



preventing campus sexual violence

by miriam gleckman-krut, elizabeth a. armstrong, and erin e. bonar

Campus sexual violence is a structural problem. Yet U.S. higher education favors interventions that modify student behavior, such as bystander education, over structural change. While crucial, emphasis on changing student behavior has not decreased the estimated national prevalence of student sexual victimization.

To reduce campus sexual violence, universities must target the organization of student social life. This will require administrators to work with faculty experts in structural inequalities to develop, implement, evaluate, and share structural-level policy interventions. Institutional changes could include funding parties hosted by trans and gender nonbinary students; partnering with queer-led community service initiatives to provide weekend excursions; providing free

offer first year students, students of color, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) students more physical space to socialize.

There remains much we do not know about campus-specific, structural causes of sexual violence. Higher education institutions should work with experts in structural inequalities to ask of their campuses: Which student groups control the terms of socializing? Control over the terms of socializing might look like hosting large parties, or it may be the result, as sociologist Saida Grundy suggests, of particular visitation policies. Conversely, which students have limited access to campus space? Where do minority students relax, and what might institutional support for their doing so look like? These questions could inform an analysis of the structural

campus sexual violence. For example, bystander education is the most common prevention strategy. In the early 2000s, researchers found that anti-campus sexual violence training made men defensive, and thus resistant to training material. Social psychologist Victoria Banyard proposed that schools teach students to interrupt their peers engaging in would-be incidents of sexual violence. The idea came from fire prevention techniques. The programs generally under-emphasize the role power plays in patterning violence, in favor of recruiting as many students as possible in the fight against sexual violence. Less than a decade after Banyard's proposal, the Obama Administration noted early programs' successes and recommended bystander training be implemented nationally. The University Responses to Sexual Assault (URSA) project, directed by Armstrong and Sandra Levitsky, analyzes a representative sample of 2016 U.S. college and university sexual misconduct policies (n=381). URSA found that by the end of Obama's tenure, 76 percent of campuses provided some form of bystander training. Bystander programming is presently among the most implemented and tested form of campus sexual violence prevention.

By contrast, structural interventions are seldom implemented and evaluated. A 2020 prevention science review, led by Bonar, found several studies evaluating individual- (think challenging rape myths) or relational- (bystander education) programs. The researchers found that no structural interventions had been systematically evaluated. The task of translating structural ideas into prevention policy is incomplete.

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24-hour transportation to students; dismantling white Greek life; and diversifying students, faculty, and staff. The most effective structural changes will vary by campus. Administrators should approach structural change through collaboration with experts at their institutions.

policy proposal

Sociologists, social psychologists, and public health specialists have begun to design structural interventions that address campus sexual violence. Jennifer Hirsch and Shamus Khan, for example, suggest that higher education should

conditions that produce sexual violence on a given campus, and subsequently lay the groundwork for campus-specific structural-level policy interventions.

University administrators would have to provide these experts with research-related resources; allow them to work closely with student life to implement and evaluate proposals; and then enable the dissemination of their findings regardless of results.

current approach

Individual- and relational-level approaches dominate efforts to prevent

structural approaches are needed

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins teaches that racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and homophobia are inextricably intertwined. Acts of violence—including sexual violence—bind these systems of inequality together to cement what she calls the “matrix of domination.” The matrix of domination informs patterns of sexual violence victimization, perpetration, impunity, punishment, and access to recourse. This is as true on our campuses as it is in society at large.

Tangibly, this is what we mean: many colleges offer wealthy, cisgender, straight, able-bodied white men control over socializing spaces. Think of white eating clubs or sports teams. Privileged men’s control over the physical spaces in which students socialize creates risk for women, sexual and gender minorities, people of color, students with disabilities, and/or economically marginalized people, while simultaneously protecting privileged students against accusations of sexual violence.

Fraternities are an example. Sociologists Rashawn Ray and Jason Rosow show that at predominantly white colleges, white fraternities are more likely than Black fraternities to own houses. White fraternities thus have disproportionate control over the terms of campus partying. Armstrong, Laura Hamilton, and Brian Sweeney demonstrate that wealthy white fraternity men use these houses to dictate access to parties, what partygoers consume, how partygoers interact, and even how partygoers return home. These men use their control over the infrastructures of fun to funnel women into the way of sexual harm.

Hirsch and Khan add that privileged men are protected by their institutional power. Barnard and Columbia students in their study viewed some socially marginalized students as “rapey.” This included Black men and men with few friends. The wealthy, largely white, able-bodied men who host parties on the other hand, were exempt from students’ category of possible rapists. Students’ assumptions of privileged men’s goodness



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Heavy drinking may increase the likelihood of sexual violence occurring and decrease the efficacy of individual-level prevention strategies, like bystander education.

and marginalized men’s rapey-ness did little to stem violence; several assaults occurred after a man who had taken on the bystander role walked a woman home. Pervasive assumptions about who is a rapist, and who is safe, reinforce racism, sexism, and classism—even among students trained as bystanders.

Collectively this research paints a portrait of college social life as structured to reinforce intersectional inequities. Indeed, Chris Linder’s recent analysis of 560 articles on campus sexual violence makes clear that marginalized students—sexual-, gender-, and racial minorities, disabled students, and students from poor and/or working-class backgrounds—are disproportionately vulnerable compared

to their representation in U.S. higher education. This is not coincidental. Campus sexual violence is a result of social arrangements. Students disadvantaged by those arrangements are at elevated risk.

shortcomings of the current approach

Programs like bystander education leave intact violence’s structural causes. Bystander education, for example, assumes that students are present in situations where perpetration is imminent. But the dynamics of spatial control isolate targets of sexual violence. Sherry Hamby and colleagues estimate that bystanders are *absent* from 83 percent of sexual violence incidents. U.S. higher education’s



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avored intervention cannot prevent most incidents of campus sexual violence.

Furthermore, training programs cannot root out students' biases, which matters gravely for prevention efforts. Gleckman-Krut and Bonar interviewed students at the University of Michigan, all of whom had undergone anti-sexual violence training. When asked where they perceived sexual risk, women pointed to unhusbanded men, "people from out-of-town who come for the bars," and strang-

Jessica rejected the allegation based on the fact that she knew the men in question. Her inclination to protect the (likely wealthy and white) men rests on a psychological phenomenon known as "motivated blindness." That is, people find it difficult to identify bad behavior in those upon whom they depend. Jessica depended on her boyfriend and his fraternity for her social life. Furthermore, to consider that these men might be sexually violent could threaten her self-concept, suggesting that she was the sort of person with rapists as friends. She is incentivized to protect privileged men against the reputational threat of a rape allegation.

Biases and investments in social hierarchies matter for campus sexual violence prevention, as they inform student behavior. Melanie Carlson shows that men often do not intervene when they see their friends being sexually threatening to women, as loyalty to male peers discourages them from doing so. Ruschelle Leone and Dominic Parrott add that alcohol heightens the male peers' influence and makes intervention even less likely.

violence. Reducing campus sexual violence will require sweeping changes to the organization of undergraduate social life. Organizational changes are expensive, and shifting the balance of power is unpopular with powerful stakeholders. Public outrage about the level of sexual harm routinely accepted on campuses, combined with pressure on universities, might move universities to enact more structurally-oriented prevention efforts. Implementing structural changes to address campus sexual violence may initially feel experimental. This is not an excuse to ignore structural-level insights, nor is it a reason not to try.

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ers who lurk after dark. These statements reflect classist and gendered assumptions about rapists (read: poor, male, socially distant). At the same time, participants extended to their privileged peers the benefit of the doubt. Jessica, a pseudonym, a white sorority woman, shared her response to hearing that members of her boyfriend's fraternity had drugged and raped a woman:

I know a lot of the guys in the fraternity... And [this story] makes me wonder how much of [stories like this one] get spun out. I think a lot of times girls get really, really, really drunk and they don't like to admit fault, and they're like, 'Oh, well, I must've been drugged.'

Jennifer Katz finds that white women in college systematically choose not to offer Black women bystander support.

Campus sexual violence is not akin to a fire. We should not try to prevent it as if it were. It is neither randomly experienced and perpetrated, nor is it a rare and widely recognized event. Rather, it is a patterned, commonplace, and normalized outcome of the structural arrangements of college life. Individual students are unable to counter all of the effects of those arrangements—no matter how well-trained and well-meaning.

conclusion

The data are clear: while important, individual- and relational-level solutions will not on their own meaningfully reduce the prevalence nor the patterned incidence of campus sexual

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