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Campus sexual assault

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Recommended Citation
Swartout, Kevin M. and Flack, William F. Jr., "Campus sexual assault" (2019). *Faculty Contributions to Books*. 178.
https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_books/178

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The Routledge International Handbook of Violence Studies

Edited by
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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: DeKeseredy, Walter S., 1959- editor. | Rennison, Callie Marie, editor. | Hall-Sanchez, Amanda K., editor.
Title: The Routledge international handbook of violence studies / edited by Walter S. DeKeseredy, Callie Marie Rennison and Amanda K. Hall-Sanchez.
Other titles: International handbook of violence studies
Description: 1 Edition. | New York : Routledge, 2019. |
Series: Routledge international handbooks | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018029320| ISBN 9781138283442 (hardback) |
ISBN 9781315270265 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Violence. | Violent crimes. | Victims of violent crimes. |
Crime and race. | Sex crimes. | Violence--Psychological aspects.
Classification: LCC HM1116 .R68 2019 | DDC 303.6--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018029320

ISBN: 978-1-138-28344-2 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-27026-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

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Campus sexual assault

Kevin M. Swartout and William F. Flack Jr.

Introduction[1]

Campus sexual assault (CSA) – a crime, a form of academic behavioral misconduct, and a source of psychological trauma – affects people of all genders, but as most CSA is directed against women[2] (Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014) it can be seen as one part of the global problem of violence against women (VAW; World Health Organization (WHO), 2013). Most CSA is perpetrated by men, often men who are known to their victims before the assault (WHO, 2013). More research and intervention have been expended on CSA in the last 20 years than during the previous 50, although the latter period included a handful of critically important studies (e.g., DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). The more recent period has seen significant advances in our research methods and in our understanding of prevalence rates, risk factors, and intervention strategies (see recent reviews by Hipp & Cook, 2018, and by Rennison, Kaukinen, & Meade, 2017). In the last ten years, indefatigable CSA student survivor activists have brought national public and political attention to the issue (Clark & Pino, 2016; Heldman & Brown, 2014), leading to new interpretations and consequences of Title IX civil rights legislation (Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, 2011), a White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014), and a subsequent, significant increase in campus climate surveys[3] of students at U.S. colleges and universities (for a recent review of climate surveys, see Wood, Sulley, Kammer-Kerwick, Follingstad, & Busch-Armendariz, 2017). Although attention to CSA remains high at the time of this writing, the impact of the conservative turn in U.S. national politics and consequent proposed changes in Title IX interpretation and advice (Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, 2017) remains unknown. Herman (1992/2015) reminds us that the history of widespread, psychologically traumatizing experiences such as CSA has shifted over time from collective forgetting/denial to remembering/acknowledgment, the latter often coinciding with political activism.

In the rest of this chapter, we summarize the peer-reviewed research literature on victimization and perpetration of CSA. The types of CSA addressed here are limited to

those included in the most recently revised version of the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss et al., 2007), the most widely used measure in the field (Kolivas & Gross, 2007): nonconsensual, noninvasive physical contact (fondling/groping), attempted anal, oral, and vaginal rape, and rape.[4] We also summarize research on risk factors including gender and other demographics, alcohol and other drugs, and hooking up, as well as prevention efforts, including bystander-intervention programs. We end by arguing that the current focus on identification and adjudication of individual victims and perpetrators, although vitally important, insufficiently contextualizes and largely disregards the roles of institutional factors that may maintain the phenomenon of CSA beyond the four to five years that individual cohorts of U.S. students spend on campus. As the vast majority of research has been devoted to CSA victimization, we begin there.

Victimization

Prevalence

Research on CSA in the US began with the pioneering work of sociologists Kanin and Kirkpatrick in the 1950s. Three decades passed before Koss and colleagues published their groundbreaking U.S. national study (Koss et al., 1987). These researchers found that one in four college women reported one or more types of sexual assault victimization from the age of 14. These findings were replicated in a Canadian national study conducted by DeKeseredy and Kelly (1993). Results of subsequent U.S. national studies of CSA (summarized by Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2010; and see Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007) are largely consistent with the earlier research, albeit with somewhat lower prevalence rates (one in five college women) because of more limited reference periods[5] and other differences in research methods and procedures. Recent results from campus climate surveys, many of which have been made available online, are also largely consistent with the national results from the empirical literature.

Research on college women's CSA victimization converges on the finding that approximately one in five will experience one or more such incidents during their four to five years in college. This statistic, although generally accepted among researchers, has been called into question within public discourse, usually by politicians, lawyers, or journalists with little expertise in relevant research. A recent scholarly analysis of both the research base for the one-in-five statistic and the critiques and controversy surrounding it concluded that the statistic is accurate, on average, taking into account evidence that women's victimization risk varies somewhat across institutions and victim demographics (Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, & Jozkowski, 2017; see also Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2018).

Heterogeneity among women who experience CSA

Recent research has moved beyond examining overall prevalence rates to explore subgroups of college women who experience CSA. As pointed out by Macy (2008), much of what we currently know about CSA revictimization derives from studies that assume a single, cohesive population with consistent patterns of CSA prevalence and risk factors. Person-centered approaches to data analysis, which are well suited to explore underlying subgroups within a population (Bogat, Levendosky, & von Eye, 2005), have only been applied to research on CSA within the past decade.

Macy and colleagues conducted a series of studies that uncovered four subgroups of victims based on the women's prior victimization, alcohol use, pre-assault perceptions of the perpetrator, and risk-avoidant behaviors (Macy, Nurius, & Norris, 2007a). They then used multivariate analyses to compare the subgroups on a series of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. Their findings suggest that each subgroup coped with CSA differently, with some results suggesting certain subgroups might be at increased risk for revictimization (Macy, Nurius, & Norris, 2007b).

Subsequent analysis of longitudinal data collected from college women at five time points, from pre-college through their fourth college year, suggests additional heterogeneity among college women's CSA victimization (Swartout, Swartout, & White, 2011). These analyses yielded evidence for trajectories representing low, high, increasing, and decreasing victimization rates across the pre-college and college years. Importantly, the dynamic increasing and decreasing victimization patterns coincided with college matriculation, potentially suggesting that changes in social context played a role in the shifting victimization patterns.

Risk factors

Student gender and sexual orientation are likely the strongest and most robust predictors of CSA victimization. Female and gender-nonconforming students are at far greater risk than male students based on findings from recent campus climate surveys (e.g., Penn State Student Affairs, 2018). LGBTQIA students are also at significantly greater risk compared with heterosexual students (Hequembourg, Livingston, & Parks, 2013; Krahé, Schütze, Fritsche, & Waizenhöfer, 2000). Most research on risk factors for CSA victimization has focused exclusively on female students, which we review in the remainder of this section.

Negative childhood experiences – such as childhood sexual abuse, emotional abuse, parental physical punishment, and witnessing domestic violence – are also robust predictors of CSA (see Muehlenhard, Higby, Lee, Bryan, & Dodrill, 1998; Zurbriggen, Gobin, & Freyd, 2010). Koss and Dinero (1989) found that childhood sexual abuse was one of the best predictors of adult sexual victimization. This relation is most often interpreted as the result of traumatic sexualization: the early coercive sexual experiences that shape a person's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about sex and sexuality (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985).

Alcohol consumption is the most robust risk factor demonstrated by empirical research to date. In the social intimacy culture during college, the phenomenon of hooking up is strongly related to alcohol consumption. Hooking up, usually defined as a physically intimate encounter that ranges from kissing to sexual intercourse and that usually does not lead to an ongoing relationship, has only recently been the subject of research by social scientists (see the review by Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). Extant findings indicate that most students engage in hooking up at some point during their time at college. Given that hooking up is a frequent context for intimate behavior among college students, and given its association with alcohol consumption, it is not surprising that hooking up is a frequent context for CSA. For example, Flack and colleagues have demonstrated that hooking up is not only statistically correlated with CSA (Flack et al., 2007), but that it is frequently reported as the context for CSA; in one recent study (Flack et al., 2016), more than 77% of participants indicated hookups as the context for their CSA victimization. Subsequent research has demonstrated similar relationships among CSA, alcohol consumption, and hooking up (Mellins et al., 2017).

Dramatic shifts in victimization risk detailed earlier may be related to changes in women's drinking patterns and drinking-related social contexts at the beginning of college.

To be clear, women's drinking does not cause their sexual victimization; it increases their likelihood of being in risky environments (Graham, Bernards, Abbey, Dumas, & Wells, 2014; Testa & Livingston, 2009). Owing to peer group homogeneity, women who engage in high-risk drinking tend to associate with men who do the same. We will discuss the strong link between alcohol use and sexual aggression among men later in this chapter. Taken together, this pattern of associations may ultimately bring women who drink heavily into contact with sexually aggressive men at a disproportionally high rate (Testa, 2002).

Other CSA risk factors that have been demonstrated in survey research include sorority membership (e.g., Minow & Einolf, 2009) and time of the academic year (e.g., Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). At present, we do not have a comprehensive, empirical rendering of all risk factors for CSA victimization. We turn next to CSA perpetration, a factor that has recently been the subject of increased attention from researchers.

Perpetration

Koss et al. (1987) were the first to conduct a U.S. national study on CSA perpetration among college men, concluding that approximately 25% perpetrated some form of CSA. More recent research (e.g., Swartout, 2013) supports this finding. As with victimization rates, there are dramatic shifts in men's CSA perpetration patterns during the first year of college. Swartout and colleagues (Swartout, Koss, Thompson, White, & Abbey, 2015) analyzed the two largest, longitudinal data sets of college men's rape perpetration available at the time, which yielded three cohesive trajectories: men who had a low or time-limited, decreasing, or increasing likelihood of perpetrating rape across their adolescent and college years. Importantly, these results suggest that the men most likely to perpetrate rape before college matriculation were not those who were most likely to perpetuate rape while in college. A more nuanced understanding emerges when a broader operationalization of CSA is considered, such as the one used throughout this chapter. This yields four cohesive trajectories of college men's sexual violence perpetration: low, moderate/high, increasing, and decreasing (Swartout, Swartout, Brennan, & White, 2015; Thompson, Swartout, & Koss, 2013), which further suggest context-specific risk and protective factors for CSA perpetration.

Risk factors

We unfortunately cannot cover the entire landscape of risk factors for CSA perpetration (see Tharp et al., 2013 for a comprehensive review), but we will highlight some of the strongest and most robust risk factors. Men's CSA perpetration is consistently and strongly linked with their high-risk alcohol use (Parkhill, Abbey, & Jacques-Tiura, 2009) and the extent to which their peers support CSA (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997; Swartout, 2013). There is an emerging literature that jointly examines high-risk drinking and peer norms for sexual aggression as predictors of sexual violence (Thompson et al., 2013). Malamuth and colleagues' confluence model, the dominant framework for understanding CSA etiology, hypothesizes two pathways – promiscuous sex and hostile masculinity – that lead to sexually coercive behavior. The promiscuous sex and hostile masculinity pathways accounted for a combined 26% of the variance associated with CSA when this model was initially fit to data collected from a nationwide sample of college men (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991).

CSA prevention and intervention

Across studies of college students' violence and victimization, many of the students who will perpetrate or experience CSA before or during college tend to either decrease or increase in risk soon after college matriculation. These shifts suggest that one or more elements involved with the transition to college affect students' risk for violence or victimization. These findings underscore the importance of community and college-level interventions for physical and sexual violence. Currently, most sexual violence prevention and intervention strategies focus on the individual (DeGue et al., 2012). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014) and White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) have identified bystander education programs – which aim to increase prosocial bystander behavior and bystander effectiveness – as potentially effective in reducing CSA. Results of a meta-analysis of studies that have assessed the effectiveness of in-person bystander education for CSA prevention suggests the programs are generally effective at increasing bystander efficacy, intent to help others, and bystander behavior, as well as reducing rape myth acceptance and rape proclivity (Katz & Moore, 2013); however, there was no evidence that the programs reduced sexual assault perpetration.

Recent evidence from a multi-campus randomized control trial suggests that Green Dot – one of the most widely implemented bystander education programs on college campuses to date – lowers sexual violence victimization and perpetration rates (Coker et al., 2015). Not surprisingly, Green Dot's effectiveness is ostensibly due to increases in prosocial bystander behaviors and reductions in rape myth acceptance on college campuses that receive the intervention (Coker et al., 2015).

Bringing in the Bystander is another popular bystander educational prevention program that has been implemented across numerous college campuses. Banyard, Moynihan, and Plante (2007) evaluated this program by comparing the knowledge, attitudes, and efficacy related to bystander intervention of students who received one session, three sessions, or no training at all. Students in the one- and three-session treatments significantly increased in all three domains, whereas students who did not receive the intervention evidenced no significant changes.

RealConsent is currently the only empirically supported, web-based CSA prevention program. This product aims to reduce sexual violence both directly, with educational modules on consent and rape myths, and indirectly, with bystander education. Salazar, Vivolo-Kantor, Hardin, and Berkowitz (2014) conducted a randomized control trial of college men recruited online for this web-based intervention. Participants were randomized into RealConsent and control groups. Results suggest that college men who received the RealConsent training perpetrated significantly less sexual violence and engaged in significantly more prosocial bystander behavior than men in the control group at the six-month post-treatment assessment.

Although these findings generally suggest that bystander education programming is an effective way to reduce CSA, such programs remain individual-level interventions. DeGue and colleagues (2012) suggest that interventions to alter individuals' behavior may not fully succeed unless campuses also effectively address the contexts that promote CSA. Unfortunately, true community-level CSA intervention programs are rare, and none to date have rigorous empirical support. Beyond the scope of college campuses, the CDC (2014) and White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) have identified only two evidence-based, community-level primary sexual violence prevention strategies. First, the funding associated with the Violence Against Women Act (1994) was used, in part, to improve survivor assistance programs, law enforcement efforts, and state and local

capacity. This legislation and subsequent U.S. federal funding were linked to annual reductions in rapes and aggravated assaults reported to police from 1997 to 2002 (DeGue et al., 2014). Second, a randomized control trial of the Shifting Boundaries program across 123 U.S. middle schools suggests its school-level intervention component is effective in reducing sexual violence (Taylor, Mumford, & Stein, 2015). The building-specific intervention includes temporary school geography-based restraining orders, poster campaigning to increase awareness of dating violence, and "hotspot" mapping to direct shifts in monitoring by school security staff.

Institutional factors

Among many institutional factors involved, the process of adjudicating cases of CSA is central and provides an example of feedback loops in the social ecology of campus culture. Campus adjudication, supported by Title IX, is vitally important as a means of obtaining justice for victims. Critics have decried this process, claiming that campus personnel are inadequately trained to carry out what, the critics say, should be a matter of legal jurisprudence. This criticism pays inadequate attention to two factors. First is the small statistical chance that VAW cases are accepted by local district attorneys and prosecuted, and the even smaller chance that convictions result from such prosecutions (UK Center for Research on Violence Against Women, 2011). Campus procedures give victims a much-needed alternative to a legal system that rarely meets the victims' needs. Second is the responsibility of campus authorities to deal with various forms of misconduct among their students, faculty, and staff. Within the campus system, it is also possible to take different approaches to adjudication, including especially those that prioritize victim voice (Koss, White, & Lopez, 2017). Thus, campus adjudication is an important aspect of CSA because its handling may significantly impact not only perpetrator deterrence, but also the likelihood that victims will obtain justice.

Another macro-level factor in CSA is institutional betrayal (Freyd & Birrell, 2013), which consists of the negating responses from groups or organizations to their members who are victimized. These responses of denial of victims' realities are experienced by victims as an especially acute form of disbelief and rejection because they come from social groups that victims often identify with and consider important parts of their self-concept. One form of institutional betrayal that is a recent focus of concern is the institutional mandate that staff report victim disclosures to campus authorities. Better thought of as compelled disclosure (Holland, Cortina, & Freyd, 2018), this requirement of faculty and many staff to report disclosing students to Title IX coordinators reveals the extent to which some campus policies are still inadequately informed by research on psychological trauma. Students who summon up the courage to disclose their sexual assault to a trusted staff member should at the same time maintain the authority to decide whether their disclosure goes beyond that interaction.

A third institutional factor is institution type. National and international research across institutions is vitally important for providing an overall index of the magnitude of CSA. However, institutions of higher education (IHEs) vary quite a bit within and across countries. Within the US, we have public and private IHEs that vary in campus size and geography, numbers of students, settings (rural, urban), and type (community colleges, undergraduate colleges, and R1 institutions). Recent evidence indicates that there may be some differences among IHEs in rates of CSA. Such differences, if they turn out to be reliable, underscore the importance of all IHEs gathering and disseminating local CSA data, and using them to inform educational prevention and adjudication efforts.

Brief outline of an ecological-intersectional approach to CSA research

CSA is clearly a complex, multilayered problem that goes well beyond the simplistic but commonly assumed minimization that inebriated young adults lacking sufficient oversight will occasionally experience regrettable sexual encounters. The complexity of this problem is reflected to some extent in the range of phenomena contained in campus climate surveys, but even these are limited to now standard means of measuring different kinds of sexual and gender-based violence, demographics, and a limited set of risk factors and consequences. We believe that what is now needed is a more useful set of conceptual tools that can inform choices of methods and help researchers to develop a more comprehensive account of how CSA is produced and, ultimately, how it might be eliminated. Ecological frameworks for understanding VAW (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Heise, 1998) have been available for some time and are often used to contextualize results of research on CSA. Consistent with this approach but adding substantial conceptual tools to it is work on intersectionality (e.g., Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intersectional approaches pay attention to many of the factors commonly considered and measured as demographics in CSA research to date. But, used as an analytical tool, intersectionality requires not only that we examine those standard demographics in more complex ways (e.g., understanding gender complexity rather than reducing it to the usual binary distinction), but that we also focus intensively on the interactions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, ability, age, culture, religion, and nationality. Such complexity is unlikely to be understood in a reductive approach dependent solely on quantitative analysis of statistical interactions, important though the latter is. We will need to employ a mixed-methods approach that privileges qualitative information-gathering and analysis (e.g., Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006) at least as much as we currently promote quantification, especially when we consider how the intersectionalities relevant to CSA converge within and across the individual/personal, micro, exo, and macro levels of the ecological model. Finally, any comprehensive model will also have to account for the range of and interactions among different types of sexual assault.

We have made substantial progress in understanding CSA and, more broadly, VAW, in a relatively short period of time. Many U.S. colleges and universities have conducted well-designed campus climate surveys, and many of those institutions have reported their results publicly online. Educational intervention programs are being employed and assessed in many schools. At the societal level, powerful perpetrators once thought beyond reach are being taken to task openly and, as in the case of Bill Cosby's recent conviction for sexual assault, legally in a way that has rarely happened before. At the same time, at the time of writing, in the US we have a president who was elected and remains popular despite his videotaped acknowledgment of having sexually assaulted women. The work we have yet to do on VAW, including CSA, must take into account the ways in which power – from the level of the college student intimacy culture to that of national politics – is wielded to produce situations in which mostly male perpetrators continue to assault women and others with impunity.

Notes

1 The authors thank Deirdre M. O'Connor for last-minute editorial assistance.
2 Men are also sexually victimized, usually by other men, albeit at much lower rates and usually in ways that are physically non-invasive (e.g., Banyard et al., 2007).
3 "Campus climate" surveys are something of a euphemism for surveys on various forms of gender-based violence, their risk factors, and academic and psychological consequences.

4 Thus, we do not cover harassment, stalking, dating violence, and intimate-partner violence.
5 The period of time during which assaults occur.

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