Assessing Sexual Assault and Harassment at Montclair State University: Research Abstracts

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ASSESSING SEXUAL ASSAULT AND HARASSMENT AT MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY: RESEARCH ABSTRACTS
IRB-FY15-16-245

Timeline
• Survey development and institutional navigation: 2014-2016
• Launch and analysis: 2016-2019
• Paused 2020-2022 due to COVID-19
• Re-launch March 2022

Investigators
• Amanda Birnbaum, Eva Goldfarb (Pl; goldfarbe@montclair.edu), Lisa Lieberman, Stephanie Silvera
• Department of Public Health
Presentations

2015


2017

Winner: Highest scoring abstract, APHA Women’s Caucus

2018

2019


Publications

Manuscripts in Development
Depression as a correlate of college students' perceptions and experiences of campus climate related to sexual violence.

College students' perceptions of rape myths differ by sexual orientation.
Abstract

A Sexual Assault Campus Climate Survey: Challenges in Development and Implementation

Lisa Lieberman, PhD, CHES, Eva Goldfarb, PhD, MA, Amanda S. Birnbaum, PhD, MPH, Stephanie Silvera, PhD, CPH, Kim O'Halloran, PhD, Megan Kearney, BA
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APHA’s 2015 Annual Meeting and Expo (Oct.31 - Nov. 2)

In January 2014, the White House established a Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, with a mandate to provide colleges/universities with tools to increase understanding of the true depth of the sexual assault problem on campuses and increase opportunity for victims to report crimes. The White House is exploring legislative/administrative options to require colleges to conduct evidence-based surveys beginning in 2016.

With a commitment and responsiveness to national and local sexual assault prevention movements, one major Northeastern public university created a campus-wide survey to be pilot-tested in spring 2015. This project represents a unique collaboration of senior level administrators, residence life staff, public health faculty, an IRB member, and students. The university’s national reputation of expansive resources for LGBTQ students, and strong mission focused on social justice, provided the context for a survey addressing a range of issues beyond prevalence of sexual assault.

Researching high-risk topics on a wide scale presented unique design and implementation challenges: sampling across campus, response rates, and appropriate incentives; multi-phase data collection; choosing appropriate language (e.g. girls, females, women); defining assault, rape, consent, harassment; balancing invasiveness and ability to accurately measure experiences and perspectives; and differentiating beliefs about campus responsiveness to assault vs. prevention.

Presentation will focus on one campus’s success in developing an instrument assessing a range of issues in reaching the White House’s goal of reducing sexual assault and harassment on college campuses. Pilot test data, to be collected Spring 2015, will be presented in the context of these design issues.

Discuss the challenges of addressing topics of sexual assault and harassment in surveys; Describe the importance of choice of language in describing potential victims of sexual assault and harassment; Differentiate between campus responsiveness to assault and campus prevention efforts
Abstract

**Conducting a Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault in the Context of Human Subjects Protections: A successful campus effort**

**Stephanie Silvera, PhD, CPH**, Amanda S. Birnbaum, PhD, MPH, Eva Goldfarb, PhD, MA, Lisa Lieberman, PhD, CHES, Megan Kearney, BA, and Kim O’Halloran, PhD, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ

**APHA’s 2015 Annual Meeting and Expo (Oct.31 - Nov. 2)**

In January 2014, the White House established a Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. One of its mandates is to provide colleges/universities with tools to increase understanding of the true depth of sexual assault problems on campuses and increase opportunities for victims to report crimes. The White House is exploring legislative/administrative options to require colleges to conduct evidence-based surveys beginning in 2016.

With commitment and responsiveness to national and local sexual assault prevention movements, one major Northeastern public university created a campus-wide survey to be pilot-tested in spring 2015. Though critically important, however, comprehensive research on rape and sexual assault faces important hurdles in obtaining IRB approval.

The presentation will focus on one campus’s success in gaining IRB approval for a campus-wide online survey. The unique collaboration of senior-level administrators, residence-life staff, public health faculty, an IRB member, and students, was critical in the effort to successfully mitigate several potential pitfalls. Efforts included thoughtful survey design, which sought to balance invasiveness with the need to accurately measure experiences and perspectives. IRB concerns regarding emotional distress to participants was addressed by identifying the regulatory and ethical mandates to conduct this research and an emphasis on the perpetuation of negative impacts resulting from underreporting of rape and sexual assault on campus without such research. Further, data on participants’ assessments of the risks associated with participation were collected and will provide empirical data to inform IRB members and scholars about the risks and benefits of conducting such research in the future.

Ethics, professional and legal requirements; public health or related research
Abstract

Meeting ethical challenges in the development and implementation of a sexual assault campus climate survey

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APHA’s 2017 Annual Meeting and Expo (Nov. 4 - Nov. 8)

In 2014, President Obama’s Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, and the Office on Violence Against Women, established campus climate surveys as best practice to assess the nature and extent of sexual assault on campuses and campus attitudes regarding sexual assault. Faculty and administrators at a major Northeastern public university met in spring 2014 to discuss the need to create and launch a campus-wide survey, with the goal of Spring 2015 pilot-testing.

The research team, including representatives of college administration, public health faculty, IRB, and graduate students, sought to work with university administration to address both ethical and practical concerns about development and administration of the survey. Concerns regarding researching this high-risk topic were raised at the administrative level, notably a major concern that using a voluntary sample would lead to overestimated campus assault prevalence rates.

Recognizing these challenges, the team considered various approaches to response rates: appropriate incentives; survey language; defining assault, rape, consent, harassment; balancing invasiveness with ability to accurately measure experiences and perspectives; and differentiating beliefs about campus responsiveness to assault, from prevention of assault.

Balancing the university’s desire to prevent sexual violence and harassment, its strong social justice mission, and its desire to assure the survey would be viewed by stakeholders as valid and reliable raised ethical and practical concerns for the researchers, and created significant delays. The survey was not approved until fall 2016. Pilot test data, collected in January 2017, will be presented in the context of these design and ethical issues.
Abstract

Campus climate survey on sexual assault and harassment: A pilot study*

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APHA’s 2017 Annual Meeting and Expo (Nov. 4 - Nov. 8)

Background: In January 2014, the White House established a Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault with a mandate providing universities with tools to increase understanding of the campus sexual assault problem and increase opportunities for victims to report crimes.

Purpose: We pilot tested a campus-wide online student survey to assess internal validity, response rates, and participants’ assessment of the risks associated with participation.

Methods: The pilot sample included undergraduate students who graduated in August or December 2016, chosen because they were still connected to the university, but would not be eligible for survey again during full survey administration in March 2017. Potential participants (n=195) were invited via email to complete an extensive survey.

Results: Nearly three-quarters (141) opened the survey link, although only 19 responded, and 10 completed the survey. All participants reported that they were mostly/completely honest with their responses and the majority responded that questions were either neutral or less distressing than other questions faced in everyday life and that asking about sexual assault on campus is “definitely important.” Most re-confirmed consent to have their data included. Notably, experience of sexual assault and harassment did not appear to be the determining factor in assessments of stress, importance, or willingness to allow use of data.

Conclusions: Pilot data indicated that while the survey content was acceptable to these respondents, and they were comfortable providing honest responses, strategies to increase participation will be critical when fully launched. Both pilot and full study data will be presented.

*Highest Scoring Abstract, APHA Women’s Caucus, 2017
How safe do students feel on campus? Differences in perceptions of campus sexual assault climate by race

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APHA’s 2018 Annual Meeting & Expo (Nov. 10 - Nov. 14)

Background/Purpose Former President Obama mandated that universities study the climate of sexual assault on campuses and increase opportunities for victims to report crimes. We assessed sexual assault climate through a campus-wide survey in March 2017. Methods All matriculated undergraduates over 18 were invited to participate in an online survey seeking students’ perceptions of the campus sexual assault climate. Self-identified Black, White, Latinx, and Asian/Pacific Islander participants were eligible for the analysis presented here (n=1009). Results The majority of respondents felt the university was working to create a sexually safe environment. Overall, 61% felt the university is taking steps to prevent unwanted sexual experiences from happening, while 18% agreed that “The university is creating an environment in which unwanted sexual experiences seemed common or normal,” and 13% with “The university is creating an environment in which unwanted sexual experiences are more likely to occur.” Students of color, however, were more likely than their White peers to feel the university is creating an environment in which unwanted sexual experiences seem common or normal (25% vs 16%, p<.001) and creating an environment in which such instances were more likely to occur (18% vs 11%, p<.001).

Conclusion: Data from the first annual survey of campus sexual assault climate suggest that while students generally perceive the university is working to create a positive and safe climate, these perceptions vary by race. Further investigation is necessary to better understand the needs and concerns of students of color on campus with respect to campus safety.
Abstract

Depression as a correlate of college students’ perceptions and experiences of campus climate regarding sexual harassment and assault

Amanda S. Birnbaum, PhD, MPH\(^1\), Stephanie Silvera, PhD, CPH\(^1\), Lisa Lieberman, PhD, CHES\(^1\), Jacqueline Bavaro, MPH\(^2\), Alejandra Kaplan, MPH\(^1\) and Eva Goldfarb, PhD, MA\(^1\)
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APHA’s 2019 Annual Meeting and Expo (Nov. 2 - Nov. 6)

Background
Depression is an overlooked but potentially important context in which to explore sexual violence. Although depression is a well-known consequence of sexual violence, its role in college students’ perceptions and experiences of campus climate related to sexual violence has not been studied.

Methods
In March 2017, we conducted an online campus survey, inviting all undergraduates over age 18 to respond about their perceptions and experiences of campus climate related to sexual assault and harassment. We included the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression (CES-D) scale, with scores >16 indicating elevated depressive symptoms. Respondents with complete CES-D data are presented (n=771).

Results
Students with elevated depressive symptoms at the time of the survey were less likely than non-depressed peers to report that the university was “taking steps to prevent unwanted sexual experiences from happening” (64% vs 72%, p<0.01). They were more likely to agree that groups or individuals on campus actively contribute to a negative climate (32% vs 21%, p<0.01), and more likely to report having been sexually harassed, raped, or assaulted themselves while at the university (33% vs 14%, p<0.01). Students with elevated depressive symptoms reported poorer overall attitudes towards, and engagement with, the university.

Conclusion
While the cross-sectional design precludes determining temporality, the data suggest elevated depressive symptoms as a correlate of both experiencing sexual harassment/assault and perceiving a less safe campus climate. Understanding and explicitly addressing these connections may be beneficial for the effectiveness of campus prevention and intervention efforts.
Abstract

Do sexual minorities experience sexual assault and perceive the campus sexual climate differently than their peers?

Alejandra Kaplan, MPH¹, Stephanie Silvera, PhD, CPH², Amanda S. Birnbaum, PhD, MPH², Eva Goldfarb, PhD, MA² and Lisa Lieberman, PhD, CHES²
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APHA’s 2019 Annual Meeting and Expo (Nov. 2 - Nov. 6)

Research suggests that sexual minority women disproportionately report experiencing sexual assault and harassment, but limited research has assessed these experiences on college campuses. A study of campus sexual assault climate assessed experiences and perceptions of self-identified sexual minority students. A campus-wide online survey of students enrolled at a large northeast institution (n=1335) in Spring 2017 asked about perceptions of the campus sexual assault climate and experiences with sexual harassment, rape, and sexual assault. Participants who identified as LGB were more likely to report being sexually harassed compared to their non-LGB peers (31.3% vs 13.4%, p<.001) and more than twice as likely to report having been raped/sexually assaulted (16.2% vs 7%, p<.001). While only 25 respondents identified as either genderqueer/non-conforming or transgender, a quarter reported having been raped/assaulted, compared to 9.4% of cis-females and 3.6% of cis-males (p<.01). Non-binary and LGB respondents were somewhat less likely to agree that the university is taking steps to prevent unwanted sexual experiences (p=.04 and p=.07, respectively). In keeping with the literature, LGB and non-binary students were more likely to report having been impacted by sexual harassment or violence on campus. While non-binary students had a somewhat less favorable perception of the campus climate, these respondents were a very small percentage of the study population. Therefore, additional research, is needed to fully understand the unique experiences and perceptions of gender and sexual minority students.

Advocacy for health and health education Program planning
Beliefs about Consent, Rape and Campus Sexual Assault Climate and Experiences: Do gender and sexual orientation play a role?

Lisa Lieberman, PhD, CHES¹, Eva Goldfarb, PhD, MA¹, Stephanie Silvera, PhD, CPH¹, Alejandra Kaplan, MPH² and Amanda S. Birnbaum, PhD, MPH¹
(1)Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, (2)University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR

APHA’s 2019 Annual Meeting and Expo (Nov. 2 - Nov. 6)

Recent social and political movements have highlighted society’s conflicting views about sexual consent, assault, and rape on college campuses, and about who is most at risk. A 2017 study (n=1335), at a large state university, explored perceived sexual assault climate and experiences, and definitions of consent and rape, in the context of gender and sexual orientation. Rape beliefs (alpha=.95) varied significantly by gender and sexual orientation, with all men, and all who identified as heterosexual, holding more stereotypical views about rape (p<.001), e.g. someone who was drunk or dressed a certain way was more likely to be raped. Consent definitions (alpha =.77), however, e.g. does not push their partner away or willingly goes somewhere private, did not vary by gender or sexual orientation. Further, while this campus’s sexual assault climate was viewed positively by the majority of respondents, it varied significantly by gender, sexual orientation, and rape views: More positive sexual assault climate (p<.01) was reported among those holding stereotypical views about rape; Men, and all who identified as heterosexual, were slightly more likely (p=.07) to believe the university was taking steps to prevent unwanted sexual experiences, and less likely (p<.001) to report experiencing sexual assault or rape. Notably, the small group (n=25) of students identifying as genderqueer/noncomforming or transgender were slightly less likely (p=.07) to report positive campus climate, and more likely (p<.01) to report assault or rape than all other groups. These findings have important implications for program and policy development that protects all students on college campuses.

Assessment of individual and community needs for health education Planning of health education strategies, interventions, and programs Public health or related laws, regulations, standards, or guidelines
Racial and ethnic differences in perceptions of campus climate related to sexual violence,
Silvera SAN,1* Goldfarb E 1, Birnbaum AS 1, Kaplan A 2, Bavaro J 3, Guzman M 1, Lieberman L 1

(1) Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, (2) Indiana School of Public Health, Bloomington, IN, (3) NJ YMCA State Alliance, Trenton, NJ


Abstract

**Objective:** To assess perceptions of university institutional climate related to sexual violence and whether these differed by race/ethnicity.

**Participants:** Matriculated undergraduates >age 18 (n = 1028).

**Methods:** Students were invited via campus email to participate in an online survey.

**Results:** Overall, only 20% agreed that the university is creating an environment in which unwanted sexual experiences seemed common or normal, but these findings differed by race. Black students were more likely than their white peers to feel the university is creating an environment in which unwanted sexual experiences seem common or normal (37.3% vs. 19.7%, p < .001) and creating an environment in which such instances were more likely to occur (33.3% vs. 13.4%, p < .001).

**Conclusions:** Data suggest that while students generally perceive that the university is working to create a positive and safe climate, these perceptions vary by race. Further investigation is necessary to better understand the concerns of students of color.