

Campus Sexual Assault: Formative Survey Research on Student Perceptions, Attribution of Responsibility and Communication Needs

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Background:

Campus sexual assault is one of the most serious social issues in the United States: a crime that occurs to one in five college women, three out of four victims blame themselves for being responsible. There have been studies about media coverage of campus sexual assaults, but none that explore their perceptions about the causes and solutions for campus sexual assault, as well as about individuals or entities that should be responsible. This study performed what is believed to be the first formative research that explores college students' knowledge and attitudes about this.

Purpose:

To explore (1) how college students—both male and female—perceive the issue of campus sexual assault; (2) crucial data to health campaign designers in educational institutions and government agencies so they reach their target audiences more effectively.

Methods:

An online study on Amazon Mechanical Turk of 567 college students was conducted to assess students' perceptions regarding who or what causes campus sexual assault, who or what should be responsible for resolving the issue, and measuring the students' perceptions about their communication needs regarding the issue. Descriptive statistics, independent sampled t-tests, and paired sampled t-tests were used to analyze all data.

Results:

323 female (57%) and 244 male (43%) college students participate in the survey. College students consider the issue of campus sexual assault as a somewhat serious problem, and female students perceived more severity. Findings suggest that universities are more responsible for both causes and solutions regarding the issue; however, female college students reflected more sympathy toward victims. College students did not either strongly praise or criticize existing prevention programs, but indicated they rarely receive information from any sources. They also consider school health centers as the most crucial sources, while female students reported that they are more likely to search actively for information regarding campus sexual than male students are.

Conclusions:

Implications from this formative research focus on the need for campus officials to implement educational programs that are tailored to men and to women. Program designers may consider social media outlets as a sustained and effective student forum for campus sexual assault issues. Also, as students perceive the first phone call after an assault should go to a friend or family member, campaign designers might integrate these nontraditional "first responders" into campus procedures. Future research in specific campaign effects would extend the findings of this formative research on students' perceptions.