

# HOW PREVALENT IS CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE UNITED STATES?

BY **LISA FEDINA, JENNIFER LYNNE HOLMES AND BETHANY BACKES**

A review of research from the last 15 years finds that although prevalence rates vary, they all indicate that a substantial number of college students are sexually assaulted.



**S**exual assault on college campuses continues to make national headlines. We know the victims suffer short- and long-term health problems, such as sexually transmitted infections, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, chronic illness and post-traumatic stress disorder. We also know that college students who have been sexually assaulted are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as binge drinking and drug use, and have lowered academic achievement, and they may be at greater risk for revictimization.

A number of government and campus initiatives aim to address the problem. For instance, in September 2014, the White House partnered with stakeholders to launch “It’s On Us” and “Not Alone,” national public awareness campaigns focusing on preventing and responding to campus sexual assault.

But to truly tackle sexual assault on college campuses, we must understand how often it occurs. How many college students are sexually assaulted, and what factors are associated with higher or lower prevalence rates?

Official estimates vary widely. To date, no studies have systematically reviewed prevalence findings in the research on college-based sexual victimization, which would provide greater insight into the extent of the problem, the types of sexual victimization that students experience, and how study methodologies influence the prevalence rates found.

To help fill this knowledge gap, we systematically gathered prevalence estimates for campus sexual assault in the U.S. that were published between January 2000 and February 2015. We defined “prevalence” as the reported

## 2 How Prevalent Is Campus Sexual Assault in the United States?

percentage of study participants who reported sexual victimization since entering college or during a study follow-up period or time frame while attending college. (For more on the definitions used in our review, see the sidebar, “Defining Sexual Assault.”)

We examined peer-reviewed studies, dissertations and reports on a wide range of topics, such as health outcomes, risk factors, and evaluations of campus intervention or prevention programs. We assessed and synthesized prevalence findings, research designs and methods, sampling techniques, and measures, including types of sexual victimization.

Our goal was to better understand the range of prevalence findings currently available and the factors behind the variation. We also wanted to present recommendations for campus prevention and response strategies and propose research questions for future studies on campus sexual assault.

### An Incomplete Picture

We found that estimates of completed forcible rape, incapacitated rape, unwanted sexual contact and sexual coercion on college campuses in the U.S. vary widely. Unwanted sexual contact and sexual coercion appear to be most prevalent, followed by incapacitated rape and attempted or completed forcible rape. The infographic on the following page shows which factors are associated with higher or lower prevalence rates.

The variability is due in large part to differences in measurement and definitions of sexual assault among studies. To date, the majority of research on campus sexual assault has been limited to white, heterosexual, female students attending four-year colleges. Few studies measure prevalence among racial and ethnic minority students or other students who may be particularly at risk for campus sexual assault, such as lesbian and bisexual women, sorority women, students with disabilities, and students who have suffered prior victimization. Some studies included in

### Defining Sexual Assault

We used the following definitions in our review of sexual assault on U.S. campuses:

- **Prevalence:** the reported percentage of study participants who reported sexual victimization since entering college or during a study follow-up period or time frame while attending college
- **Unwanted sexual contact:** attempted or completed unwanted kissing, fondling, petting or other sexual touching using physical force, threat of physical force, verbal coercion or a combination of these, but excluding vaginal, anal and oral intercourse
- **Sexual coercion:** completed unwanted sexual contact (kissing, fondling or other sexual touching) or completed vaginal, anal or oral intercourse through nonviolent means (such as intimidation, pressure, lies, threats to end a relationship or continual arguments)
- **Incapacitated or alcohol-related sexual assault:** completed vaginal, anal or oral intercourse while victim was intoxicated or on drugs
- **Broadly defined sexual assault:** involving multiple forms of sexual victimization, including rape, sexual coercion, incapacitated or alcohol-related sexual assault, and unwanted sexual contact
- **Physically forced completed and attempted rape:** vaginal, anal or oral intercourse using physical force or threat of force

# A Close Look at Research on Sexual Assault on U.S. Campuses

## How prevalent is campus sexual assault? Official estimates vary widely.

Researchers reviewed 15 years of data to better understand the variation and shed light on what factors are associated with higher or lower prevalence rates.

	<b>Who</b> was sexually victimized?	<b>What</b> occurred?	<b>What</b> kind of data did the study collect?
<p><b>Higher</b></p> <p>Prevalence Rate</p>	Women	Unwanted sexual contact	Smaller sample size
	Underclassmen	Sexual coercion	Convenience sample <sup>1</sup>
	Racial, ethnic and sexual minorities	Incapacitated or alcohol-related sexual assault	One or two universities, based in one local area
	Sorority women	Broadly defined sexual assault, which has the highest prevalence rate because it includes multiple forms of sexual victimization	
	Students with disabilities		
<p><b>Lower</b></p>	Students with past histories of sexual victimization		
	Men	Physically forced rape	Larger sample size
	Upperclassmen	Attempted rape	Random sample <sup>2</sup>
	Graduate students		Multiple universities, based across the United States



<sup>1</sup> All students from a designated pool of participants are invited to participate.

<sup>2</sup> Select students from a designated pool of participants are randomly chosen to participate.

## 4 How Prevalent Is Campus Sexual Assault in the United States?

our review found higher rates of sexual assault among these students.

Only one study sampled students at vocational and trade schools, so it is unclear whether the prevalence of sexual assault among nontraditional college students differs from that among traditional full-time students attending four-year colleges.

Despite the discrepancies, the studies we reviewed — even those with lower estimates — all point to the same troubling truth: A substantial proportion of college students are sexually assaulted.

### Recommendations

Students experience different forms of sexual victimization, and prevalence rates for each form often vary from campus to campus. Schools should start with a detailed understanding of the types of sexual victimization occurring on their campuses and appropriately tailor prevention and intervention strategies, treatment for victims, and campus response.

We found a high prevalence of unwanted sexual contact and sexual coercion; therefore, prevention efforts should include a focus on the dynamics of these two forms of victimization. Further, the disproportionate rates of victimization among LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) students, students with disabilities, and racial and ethnic minority students highlight the need for responses that are inclusive and culturally specific.

When researching campus sexual assault, it is important to clearly define and separately measure the range of experiences that may fall under “unwanted sexual contact,” “forcible rape,” “incapacitated rape” and “drug- or alcohol-facilitated rape.” Standardized definitions can help us better understand how prevalence rates vary and how to develop appropriate prevention and intervention strategies for various types of sexual victimization. Studies should continue to include behaviorally specific measures, such as providing students with examples of unwanted sexual experiences. Also, measuring victimization “since entering college” will help distinguish campus sexual

assault from childhood, adolescent and lifetime sexual victimization.

Future studies should measure sexual victimization among students who may be at greater risk for sexual assault, such as LGBTQ students, students with past histories of sexual victimization and students with disabilities. Future research should also explore whether sexual assault among students at alternative college education programs is similar to or different from sexual assault among traditional college students; this will help nontraditional programs develop appropriate intervention and prevention responses for students. Additionally, researchers should consider contextual and cultural differences between public and private universities — for example, small liberal arts colleges versus large public state universities — as well as four-year colleges and vocational or trade schools when measuring the prevalence of sexual victimization on different types of campuses.

---

### About the Authors

**Lisa Fedina** is a graduate research assistant at NIJ and a Ph.D. student in the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. **Jennifer Lynne Holmes** is a graduate research assistant at NIJ and a Ph.D. student in the College of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University. **Bethany Backes** is a social science analyst in NIJ's Office of Research and Evaluation, where she directs NIJ's program of research on violence against women.

---

### For More Information

For a detailed discussion of our review and findings, see “Campus Sexual Assault: A Systematic Review of Prevalence Research from 2000 to 2015” in *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*.

To learn more about NIJ's research on campus sexual assault, go to [NIJ.gov](http://NIJ.gov), keyword: campus.

---

Image source: ©DigitalVision, Thinkstock. Image is used for illustrative purposes only and any person depicted is a model.

---

**NCJ 249827**

**Cite this article as:** Fedina, Lisa, Jennifer Lynne Holmes and Bethany Backes, "How Prevalent Is Campus Sexual Assault in the United States?" *NIJ Journal 277* (2016): 26-30, available at <http://nij.gov/journals/277/pages/campus-sexual-assault.aspx>.