

# THE ROLE OF TRUST IN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY SEXUAL ASSAULT POLICIES AND SERVICES

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## Abstract

Many post-secondary institutions are developing policies and programs aimed at improving responses to sexual assault experienced by students. In some areas, such as Ontario, Canada, the government has mandated post-secondary institutions to engage with, the university following sexual violence. This study explores students' perceptions of sexual assault policies and programs using services. Findings show that students believe that sexual assault policies and programs exist, but this does not mean students are willing to use such resources or that they even trust that their university has students' needs and interests at the fore. This paper discusses policy and programmatic considerations for building student trust in their post-secondary institutions to encourage student use of campus support.

**Keywords:** sexual assault policies, student trust, institutional betrayal, sexual violence, university policy, violence prevention

## Résumé

Beaucoup d'établissements postsecondaires conçoivent des politiques et programmes visant l'amélioration de leur réponse aux agressions sexuelles vécues par les étudiants. Dans certains lieux, comme en Ontario, au Canada, le gouvernement a obligé les établissements postsecondaires à le faire. Quelle que soit l'importance des initiatives, elles impliquent que les établissements examinent les perceptions, parmi les étudiants du campus d'une université de taille moyenne, quant à la politique et des programmes de violence sexuelle et dans l'utilisation des services. La conclusion est que les étudiants croient que des politiques et des programmes existent, mais cela ne signifie pas qu'ils sont prêts à utiliser ces ressources ou qu'ils ont confiance que leur université a leurs besoins et intérêts à l'esprit. Cet article discute des considérations politiques et programmatiques pour bâtir la confiance des étudiants dans leurs établissements postsecondaires afin d'encourager leur utilisation des services de soutien sur le campus.

**Mots-clés :** université, politiques de violence sexuelle, confiance des étudiants, violence sexuelle, politiques universitaires, prévention de la violence

## Introduction

Universities are a unique context to examine the issue of sexual violence. One reason is the paradox behind the image of the university as a *safe space* for students, and the reality that women in post-secondary institutions are at greater risk for sexual assault than women in the general population (Fisher et al., 2000). For many students, the university experience is closely associated

with substance consumption, riskier sexual and dating behaviour, and partying (Armstrong et al., 2006; Franklin, 2010), as well as organized social groups (Armstrong et al., 2006). This common university experience is problematic when we consider that most sexual assaults take place at a party (Krebs et al., 2007), after social events, or on dates (Walsh et al., 2010). Research also suggests that some policies and/or practices in place in colleges and universities, seemingly to protect students, heighten

sexual danger. For instance, bans on alcohol within residences, quiet times, and restrictions on type of social activities that can occur on campus, may lead to increased clandestine alcohol consumption in hidden spaces, bars, or unknown residences (Armstrong et al., 2006).

There exists general consensus that sexual violence is a serious problem for women, especially women aged

## Institutional Betrayal

Sexual assault continues to be one of the least reported crimes. In Canada, for every 100 sexual assaults, less than 1 per cent of accused are actually convicted (Department of Justice Canada, 2017). As part of a 20-month long investigation, the Globe and Mail's investigative series *Unfounded*, found that police dismiss 1 in 5 sexual assault claims as baseless. This has resulted in a national unfounded rate in Canada of 19.39%, higher than any other type of crime (Doolittle, 2017). Having concerns related to how the case will be handled in the criminal justice system is one reason survivors cited for not reporting sexual assault victimization, suggesting that victims lack faith and/or trust in police, with respect

created sexual violence policies as well as practices, procedures, and supports for victims, and awareness campaigns for the institution at large. The university purports itself as a safe space, a space of trust, yet do students experience it this way? That very few victims of sexual violence disclose or report their experiences to their institutions is telling, particularly in light of a recent news media report that “Canadian universities are failing students on sexual assault” (Schwartz, 2018). Institutional betrayal provides the theoretical starting point to understand the lack of reporting by students who have been sexually victimized.

## Literature Review

### Barriers to Reporting

Researchers posit several explanations for sexual assault survivors deciding not to report their victimization, particularly as it relates to college and university-aged women. The main barriers to reporting include: “(1) shame, guilt, embarrassment, not wanting friends and (3) fear of not being believed” (Sable et al., 2006, p. 157). In addition to not reporting due to the personal and potentially embarrassing nature of the crime (Sampson, 2002), since acts of sexual violence may not have resulted in visible physical injuries, victims may not characterize these as “true” sexual assault or rape, and therefore do not report (Fisher et al., 2003; Gross et al., 2006; Sampson, 2002; Ward et al., 1991). Many women also refrain from reporting because they do not think the incident was serious enough (Fisher et al., 2003). This is especially true if the victim knew the perpetrator (Gross et al., 2006; Sampson, 2002; Ward et al., 1991). Moreover, knowing the perpetrator can cause victims to not disclose for fear of reprisal from both the perpetrator and their friends (Sampson, 2002). Disclosure decisions among students, which may result in negative consequences for their peer groups but little or no action by the justice system (Fisher et al., 2003). Victims also fail to report because of the social stigma attached to this form of victimization (Fisher et al., 2003; Sampson, 2002) and fear of being blamed (Fisher et al., 2003).

Certain policies put in place to protect students and

campus space may have the unintended consequence of discouraging reporting. For instance, some victims of sexual assault may believe that the costs of reporting (e.g., getting in trouble for drinking alcohol) outweigh the benefits. Characteristics of campus sexual assaults involve drinking and/or substance use by the victim, those who are assaulted while incapacitated may not only fear they will be blamed for their victimization, but that they may also end up receiving a criminal record (Karjane et al., 2005; Ward et al., 1991).

### Crime Reporting

Underscoring the barriers to sexual assault reporting is the issue of trust. Trust per se, however, is not a central focus of previous research on sexual assault reporting and disclosure practices among post-secondary students. Research instead typically emphasizes the individual characteristics, gender, race) and factors related to the nature of victimization (e.g., relationship to the victim, presence of alcohol, if there was physical injury). There is less explicit consideration of factors related to the institution, such as general trust in the institution itself.

There is, however, indication that trust is a relevant factor. First, most survivors of sexual violence report their victimization to somebody, just not law enforcement or those in authority. Friends and health professionals are two groups that victims of sexual violence are likely to report to (Fisher et al., 2003; Walsh et al., 2010). This suggests that victims have more trust in the response from those sources than institutional ones. Second, as previously noted, victims cite fear of not being believed or of being blamed as reasons for not reporting victimization or accessing services (Fisher et al., 2003; Walsh et al., 2010). Third, among studies that do consider institutional factors, there is indication the individuals are more likely to report when they trust the adjudication process and have a favourable attitude to those taking the report (Amar et al., 2014; Fisher et al., 2003; Karjane et al., 2005; Strout et al., 2014). Fourth, research indicates that students with more trust in the university response system (e.g., campus police, administrators) and those with a closer connection to the campus are more likely to

report potential threats (Sulkowski, 2011).

Related research on reporting sexual violence to the police similarly points to the importance of trust. For example, research shows that women are more likely to report, and that women with past victimization experience are the least likely to report, suggesting that negative past experiences have impacted their trust in the process (Orchowski et al., 2009)

Trust in authorities is relevant for understanding the underreporting of sexual victimization on campus, given that young adults hold less favourable views towards the police, resulting in decreased satisfaction in the po-

sexual assault and harassment policies and programs,  
whether they would report sexual assault or harassment

## 1508 University Policies

While the majority of women interviewed were unaware of the university's policies on sexual harassment and assault, 68% indicated that they believed or hoped that the university had such policies in place. The women appeared to

## University-Provided Services/Resources

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er, you want to feel safe with them but maybe they will abuse you or like, rape you or something.

This lack of trust in the university's abilities to handle sexual assault and harassment is also evident in another woman's recommendation for police involvement when assault is reported.

I think it should be dealt with internally and with the help of the police services...Again, situational, but if like a student didn't report it and they [the university] found [out]—they got knowledge of it they should deal with it within their policies. But then if there [is] police should be brought in...depending on what's going on, what happened, who the victim was, who the assailant was, were they a student, just things to consider within—like whether that's within their scope or if it needs to be brought to bigger peoples to get involved...I think for sure the police...police is [the] main thing...*I don't think they're [the university] going to do a whole lot* [emphasis added]... I think anything, even harassment, I would think if it—if it was like just one comment then it's kind of the school could probably deal with that, but if it's continuous comments, they were told to stop, the school might have to bring it to higher authorities to deal with it, but anything beyond multiple comments like unconsented touching, anything like that, that should be the police.

ing: "I don't feel that school services will help, I think going straight to the police would be better."

Another student explained that her experiences with this particular service's ability to provide care to victims.

I've talked to counsellors before—at the line up to get in, it's crazy the amount of paperwork you have to go through. *It's crazy* [emphasis added] of kids and too many varying problems, you know, that the mental things that come with having sexual assault and sexual harassment should be taken care of separately from the kids that are having problems at school, from the kids that are

therapists for all these kids. It's just not set up well... Just not having enough people in general. Students know that so they don't report anything. They don't want to go talk because it just takes too long and I think they're overworked and they stare at you like *they don't really care* [emphasis added]. They don't have time, right... And having to walk in every day, there's a stigma around it. It's like a walk of shame almost having to constantly repeat and repeat and repeat exactly what happened over and over again, I think it becomes quite tedious and just not worth it because what is the results, right?

Previous negative experiences informed another student's lack of trust in campus services:

I have had some negative personal experiences with the SA [Student Association] and mental health services at campus health. Therefore, I would not choose to use these services again.

One woman also indicated that she does not trust that the university would have the best interests of victims in mind. She explained:

I don't think that there's any consequences really. Like obviously again there would be in an extreme case, but I mean the violation you have to go through to get your case heard is just absurd...And I've been through the process with a friend of mine...So it's like there wasn't any real support and I mean you see that all over the place. You see even with the incident at like the University of Ottawa with like the men's *It's not really a big enough deal to take to anybody*. Like the university, the police even said—they're like... this isn't really a big enough deal to take to anybody. Like the university wouldn't. They're like, what would they do?... We've got a pretty strong social justice course so I'd like to think that maybe they'd be *It's [the university] a business* [emphasis added].

I mean people donate money to it, right? It's a public image thing. Who wants [university name] rape victim like splayed across national headlines, right?...I think ζΦΓζή ψΔΑΓΖΔΝ ζ~ ωζ ΣΔΖΩΤΣΪ ΪΨ~ΖΔ ~Λ.

A survey participant similarly voiced a lack of trust that the university would prioritize students over their reputation. She stated:

I would look towards community/law enforcement assistance before campus. I do not trust that campus administration would take me as seriously as community or law enforcement, as [the] *campus has a reputation stake to consider* [emphasis added].

This lack of trust in the university prioritizing victims is also evident in one woman's call for universities to better support victims and for an advocate or counsellor to be present when a victim is reporting. Recommending an advocate or counsellor be present suggests that this student thinks that victims need someone to advocate for them when interacting with the university; the university will not be their advocate. She said:

I think we need to make a process where not assuming guilt, but believing that what the victim is saying is like their truth, you know what I mean? There needs to be more support and I think—I'm not sure how the—how it goes now when you report a thing, but I think there should always be a counsellor present, like someone to kind of—like there should be a counsellor or an advocate for the victim to make sure that they don't get ... Like the big thing is like, people trap you. Like they'll—if you make one mistake in a story from one telling to the next they like to trap you and say that like oh, well, they lied, they must have lied about everything, whereas like, victim recall is bad, right? It's always bad. And so it's one of those things where I think that like, bringing in an advocate for them to like, help them, right, and to make sure that they're not just bullied into dropping the charges. And as much as universities like, aren't supposed to—wouldn't—you'd like to think they would never want you to be quiet about it, like someone to ensure that they're not just getting, you know, hushed up about the incident

For some students, their lack of trust in the university ωή ζλήζωψΔΝ Γ'ΦήΔΝ ~Τ ΨΓήζ ΔΚΨΔΨΔΤΔΔΔή+ ² ΤΔ ΨΓΨΔΨΔΨΓΤΖ

reported that the university responded with concern for ζΦΔ ~ΔΔΤΔΨ Ϊ ΦΔΤ ήΦΔ ΨΔΨ~ΨΖΔΝ ΓΤ ΔΤΔΔΔΝΔΤΖ:

[The person she contacted] told me to think about the Δ~ΤήΔΔΔΔΤΔΔΔή §~Ψ ζΦΔ ~ΔΔΤΔΨ; ΓΤΝ Φ~ Ϊ ΪΦΖ ΦΓΨ- opened wasn't important enough for them to get in the kind of trouble that they would.

Τ~ζΦΔΨ ΨΓΨΔΨΔΨΓΤΖ ήΨΔΔΨΔΔΝ ζΦΖ ΦΔΨ ΔΚΨΔΨΔΤΔΔΔή ΓςζΔΨ reporting did not demonstrate the university services' ability to adequately support victims. She said:

[The person she contacted] tried and continues to try Δ~ΤΔΨΤΔΔΔ Ϊ~λ ζ~ Γ'Δ ΦΓΨΨΔ; ή § ΔΔΔ; ΔΦΔΔΨ λΨ- η ΔΤΔΝ ζΦή is like telling someone with a bad headache to just stop having a headache; it doesn't work like that. It ΓΔΔΔΔή ΔΔΨΔΨΔΨΤΣ Ϊ~λ Ν~ --- ΔΓΤΤ~Ζ ήζΔΝΔ; ΔΓΤΤ~Ζ Σ~ out, don't want to get changed, and just want to sleep



order to build trust. Campuses are communities unto themselves. By fostering and maintaining these relationships, students may not only feel safer in this community, but may also develop trust in university disclosure and adjudication processes, as well as in the services (Zemke & Lippert, 2006). SARTs (Nugent-Borakove et al., 2006), may also serve to cultivate trust in students. SARTs draw from law enforcement/security, healthcare, women's centres, victims' advocates, counselling, and legal aid with the goal of increasing reporting, assisting sexual assault victims with recovery through support, and facilitating communication between all parties involved in the disclosure, investigation, and adjudication of the assault through to the reporting, and establish a track-record of successful assistance and support (Nugent-Borakove et al., 2006). While some communities are starting to use such formalized and coordinated team responses in collaboration with local police services, implementing similar coordinated response teams on campus merits some consideration and future study.

An important consideration is that colleges and universities also need to be seen as deserving of trust, and not to automatically assume institutional trust exists. If a university's reputation will be prioritized over student concerns, campus administrators is to grant immunity to victims of sexual assault. Student codes of conduct are common for colleges and universities, and can cover myriad behaviours, including prohibitions against alcohol use in campus residences. Depending on the conduct policy, students who have engaged in (underage) drinking may not come forward and report to campus security for fear of punishment. Information concerning this immunity may improve students' institutional trust. Post-second-

ary institutions, in addition to improving institutional responses to sexual violence, must also seek to demonstrate integrity in those responses to ensure that victims truly enhance campus safety for all students.

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