assault, race, and other marginalized identities like gender, sexual orientation, and ability status (Krebs et al., 2007).

## **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

The intersection of international student and graduate student status creates unique and additional risks to CSA (Bonistall Postel, 2020). International students face unique adjustment issues, including difficulties with language, lack of social support, loneliness and homesickness, anxiety, and lack of confidence (Bonistall Postel, 2020). A recent study among 829 students, 13.5% of whom were international students, demonstrates that 5.5% of international students experienced sexual violence (Scholl et al., 2019). Compared to domestic peers, international students face an increased likelihood of being the target of sexual violence and experience more PTSD symptoms after campus sexual violence (Fethi et al., 2022), particularly as international students are significantly less likely to use counseling services (Hyun et al., 2007). International students are also less likely to be familiar with university policy, which serves as a barrier to reporting and seeking resources following sexual assault (Hutcheson & Lewington, 2017). Reporting may also be influenced by students’ adjustment to unfamiliar cultural and societal norms, including those in the context of what would be considered culturally “normal” behavior versus sexual harassment or assault (Forbes-Mewett et al., 2015). Future studies are needed to determine why perpetrators target

international students. Prevention and intervention efforts need to acknowledge diversity among international students and potential victims, who could be men, women, LGBTQ+ students, undergraduate, and graduate students.

## **UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS**

Students who are undocumented immigrants also face unique challenges when navigating and reporting CSA largely due to their immigration status. Data on this has not been collected specifically for CSA, but for interpersonal violence more generally, including sexual assault; those who are undocumented are less likely to seek formal support after experiencing violence than immigrants with permanent legal status (Zadnik et al., 2014). The immigration status of undocumented students represents a risk factor of CSA and also acts as a barrier to reporting CSA. Many may feel unsure about U.S. legal procedures or feel isolated from support systems if their family/friends are not in the U.S. While some resources exist for undocumented students (e.g., National Immigrant Women’s Advocacy Project), there is a lack of information about undocumented immigrants and CSA, and more research and support are needed.

## **FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS**

Barriers to higher education, including socioeconomic status (SES) and first-generation status, are associated with increased risk for CSA (Mellins et al., 2017; Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). Students who have difficulty paying for basic expenses have been shown to experience higher rates of CSA (Mellins et al., 2017). More research is needed to specifically examine the experiences and reporting of CSA in these groups. First-generation and low-income students may require increased access and support when navigating campus-specific policies, including filing a report and accessing mental health resources and support on campus.

## **GRADUATE STUDENTS**

Graduate students hold a privileged position in comparison to many other populations, but they are still marginalized. Graduate students often hold a unique position on campus in that they are officially enrolled as students but are often also employees of the university (e.g., research assistant, teaching assistant). Graduate students have expressed their limited knowledge of how to access sexual violence/sexual harassment resources on campuses and that trainings offered to them tend to focus on their duties as employees rather than on how to prevent or seek support for CSA for themselves (Bloom et al., 2021a). Graduate students have also noted that their differential power relationship with faculty, along with distrust of university procedures, are influential factors in deciding not to report CSA (Bloom et al., 2021b). These barriers for graduate students are important to address: 5.2% reported experiencing sexual violence since attending

their university, and 13% of graduate students reported a peer disclosing an experience of CSA to them (McMahon et al., 2021). Further, graduate students (61.7% of females and 38.3% of males) also experience sexual harassment on

campus from other students, faculty, and staff, which has been associated with later sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking (Rosenthal et al., 2016).

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