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THE BLOG 12/01/2015 11:52 am ET | Updated Dec 01, 2016

Campus Sexual Assaults Are Economically Traumatic for Victims

By Bruce Kellison and Noël Bridget Busch-Armendariz



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Much of the attention paid to campus sexual assault centers on students' trauma and victimization. Rightly so. Students often suffer in silence because of the stigma that surrounds the crime and confusing web of reporting structures on campuses. Further, the emotional and psychological impact of being a crime victim may last for years.

But like other crime victims, students also bear enormous economic costs that affect their college careers and often their lifetime earning potential. Yet we know almost nothing about the scope of these costs.

A campus sexual assault study commissioned by The Association of American Universities (AAU) found that among currently enrolled students, 23 percent of undergraduate women and 5 percent of undergraduate men at the nation's most prestigious universities reported being victims of nonconsensual sexual contact.

AAU's results are significant for higher education but they don't go far enough. It's important that future campus sexual assault studies provide college administrators with real data about the economic costs their students face after an assault. This will help campus leaders to create effective policies to help victims recover from both the physiological and economic trauma.

Campus sexual assaults may lead to significant financial costs and lost earning potential of promising students whose victimization can delay or derail their career goals or permanently postpone their college careers, if they end up dropping out. Either outcome could negatively affect their financial aid or tuition reimbursement — not to mention their post-college salaries.

Trauma and victimization may make the post-assault period very difficult for student victims, often precisely when they are facing critical short- and long-term decisions about their futures. In the short term, victims often miss classes and their grades may slide, causing them to withdraw from or fail classes. This, in turn, may lead to changing their major field of study. Some victims may also have trouble maintaining student employment, leading to a loss of income.

Furthermore, many students may have to figure out how to pay assault-related medical bills not covered by private insurance, or how to navigate the victim compensation system. The worst long-term economic impact is when victimization hinders the ability to graduate with a degree.

This consequence of sexual assault puts at risk the high-wage premium that college graduates expect to earn with their degrees (on average, today's college graduates make 62 percent more than a high school graduate, according to government data).

For now, most of the information about the costs borne by victims is anecdotal. College administrators must begin collecting empirical data on the economic impact on sexual assaults to understand the full extent of the problem on their campuses. Campuses should include information on the economic cost of sexual assault during new student orientation, as

part of alcohol and sexual assault awareness programs.

Our research team is currently conducting an economic impact analysis of sexual assault for 13 campuses in The University of Texas System. We intend to examine the lost earning potential of victims who changed majors; the amount they may have lost in tuition; and the number of days or sessions required for victims' medical or mental health care.

We will also compare the economic impact of sexual assault (by days off work/school and cost of tutoring and unreimbursed medical care) against the economic impact of other traumatic events such as a death in the family, debilitating illness, or major accident while they were students.

Valuable economic data will be a catalyst for positive outcomes.

Dean of students offices, armed with economic data, can expand their academic advising and incorporate financial guidance services to help keep victims on their desired career paths. Title IX officers can play the role of champions to help and encourage victims make sound financial and academic decisions during a time of extreme stress and vulnerability.

Right now, student leaders, campus administrators and Congress are working hard on programs and new legislation to lower the rates of campus sexual assault, which in essence will prevent future victims from experiencing both the psychological and economic impacts of being assaulted.

Collecting cost data surrounding sexual assault is a vital step in uncovering the crime's scope on our nation's higher education campuses. A more complete understanding of the economic impact of campus sexual assault can help victims recover and remain the productive, ambitious students they came to college to be.

Need help? In the U.S., call 1-800-656-HOPE for the National Sexual Assault Hotline.

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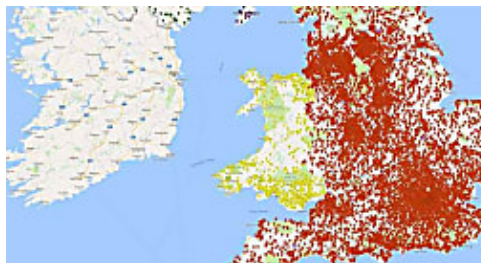
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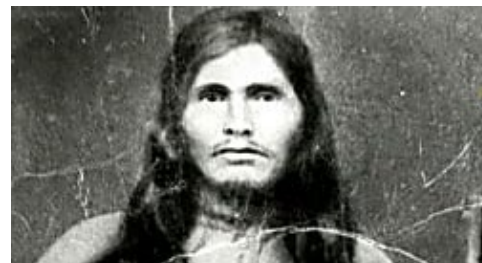
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