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## Predictors of Sexual Violence Prevalence at U.S. Colleges and Universities

Theodore Daniel Hostikka  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Theodore D. Hostikka

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the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Teaonna Watson, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Jana Price-Sharps, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Predictors of Sexual Violence Prevalence at U.S. Colleges and Universities

by

Theodore D. Hostikka

MS, Capella University, 2012

BS, Washington State University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

November 2025

## Abstract

This research explored the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault among students at U.S. colleges and universities, aiming to quantify incident rates and assess their impact on academic and psychological well-being. Grounded in socioecological and intersectional theories, the research examined how environmental interactions and interconnected social identities shape individual experiences. Specifically, this research explored (a) the link between the percentage of female students and the prevalence of sexual violence on campuses; (b) how the proportion of first-generation students relates to sexual violence prevalence; (c) the connection between campus size and rates of sexual violence; and (d) whether gender makeup, first-year student percentages, and campus size predict sexual violence prevalence. Using a cross-sectional quantitative design, archival data from 120 colleges and universities over three academic years were analyzed, focusing on demographic variables related to incidents of sexual misconduct. Statistical analyses, including Pearson's correlation and linear regression, assessed relationships between independent variables and prevalence. Findings unveiled no significant relationships between female students or first-generation status and sexual violence prevalence. However, a notable negative correlation was identified between campus size and incident rates, suggesting that larger campuses report fewer incidents. Although certain demographic factors did not predict prevalence, campus size may influence reporting. Directions include implementing comprehensive prevention programs and aid systems tailored to student needs. This study stresses the critical need for policy reform to foster a safer campus and promote a culture of respect and accountability.

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## Dedication

This dissertation and my PhD program are dedicated to my wife, Rosalie, and my boys, Easton and Drew, for they have supported me every step of the way, from coursework to the development and writing of this dissertation. Thank you so much to each of you for your continued support.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Sexual harassment and assault remain alarming crimes in United States colleges and universities (Tilley et al., 2020). Millions of individuals are affected by sexual assault in the United States yearly. Sexual assault and harassment cases persist as alarming and prevalent crimes on United States college and university campuses, impacting 13% of all students (Truman & Langton, 2019).

The Association of American Universities (AAU) 2019 Campus Climate Survey results indicate an aggregate incidence rate of nonconsensual sexual contact among students, at 13% since their enrollment in educational institutions (Tilley et al., 2020). Harassment of a sexual form entails the occurrence of unsolicited sexual advances, solicitations of sexual favors, and various forms of either physical or verbal conduct that are sexual (Miodus et al., 2022). Sexual assault encompasses criminal acts wherein perpetrators engage in non-consensual or objectionable sexual contact with their victims (Cantor et al., 2019).

The research holds promise for positive social change by informing the development of practices, policies, and programs aimed at education and prevention on college campuses where sexual harassment and assault can occur (Brubaker & Keegan, 2019; Noetzel et al., 2023). This chapter provides an outline of the research project and information on critical variables, including perceptions of school safety and school-level demographics (e.g., race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status [SES]). Additionally, an outline in the Background section provides an overview of pertinent research results and

theoretical perspectives. The Problem Statement section identifies and briefly discusses the research gap, while the study's relevance is justified and rationalized. The hypothesis and research questions are outlined. The theoretical basis is characterized by socioecological theory, which underscores the impact of interactions across different environmental levels on individuals' behaviors and experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The concept of bio-ecological systems has merit in explaining the growth of pupils' perceptions of the school community (El Zaatari et al., 2022). The study also incorporates intersectionality theory, which emphasizes the interconnections between various social identities and experiences, particularly in dimensions such as race, gender, and diversity (Crenshaw, 1989; Lopez et al., 2023). The study's limitations are acknowledged. This research identified risk factors (i.e., yellow zone and red zone behaviors), examined individual and societal factors influencing reporting, disclosure, and outcomes, and used the findings to develop education and prevention programs that incorporate policy development, community engagement, interventions, and support systems. Regulations such as Title IX, the Clery Act, and the education system in the United States provide a framework for a systematic approach to address these issues.

### **Background**

Sexual harassment and assault on U.S. college campuses remain urgent issues that require comprehensive research, effective policy-making, and a firm commitment to creating a safe, educational environment for all students. There is increased attention from institutions of higher learning and policymakers toward implementing strategies to address these concerns, though progress and implementation vary widely across

campuses. This study followed the problem alongside the research questions with a specific analysis of leadership responses to the psychological impacts on the victims of sexual harassment and assaults in U.S. colleges and universities. The period of maximum potential danger for assault involving sexual activity is in the first or second year of college (McMahon et al., 2018). Although the initial basis for this pattern's acceptance was anecdotal, efforts have been made to appraise a red zone's existence systematically and quantitatively. A period of increased sexual assault risk that occurs close to the start of an international student's college career (Cranney, 2019).

Individuals experiencing sexual harassment and or assault can use their college to pursue disciplinary action through their college and the authorities in the geographical area. Those who choose to seek justice for their abuse as survivors often have to navigate an emotionally demanding and laborious procedure. Whether deemed yellow-zone behaviors or red-zone offenses, they can adversely impact the harmed individual's experience with the institute of higher education and its leadership. It has proved deleterious to the campus climate (Hunter, 2017; Richards et al., 2024).

Yellow zone risk behaviors can have various impacts on college campuses. These behaviors refer to actions or situations that may not be immediately dangerous or severe but still pose potential risks. Yellow zone risk behaviors can shape the culture on college campuses. If these behaviors become normalized or pervasive, they can create an environment where students feel increased anxiety or depression (Richards & Rennison, 2022).

The red zone risk behaviors refer to the elevated risk of sexual misconduct during the first few weeks of the college academic year. Red zone risk behaviors pose a significant risk to college campus culture by creating an environment that undermines safety, consent, and respect. The prevalence of red zone behaviors and sexual violence can contribute to a hostile campus culture that ultimately perpetuates sexual violence and jeopardizes pupils' well-being (Matray, 2020; Follingstad & Barczak, 2023).

In summary, all forms of sexual misconduct are severe and harm the college campus climate and community. These issues cross boundaries of SES, race, age, and gender. This research identified risk factors (yellow- and red-zone behaviors), examined individual and societal factors influencing reporting, disclosure, and outcomes, and used the findings to develop education and prevention programs that incorporate policy development, community engagement, targeted interventions, and support systems. Regulations such as the Jeanne Clery Act, the United States education system, and Title IX provided a systematic approach to address these issues. This research addresses the gap by describing college students' reports of assault, the adjudication procedure, and the outcomes of individual cases (Cantor et al., 2019; Brubaker, 2019).

Ensuring that research and prevention strategies consider diverse populations and intersectionality is critical, as sexual harassment and assault can have different dynamics and impacts on one's race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors (Gantman & Paluck, 2022).

## **Problem Statement**

The circumstances that led me to look through previous research are the conventional wisdom among universities that sexual harassment and assault in U.S. colleges and universities, particularly within the age bracket of 18- to 24-year-old females (Brubaker et al., 2017). These incidents threaten students' well-being, academic success, and the overall campus climate (Cantor et al., 2019; Krebs et al., 2016). McMahon et al. (2018) studied concepts of the red zone, a period during which sexual assaults are prevalent on campuses of colleges and universities. Referring to a specific period, the red zone is considered to be the first few weeks of the academic year, up to the fall or Thanksgiving break. It is often considered a high-risk period for incidents of sexual assault, including both harassment and assault itself.

This heightened risk is due to various factors, such as the influx of new students, increased social activities, introduction of alcohol, increased alcohol consumption, and similar social dynamics. College and university campuses often implement awareness and prevention campaigns during this time to educate students about the risks and strategies for staying safe (Follingstad et al., 2022). In the same context, temporal risk refers to the idea that the risk of experiencing sexual assault or harassment may vary over time. This concept acknowledges that certain situations or periods may be riskier than others. For example, the red zone represents a period of temporal risk within a college context. Temporal risk can also refer to situations like late-night hours when parties and social activities are more common, as these situations may carry a higher risk of sexual misconduct (Matray, 2020; O'Callaghan et al., 2023). It is crucial to recognize that,

considering the landscape surrounding harassing someone sexually and sexual assault on college campuses is not static (Burns et al., 2023). Over time, shifts in societal awareness, legal frameworks, and institutional policies have occurred, potentially influencing the relationship between school safety and the occurrence of such incidents. The temporal aspect adds a layer of complexity that may moderate or mediate the observed associations.

The specific problem that I addressed throughout this research was to quantitatively examine the prevalence of harassment and assault due to sexual misconduct on campuses of higher education within the United States, considering the influence of school-level demographics that ultimately contribute to the development of targeted strategies for fostering a safer and more inclusive campus environment, Molstad et al. (2023) stated that individuals under the age of 25 are more likely to be sexually assaulted than people of any other age, with 18- to 24-year-old students especially being vulnerable to experiencing distinct sexual assault types.

Little is understood about the violent incidents that college students have reported, campus disciplinary procedures, or the outcomes of reported cases (Fedina et al., 2016; Lathan & Koon-Magnin, 2023). Cantor et al. (2019) revealed that as many as 5% of college women are exposed to forms of sexual misconduct during their college years, with up to 32% experiencing dating violence (Guiora, 2022). These statistics underscore the need to address this social issue.

### **Purpose of the Study**

For this research study, I used quantitative methods to examine the relationship between a set of independent variables and the frequency of detailed occurrences of sexual harassment as well as assault among campuses of colleges and universities in the United States, chiefly focusing on the Midwest states. The study involved the following independent variables:

To effectively assess school safety on university campuses, it is essential to collect data on predictor and prevalence factors and analyze trends, including those related to race, gender, and SES. SES is not just defined by poverty, as Payne's (2009) research determined; it is also defined through a review of one's finances, belongingness, and family access to education. Petravskaitė & Cunichina (2019) and Fernandez et al. (2023) stated that SES is typically measured by assessing education, income, social belonging, or a combination of these dimensions, as these factors are influenced by temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

These independent variables (gender, first-year students, and campus size) were analyzed to determine their quantifiable association with the dependent variable—the frequency with which sexual harassment and assault incidents are recorded. The dependent variable quantifies incidents of sexual harassment and assault within institutions of postsecondary education. It measures the occurrence and predictive factors of these incidents, drawing from reported data.

Additionally, the study's moderating variable was age, particularly among 18- to 24-year-old females. The moderating variable may influence the strength and direction of the relationships between school safety, school-level harassment, and assault.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1. To what extent, if any, is there an association between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, considering the moderating variables of temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors)?

*H*<sub>0</sub>1: There is no statistically significant association between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, as reported to the Title IX office or presented in each university's Clery Act summary when accounting for the moderating variables of temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

*H*<sub>1</sub>1: There is a statistically significant association between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, as reported to the Title IX office or presented in each university's Clery Act summary. This association is moderated by temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

RQ2. To what extent, is there a relationship between the percentage of student population that is first generation and the prevalence of sexual violence on United States colleges and university campuses if any, do school-level demographics, including variables such as race, gender, and SES, quantitatively predict occurrences of sexual harassment and assault incidents on campuses while considering the moderating variables of temporal risk (red zone) behaviors and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

*H<sub>02</sub>*: School-level demographics, including variables such as race, gender, and SES, do not quantitatively predict the occurrence of sexual harassment and assault incidents on campuses when accounting for the moderating variables of temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

*H<sub>12</sub>*: School-level demographics, including variables such as race, gender, and SES, quantitatively predict the occurrence of sexual harassment and assault incidents on campuses. These predictions are moderated by temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

RQ3. What is the relationship, if any, between campus size and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?

*H*<sub>03</sub>: There is no statistically significant relationship between campus size and the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault on United States college universities and campuses.

*H*<sub>13</sub>: There is a statistically significant relationship between campus size and the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence on college campuses.

RQ4. Can gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and the size of the student body predict the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?

*H*<sub>04</sub>: There is no statistically significant relationship between gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and size of student body in predicting the prevalence of sexual violence in colleges and universities in the United States.

*H*<sub>14</sub>: There is a statistically significant relationship between gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and size of student body in predicting the prevalence of sexual violence in colleges and universities in the United States.

Research Questions 1, 2, and 3 require a binary correlation analysis, and Research Question 4 requires a linear regression analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is underpinned by critical theories and concepts, such as the socioecological theory, which underscores the impact of interactions between different

environmental levels on individuals' behaviors and experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, bio-ecological systems are considered in explaining the growth of students' awareness of a beneficial school community (El Zaatari et al., 2022). The study also incorporates intersectionality theory, emphasizing the interconnections among social identities and experiences, particularly along dimensions such as race, gender, and diversity (Crenshaw, 1989; Follingstad & Barczak, 2023).

The rational connections between the framework introduced and the nature of this analysis include the socioecological theory, as it helps conceptualize the individual experiences of students within the broader campus environment, guiding the examination of how school-level factors contribute to the frequency of assaults and harassment of a sexual nature (Cantor et al., 2019). Intersectionality theory, on the other hand, enhances our understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity intersect to shape unique experiences and vulnerabilities, shedding light on potential disparities in these incidents among different demographic groups (Brubaker et al., 2017). The socioecological and intersectionality theories are essential in comprehending and conveying on college campuses in the U.S., sexual assault, and harassment. These theoretical frameworks acknowledge that these issues are influenced by multiple interconnected factors at the interpersonal, organizational, individual, societal, and community levels. By integrating these two theories into research, scholars can develop a more comprehensive mastery of the complexities surrounding sexual harassment and sexual assault on college campuses. This, in turn, can lead to more effective and inclusive interventions and policies to prevent and respond to these issues.

### **Nature of the Study**

This quantitative study answered the research questions using a cross-sectional design. This approach allowed me to collect data from campuses simultaneously, providing a snapshot of various factors. This research design is particularly well-suited for investigating the complex relationships between the predictors and prevalence of school safety, school-level demographics, and the occurrence of multiple forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault as well as harassment incidents on college and university campuses (Privitera, 2017).

The study's cross-sectional design enabled me to compare responses from different data points, including gender, first-generation status, incidence, and university population. A quantitative cross-sectional study can provide valuable empirical data that not only quantifies the extent of the issue but also offers insights into the factors associated with sexual harassment and assault on university and college campuses in the U.S., informing the development of targeted interventions and policies. Previous research by Fleck et al. (2008) and Daigle et al. (2024) highlighted the red zone, also referred to as temporal risk, which encompasses the period identified as the beginning of the academic year until fall or Thanksgiving break, when a significant proportion of sexual assaults on campuses occur.

In line with Narkewicz et al. (2021), the research was used to quantitatively predict the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault on U.S. universities and campuses, as well as the application of Title IX services on U.S. campuses. Specifically, I examined sexual incidents reported in the Clery Act reports for 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Additionally, Cantor et al. (2020) reinforced the need for this study by noting that only a tiny percentage of students who experience sexual assault on university campuses report incidents.

### **Definition of Terms**

The definitions of terms and phrases are listed below, as they were employed in this study:

*Acculturation:* According to O'Connor et al., (1997) acculturation involves a series of stressful life circumstances related to adjusting to a foreign society, requiring the use of one's interpersonal and personal resources (O'Connor et al., 1997).

*Coping self-efficacy:* Coping self-efficacy refers to an individual's ability to manage stressful emotions and potential events effectively. It involves various factors, including confidence in employing problem-focused coping strategies, suppression of negative feelings or thoughts, and a robust support system. (Schwarzer & Renner, 2000).

*Depression:* Severe symptoms of depression are a mood condition that impairs one's feelings and ideas and affects routine tasks like sleeping, eating, and working (National et al., 2013; Wellman & Ratliff, 2024).

*Campus climate:* the quality of interactions and relationships among different groups of individuals on campus. It is influenced by structural variety, behavioral environment, psychological climate, and historical heritage (Cantor et al., 2019).

*Clery Act:* The Jeanne Clery Act safeguards consumers and ensures the truth in reporting on campus crime policy and statistics (Clery, 2021).

*College campuses:* A college campus is the land that has been appropriated as the location of a college, university, and associated buildings. A university campus is a physical area or grounds that typically includes buildings, residences, recreational facilities, and open spaces where students, faculty, and staff engage in academic, social, and extracurricular activities (Cheng, 2004).

*Harassment:* Unwanted sexual advances, solicitations for sexual favors, and other verbal abuse are examples of harassment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

*Indicators of School Crime and Safety:* This report provides official estimates of school safety and crime (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018, p. 26). It contains 23 indicators of school safety and crime, fights, violent deaths, sex crimes, nonfatal teacher and student victimization, school environment, weapons, and alcohol and illicit drug use.

*Red zone:* The phrase “red zone” describes a period during which students are considered to be at high risk for sexual misconduct upon entering college in the United States. Despite the lack of empirical support for a delineated red zone, it is typically understood, and campuses implement prevention measures from the first 2 weeks of the autumn semester through the Thanksgiving holiday (Follingstad et al., 2022).

*Yellow zone:* According to Rennison (2018), yellow zone behaviors include one-time occurrences like buttock or breast grabbing and sexist remarks. While not a policy violation, these behaviors hurt the injured party’s experience within the Institute of Higher Education and are detrimental to the campus climate.

*Green zone:* These behaviors are not sexual harassment (Cordova et al., 2023).

The actions can include performance counseling, coaching, and touching in a way that could not reasonably be considered sexual.

*Temporal risk:* Temporal risk captures the dynamic nature of risk over time, especially when decisions span intervals between the initial choice and the eventual resolution (Matray, 2020).

*Title IX:* A civil rights law, Title IX is essential in shaping the educational landscape for students. Title IX has a wide range of impacts; for this study, the focus is on the mandates related to sexual harassment and assault cases, as well as the review process for such cases. It aims to create safer student environments (Brubaker, 2019).

### **Assumptions**

This quantitative study included several assumptions. Hathaway (1995) stated that researchers should choose an approach in which they believe knowledge, reality, and the appropriate measurement method are integral to the process. Albers (2017) discussed that quantitative methods are chosen in psychology research for several reasons:

1. **Measurable data:** Quantitative methods enable researchers to collect data that can be easily quantified, analyzed, and compared using statistical techniques. This will help draw concrete conclusions and make predictions.
2. **Objective findings:** These methods can provide more objective findings as they rely on numerical data, reducing the influence of personal biases.

3. Generalizability: Quantitative research often aims for generalizability, allowing findings to be applied to broader populations beyond the specific study sample and across academic disciplines.
4. Replicability: Utilizing standardized measures and statistical analyses in quantitative research enhances the study's replicability, allowing future researchers to evaluate and verify the findings.
5. Understanding causality: Quantitative methods can help understand the causal relationships between different variables, providing insight into cause-and-effect relationships.

These advantages were weighed against specific research questions to determine the most suitable method for the research.

Researchers have investigated the impact of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, on campuses. Still, the topic has not been explored in research in this way: Conducting a comprehensive analysis of the connection between students at the school, including the concept of temporal risk (red zone), pervasive behaviors (yellow zone), and reported sexual harassment and assault incidents. Furthermore, they are integrating school-level demographics, including gender, race, and SES, into the analysis to uncover potential disparities in experiences influencing the predictors and prevalence of sexual violence in U.S. universities and college campuses. Whereas prior studies have delved into the results of sexual harassment and attacks on campuses, this study took a unique approach by integrating various dimensions of campus safety prevalence and predictors of risk.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Given the delimitations of this study, there is a desire to narrow the research scope. The research questions are straightforward and define what the research aims to address. Variables and parameters have been established to examine gender and age, particularly among 18- to 24-year-old females. Molstad et al. (2023) stated that individuals under the age of 25 demonstrated an increased risk, with the age range 18 through 24 being more vulnerable to sexual assault than any other age group.

As variables, school-level demographics and first-generation students include several subvariables, including race and SES. SES is not solely defined by poverty, as Payne's (2009) research indicated, but also encompasses finances, belonging, and family access to education. Petravskaite & Cunichina (2019) stated that SES is typically measured by assessing education, income, social belonging, or a combination of these dimensions, as these factors are influenced by temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone).

School-level demographics, gender, and first-generation students were used to measure the occurrence and prevalence of incidents reported across multiple campuses within 120 colleges and universities in the United States. The moderating variable may influence the strength and direction of the relationships between predictors and the prevalence of incidents associated with school safety, school-level demographics, and the frequency of reported incidents of sexual harassment and assault.

## Limitations

Limitations and barriers may include access to participants, access to data, ethical considerations, participant bias, instrumentation, and validity. Quantitative researchers may occasionally encounter unanticipated ethical constraints related to the research questions posed (Wang et al., 2021). Ethical concerns can arise when investigating sensitive topics or situations, collaborating with human subjects, or using sensitive personal histories. Ethical limitations can limit the scope and design of research studies.

Buizza, et al. (2022) investigated the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on research and scholarship in the context of reduced campus attendance due to lockdown measures, resulting in a shift from in-person to online education, which led to a decrease in the number of students physically present on college campuses, which in turn had implications for research conducted and data collected between 2019 and 2022. Barrie's study revealed a notable decline in research productivity during this period, raising concerns about the potential data distortion that could inaccurately reflect the incidents at U.S. universities and college campuses.

According to Taris et al. (2021), biases and limitations in examining the predictors of the prevalence of sexual violence on campus may include the following:

- Selection bias: There may be challenges in reaching a representative sample of students, as on-campus enrollment has declined with the emergence of hybrid and online options following the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic may have caused significant changes in campus environments, making it challenging to generalize findings compared to other periods.

- Social desirability bias: This bias can significantly impact research results, particularly in self-reports that are necessary to bring incidents to the college's attention. As a result, this may lead to inaccurate data.
- Recall bias: Trauma may or can lead to recall bias, as participants may not accurately remember past events or experiences.

Researchers need to be aware of the limitations of cross-sectional studies. They need to address the associations among the rates of change throughout the reporting process and the action items following an audit. This includes monitoring the effectiveness of these action items, their outcomes, and institutional accountability.

### **Significance**

This study is significant in that I investigated the considerable issues of assault and sexual harassment on a college campus, particularly among 18- to 24-year-old females, and its impact on students' college experience and the campus climate, by intricately examining the relationships between predictors and prevalence, school-level demographics, and the occurrence of sexual assault and harassment incidents.

The study has the potential to make significant contributions to academia and society by advancing knowledge in fields such as sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education. Employing a quantitative approach grounded in socioecological theory and intersectionality theory, I examined how individual predictors, demographic factors, and environmental elements intersect to shape campus safety and the frequency with which sexual assault and harassment occur.

Molstad (2023) found that although little research has examined the effects of sexual misconduct, its impact is significant on the academic achievements of university students. Furthermore, the effect is consequential. Additionally, there is potential for substantial long-term benefits across sociological disciplines, leading to positive social change.

### **Summary**

Sexual harassment and assault pose significant threats to students' well-being, academic success, and the overall campus climate (Follingstad et al., 2022). Addressing this study from a quantitative perspective, I employed a cross-sectional research design to collect data simultaneously across multiple campuses, providing a snapshot of various factors. This study directly addressed potential safety and preventive measures that can be immediately implemented in this geographical area and can be easily applied nationwide. The importance of this study cannot be overstated. Understanding the widespread impact of sexual assault or harassment is crucial for creating education and prevention programs, creating safe environments for students, fostering a culture of reporting and accountability, and contributing to the well-being and academic success of all students.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Sexual harassment and assault in higher education institutions in the United States, in particular among 18- to 24-year-old females, represent a pervasive and pressing issue. The prevalence of such incidents poses significant threats to students' well-being, academic success, and the overall campus climate, designating specific periods, such as the notorious "red zone," as high-risk for these incidents. The red zone typically occurs during the first several weeks or months of the academic year. It is characterized by an influx of new students, increased social activities, heightened alcohol consumption, and similar social dynamics, making it imperative for institutions to implement awareness and prevention campaigns (Follingstad et al., 2022). The temporal risk, acknowledging variations in risk over time, further complicates the landscape surrounding sexual misconduct on campuses. The research problem at the core of this study is a quantitative exploration of the connection between the predictability and prevalence of school safety of sexual assault and harassment incidents, specifically within the 18- to 24-year-old female demographic. Considering the influence of school-level demographics, the study aims to develop targeted strategies for fostering a safer and more inclusive campus environment, recognizing that individuals within the 18–24 age range are particularly vulnerable to distinct types of sexual assault (Molstad et al., 2023). According to university attendees, there is a lack of understanding about the actual campus investigative and adjudication procedures and the outcomes of publicized cases, underscoring the need to address this social issue (Fedina et al., 2016).

As a response to this urgent need, the purpose of this quantitative study was to analyze the connections or links between independent variables, predictors surrounding school safety and school-level demographics, and the prevalence of reported sexual assault or harassment on college and university campuses. The study also considered age as a moderating variable within the 18- to 24-year-old female demographic, examining its influence on the relationships among the variables and the frequency of reported incidents. This introduction provides a concise summary of the current literature, establishes a clear understanding of the problem, and previews the key sections of the chapter. The chapter is organized into several main areas: literature search and strategy; the theoretical foundation; key variables and conceptions of sexual harassment, sexual assault, Title IX, and the Clery Act; and the red zone (temporal) and yellow zone (pervasive behaviors).

### **Literature Search and Strategy**

The purpose of literature search strategies is to gather relevant and reliable information from sources. By using effective search strategies, researchers can identify relevant literature to gain a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of a specific topic. The exhaustive literature search will help identify gaps in the research and facilitate the analysis of existing evidence.

The following keywords were used when conducting this research: *sexual assault, harassment, non-consensual, intimate partner violence, college campuses, higher education institutions, campus community, red zone, temporal risk, critical period, yellow zone, pervasive behaviors, risk-prone situations, indicators of school crime and safety,*

*crime indicators, risk assessments, Clery Act, disclosures of crime, safety metrics, Title IX, gender equity, civil rights in education, campus climate, perceived safety, and institutional culture.* Databases included, but were not limited to, APA PsycINFO, Criminal Justice Database, SAGE Journals, PsycArticles, PsycEXTRA, PubMed, Clarivate Web of Science, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and various collegiate libraries, such as Walden University.

The initial search parameters were limited to peer-reviewed and full-text articles. Current articles were used to identify additional relevant articles. I focused on relevant studies published between 2018 and 2023 in the literature review.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Ideally, the theoretical framework is vital for conceptual clarity, organization, and structure of the research, as it establishes context, provides understanding within the existing body of knowledge, builds credibility by grounding the research, guides the use of established, well-recognized concepts and theoretical frameworks, and adds credibility to the body of work. The research design is grounded in a theoretical framework that influences the research approach and guides the interpretation of findings. The theoretical framework provides a lens for interpreting the findings. It is an essential component that strengthens the research study's intellectual rigor and depth (Rudzinski, 2019).

Critical theories and concepts, such as socioecological theory, underpinned this study, underscoring the impact of interactions between different environmental levels on individuals' behaviors and experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological models encompass an evolving body of theory related to research on human development

processes and conditions, as well as the environmental factors in which subjects live. Bronfenbrenner's theory, first developed in 1979, has substantially changed the development and evolution of basic constructs and corresponding research designs. Additionally, bio-ecological systems are considered when explaining the growth of pupils' perceptions of community development in school (El Zaatari et al., 2022). The central concept of belonging also connects with Payne's (2009) SES study. A sense of connectedness benefits students' academic motivation and emotional development (Longaretti, 2020).

The philosophical relationships between the framework provided and this investigation's purpose are intricately woven through the lens of socioecological theory. This theoretical framework is vital for comprehending and contextualizing students' individual experiences within the expansive, interconnected fabric of the broader campus environment. Cantor et al. (2019) posited that the socioecological theory recognizes that human behavior is shaped by a complex interplay of factors ranging from individual characteristics to broader societal influences.

Intersectionality theory, on the other hand, enhances our understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity intersect to shape unique experiences and vulnerabilities, shedding light on potential disparities in these incidents among different demographics (Worthen & Wallace, 2017). Yoon et al. (2012) and Gantman et al. (2021) stated that these identities and their intersections may affect sexual harassment risk and results, according to new research and theory. Furthermore, utilizing intersectionality theory as an analytical framework enabled the study to examine disparities in rates, risks, and the

occurrence of sexual harassment victimization, while accounting for perpetration by faculty, staff, and peers (Campe, 2021).

### **Literature Review: Key Variables and Concepts**

#### **Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment is a serious issue that involves unwanted, unwelcome sexual behaviors that create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment. In the U.S. institutions of higher education, discussions of sexual harassment are informed and detailed by Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, which set out to minimize and address sexual discrimination, harassment, and assault in higher learning institutions that receive federal funding (Dary, 2020; Weber & Ratliff, 2024).

Sexual harassment on college campuses is a significant concern that affects students' safety, well-being, and educational opportunities. Research demonstrates that 50% to 90% of undergraduate women experience sexual misconduct during their first 2 years of college (Cafer & Rosenthal, 2022). The result is increased physical health issues, mental health concerns, and disruption of academic progress. Adverse outcomes of sexual harassment can include shame and guilt, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, addictive behaviors, and disruption to academic success (Mucci et al., 2024). According to Cantor et al. (2015), 34.6% of students who experience sexual harassment or assault face adverse effects on their academic performance. These effects include decreased satisfaction with their educational experience, changed views of instructors and the campus community, and lower overall performance. Harassment can originate from peers, faculty, and staff members inside higher education institutions. Heywood et al.

(2022) stated that one in two (48.0%) students had experienced sexual harassment, which is an increase of 13.4% from Cantor's (2015) research, and one in three (30.6%) had experienced sexual assault.

Sexual harassment on college campuses is expected, and as a result, there are public health concerns. Survivors of sexual harassment are at risk for countless negative health consequences (Hersch, 2018). Analyzing survey results from more than 2,000 college students in the Midwestern United States, reciprocal causal effects considered addictive behaviors (e.g., alcohol and other drugs) as well as mental health concerns (e.g., depression, anger, anxiety; Li et al., 2023; Rau et al., 2023). Individuals with different racial, gender, and cultural identities often label sexual harassment behaviors differently, complicating efforts to establish an accurate picture of harassment (Bursik & Gefter, 2011).

Sexual harassment on U.S. college campuses is a prevalent issue that has gained attention in recent years. Institutes of higher education are required to address and prevent sexual misconduct under the guidelines of Title IX, a federal civil regulation that prohibits discrimination based on sex in education (Brubaker, 2019). Many colleges have implemented policies and resources, such as awareness campaigns, reporting mechanisms, and support services, to support survivors and prevent future incidents (Guiora, 2022). Mennicke et al.'s (2022) research determined that sexual harassment and violence prevention should be more extensive and align with a socioecological approach. Mechanisms can be applied to expand the role of students, institutional leadership, staff,

faculty, and community stakeholders in developing education and prevention programs that play a crucial role in promotion and prevention.

### **Sexual Assault**

Sexual assault on college campuses remains a critical issue, including campuses and universities in the Midwest, where statistics indicate it is a widespread problem (Papp & McClelland, 2021). Because of this pervasive pattern, universities have resources such as counseling services, reporting mechanisms, survivor support groups, and prevention programs (Orchowski et al., 2023). Additionally, universities and college campuses should have developed policies and implemented procedures to address and prevent sexual assault.

Sexual assault is still a problem on college campuses, continuing to be a significant concern that is receiving widespread attention at the national level. The study by Fedina et al. (2016) from the National Institute of Justice defined sexual assault with the following terms:

- *Prevalence*: The reported percentage of college students who reported sexual victimization since entering higher education.
- *Unwanted sexual contact*: An unwanted kind of non-consensual physical contact with another person's body for sexual purposes. The critical component is the lack of consent, where one party does not agree to the contract because they are unwilling, unable, or otherwise unable to give their free and informed consent.

- *Sexual coercion* involves the use of intimidation, threats, or violence to get someone to participate in sexual acts against their will.
- *Incapacitated or alcohol-related sexual assault*: This refers to sexual contact or activity that occurs when one person is unable to consent due to intoxication from alcohol or other illicit substances.
- *Broadly defined sexual assault*: A general phrase that encompasses a wide range of non-consensual sexual activities. It is considered a form of sexual misconduct and refers to any sexual act that a person does not agree to or is coerced into.
- *She was physically forced, completed, and attempted rape*: Defined as oral intercourse, vaginal penetration, or anal sexual relations involving the use of force or threat of force.

Basile (2015) and Nightingale (2023) defined sexual assault as “a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without the consent of the victim or against someone unable to consent or refuse (p. 18).” Operationalized by the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]) and the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), sexual violence is attempted rape; rape; being made to penetrate someone else; as unwanted sexual penetration committed through coercion; unwanted sexual contact, defined as the unwanted touching of a sexual nature not to include penetration; and noncontact unwanted sexual encounters, defined as unwanted noncontact behavior of a sexual nature or unwanted verbal comments that equate to forms of sexual harassment (Black et al., 2011).

The framing of sexual assault matters because what is measured determines which corresponding prevention and response mechanisms are implemented. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) collects campus sexual assault data. It defines sexual assault as encompassing unwanted and nonconsensual penetration (rape) achieved through the use or threat of force or incapacitation, as well as sexual battery, unwanted and nonconsensual, forced sexual touching, which includes attempted rape (Narvaja, 2016).

Sexual assault in universities remains a public health concern. Mellins et al. (2017) stated that since enrolling in college, 22% of students claim to experience at least one incident of sexual misconduct (defined as sexual touching, attempted penetration [oral, vaginal, anal, other], or completed penetration). Female nonconforming coeds reported the highest rates (28% and 38%, respectively). This research considered increased risk factors, binge drinking, social living arrangements (fraternity/sorority memberships), and experiencing sexual assault before attending college, as elevated re-victimization rates were standard reports. This information has prompted universities to implement policies and programs to minimize or prevent sexual misconduct. The review by Holmes et al. (2015) highlighted the effects of specific preventative measures and the implementation of a reporting system.

The AAU investigates sexual assault and misconduct, and the differing definitions assigned by the Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) acknowledge four types of nonconsensual contact to be included as sexual misconduct and sexual assault (Cantor et al., 2015). Penetration is defined as when one inserts a finger, penis, or another object inside someone else's mouth, vagina, or anus, or when someone's mouth (including

tongue) makes contact with a person's genitals. Sexual touching, also considered assault, includes grabbing someone's chest, breast, groin, crotch, or buttocks and rubbing, groping, grabbing, or sexually kissing another person. According to Cantor et al. (2019), physical force is characterized as someone restraining you with their body weight, holding down your arms, and engaging in striking or kicking, including using or threatening to use a weapon against you. It is imperative to note that in the future, incapacitation will be defined as an individual being unable to consent or discontinue what is happening if the individual is asleep, passed out, or under the influence of substances, legal or illicit.

Halstead et al. (2017) spoke to a lack of consistency in how sexual violence was referred to and measured, with a focus on data looking at formal disclosure, informal disclosure, families' and friends' thoughts of disclosure, the process/effects of disclosure on the survivor, barriers to disclosure, and social support in the disclosure process. Furthermore, this study examined support services and additional resources on college campuses, focusing primarily on students' understanding and use of these resources and their subsequent suggestions.

Sexual misconduct on campuses in the United States remains a contentious topic that affects the present student community and their families, as well as prospective students and their families who consider campus safety before choosing a college for their family members (Gantman & Paluck, 2022). The various methods used by modern college campuses to deliver academic instruction, including traditional face-to-face classes, hybrid courses, and fully online formats, may skew crime reporting statistics. It is

estimated that 80% of assaults go unreported, making the data incomplete and less accurate (M). It is vital to increase awareness of sexual misconduct incidents as well as educate students on how to be an ally (Beaver, 2017).

### **Title IX and the Clery Act**

Currently, 7,500 college and university campuses are required to disclose crime statistics on or adjacent to their campuses. The Jeanne Clery Act promotes transparency and accountability through the annual release of security reports. Kiss and White (2013) reported that a key feature of the Clery Act is the requirement for institutions of higher education to report, in detail, a wide range of campus security authorities. The Jeanne Clery Act has three key initiatives: (a) impose a standardized process by which campuses record campus crime, (b) mandate transparency by sharing accurate data so that students, employees, and key stakeholders can make informed decisions, and (c) reduce criminal activity at institutions of higher education (Reed, 2015). The requirement includes a multidisciplinary approach involving on-campus centers, such as student health, mental health, and women's centers, as well as various programs and departments. The extensive prevention and accountability approach will also apply to officials who supervise students, including deans, residential directors, coaches, and judicial affairs personnel within colleges or universities. Under the Jeanne Clery Act, any center or program established by the educational institution to respond to victims of sexual misconduct and fulfill the requirements set by the campus crime authority is obligated to do so (Lombard & Jones, 2012).

The Annual Security Report (ASR), as mandated by the Jeanne Clery Act, is crucial for prospective students and parents to make informed decisions about university options. Although reporting universities have responded favorably to the Clery Act, ongoing difficulties remain after its implementation (Gerhing & Callaway, 1997; Jackson, 2023). These difficulties expose college administrators' uncertainty regarding reporting obligations and the reliability of including accurate data in admission packages.

Goodmark (2022) stated that the Clery Act has undergone substantial modifications, as indicated by the Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization Act of 2021 and the issuance of updated Jeanne Clery Act guidance by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) in the form of the Clery Act Appendix for the FSA Handbook in 2020. The 2016 edition has been superseded by this version, which includes additional sections related to the Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Crime Statistics Act (Kyle et al., 2017). This includes U.S. college and university campuses that are required to report under the DOE mandate issued in 2020.

From a student's perspective, 107 students acknowledged familiarity with the Jeanne Clery Act but lacked understanding of crime logs and reporting mechanisms. Only 27% reported understanding the Clery Act, and fewer than 10% used the data when choosing where to attend school. Furthermore, the information provided on the website or in admissions brochures was not transparent during the admissions process, indicating a need to improve the overall reporting process and campus safety.

Weis & Bittner (2022). (indicated that more than 21 million individuals were identified as either full- or part-time students in college. Welding (2023) reported that

enrollment figures are expected to increase to 22 million by spring 2023. It is noted that academic delivery methods have changed; nonetheless, it becomes necessary to heighten our awareness of the lived experiences of those students in college. Data indicated that 25% of women are victims of sexual violence. Though the sheer magnitude of campus sexual violence federal legislation increases, there remains minimal evidence suggesting that rates of sexual violence are decreasing.

Title IX, a federal civil rights statute, is part of the Education Amendments of 1974 [Public Law 93-380] (Harris, 2019). It forbids sex-based discrimination in the educational system and any activities that receive federal financial aid. This includes addressing any form of sexual harassment, assault, or misconduct on college campuses. Under Title IX law, universities and college campuses are required to implement prevention programs and marketing campaigns, investigate all forms of sexual misconduct, and provide support to those affected by such incidents (Richards & Rennison, 2022). The Campus Climate Survey, part of the (ARC3) survey, The Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Consortium, was intentionally developed to evaluate various Title IX violations, both victimization and perpetrators of sexual misconduct, spanning incidents such as dating violence and sexual harassment (Tilley et al., 2020). When developing the campus safety reports, the Jeanne Clery Act defines victims' rights, establishes geographic boundaries, defines affirmative consent, and requires the publication and reference of a sexual misconduct policy. It is essential to recognize that the Title IX statutes, as intended in the 2020 Final Rule, cover sexual harassment and forms of misconduct based on sex; in addition, the Jeanne Clery Act

covers crimes of domestic violence, stalking, dating violence, and sexual assault (Wareham et al., 2022).

Richards and Gillespie (2023) stated that geography is defined in the Jeanne Clery Act as crimes that occur on all property within or immediately adjacent to campus, all campus buildings, and structures, including buildings in or on non-campus property that the institution owns or controls. This would include parks, trails, fields, academic buildings, institutionally owned, controlled, or affiliated housing, and laboratories. Developing an all-inclusive, comprehensive list is difficult, but the report has a commonly accepted template that provides insight into geography.

Madani & Kazmi (2023) identified with the Federal Campus Sexual Assault Victims Bill of Rights., Learning institutions are mandated to notify individuals about their rights when reporting all forms of sexual misconduct to campus security, local law enforcement, and student services. The Student Services department on campus is to assist in the communication process of victim requests, granting both the accused and accuser equal time to have others available at any proceedings, informing everyone of the results of any findings, and apprising the initial reporter of the sexual assault of further student services and accommodations to assist in academic progress.

Published college safety reports serve several vital purposes. The safety reports are designed to provide all students, including prospective applicants, with transparency and information about campus safety and security, and to inform their identified support systems and the broader community. U.S. colleges and universities are to provide an informative link to access the Title IX office learning how to file a complaint on their

website as it speaks to policies and processes established by the college, use a consent policy which describes consent as understanding personal preference, having an option for confidential reporting voluntary or mutual; have an amnesty policy regarding alcohol and illicit substances, that is outlined in the student code of conduct for students making good faith reports of sexual misconduct (Campus Safety and Security; U.S. DOE, 2023). Published campus safety reports are a significant tool in promoting transparency and sharing information on campus safety and security. Campuses are to execute a campus climate survey every 2 years and publish the outcomes of the study on their website; seek survivor consent before initiating an investigation; and report data regarding sexual misconduct (i.e., stalking, dating violence, domestic violence, and sexual assault) yearly to the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (Richards et al., 2015). By making these reports publicly available, colleges and universities aim to promote safety awareness and provide valuable information that helps individuals make informed decisions about their education and well-being. These reports can also serve as a tool for holding institutions accountable and continuously improving campus safety measures.

Affirmative consent on college campuses refers to a policy regarding sexual activity where all parties involved provide explicit, informed, and voluntary agreement to participate in each sexual act. Instead of the older standard “no means no,” affirmative consent holds that “only yes means yes” (Jozkowski, 2015, p. 16). This means that throughout the sexual encounter, consent must be ongoing, and it is understood that it can be revoked at any time (Cruz, 2022). Madani & Kazmi (2023) stated that campus affirmative consent policies seek to reduce sexual misconduct and assault by ensuring

clarity by expressing the willingness to engage in specific sexual acts, promoting communication that speaks to desires and boundaries, making sure everyone is comfortable with the progression of physical intimacy, and establishing mutuality by giving and getting consent. To provide consent, parties must be sober and capable of giving explicit, informed consent. This involves educating all parties, including diverse cultures and populations, about consent and establishing accountability for implementing and navigating policies and procedures for both students and the institution.

In navigating the diverse landscape of higher education, students must familiarize themselves with the specific policies and resources tailored to their campus (Brubaker, 2019). One critical federal regulation, the Jeanne Clery Act, underscores the United States' commitment to campus safety. It mandates the release of information about crimes on and around campuses and applies to institutions in the Midwest. Its research spans eight states and includes public and private nonprofit institutions with varying student enrollments. A thorough examination identified 122 institutions encompassing 358 campuses (Campus Safety and Security; U.S. DOE, 2023). The Clery Act's impact is evident through its provision of timely warnings and annual security reports, fostering transparency in campus safety matters.

On the other hand, Title IX is a federal civil rights statute that provides guidance and protection for any education program that receives federal financial aid. The Jeanne Clery Act and Title IX are crucial in ensuring the safety and well-being of students on U.S. campuses.

Title IX and the Clery Act aim to create safer campus environments by promoting transparency, accountability, and fair treatment of all individuals. They also emphasize the importance of preventing, properly addressing, and reducing incidents of sexual harassment and assault, contributing to the overall safety and well-being of students, colleges, and faculty within educational environments. By working in conjunction, the Clery Act and Title IX create a framework for promoting and ensuring campus safety (Kimble et al., 2008).

### **Red Zone**

An *Inside Higher Ed* (2019) article addressed the red zone and called for higher education institutions to take a more preventative stance. The article stated: While many higher education institutions offer programs that educate students about the Red Zone and how to navigate this period, some institutions have ineffective programs. These programs merely check a box and oversimplify the issue, failing to evaluate the negative culture of sexual misconduct on campus properly. A U.S. Department of Justice survey in September and October 2014, examining nine colleges, indicated that 629 sexual assaults occurred among first-year students, which was higher than the total amount of assaults that occurred during the succeeding four months combined (Bauer-Wolf, 2019).

Sexual misconduct and violence on college campuses remain a severe issue that continues to interfere with the college experience for many college students (Papp & McClelland, 2021). The immensity of this situation is that 43.8% of females experience unwanted sexual touching, coercion, and rape (Matray, 2020). Approximately 20% of

females reported surviving a completed or attempted sexual assault in college (National Criminal Justice Reference Service [NCJRS], 2007; Papp & McClelland, 2021).

The concept of “Red Zone” and the book “*I Never Called It Rape*” by Robin Warshaw first appeared in 1994. The Red Zone is a temporal period that is identified as the initial weeks of the academic year, when there might be an increased risk of sexual violence on college campuses. The book focused on acquaintance rape; however, it was found: “For first-year college women, the red zone of danger is a period between move-in day and the first holiday break. Repeatedly, women are raped during these weeks by men they met on campus” (Warshaw, 1994, p.157). Warshaw proposed that the new social opportunities and environments offered during the fall semester placed these female students, who were new to campus, naïve, and vulnerable to advances by upper-class men (Barone et al., 2007)

During the red zone period, the prevalence of campus sexual misconduct is starkly illustrated by multiple institutional and national surveys (McMahon et al., 2018). In 2019, the AAU survey of 33 college campuses found that 13% of all survey respondents indicated experiencing various forms of nonconsensual sexual contact (Cantor et al., 2020). A 2017 study found that, out of their sample of 834 female students at a midwestern university, 34% reported being sexually assaulted; however, only 6% reported it to any campus official, and only 2% filed formal complaints (Holland & Cortina, 2018). The AAU survey sheds some light on the red zone assault victimization, finding that students chose not to report sexual assault for a variety of reasons, including (a) a belief that the behavior they experienced was not that serious, (b) a belief system

that is based on guilt and as a result they can handle it themselves, (c) embarrassment and shame, (d) they felt that they had a role in what happened and did not want the other person to get in trouble, (e) the event happened in the context that started as consensual, and (f) the perception that the resources would give the victim the help they needed (Cantor et al., 2020).

The outline of the Red Zone in public-facing discourse continued to solidify. For example, the *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police*, published by the U. S. Department of Justice (2002), stated that “college students are most vulnerable to sexual assault during the first few weeks of the freshman and sophomore years” Matray (2020), Kimble et al. (2008), and Hasinoff and Krueger (2020) indicated that information concerning sexual assault and the associated dangers was circulated regularly on university and college campuses, identifying the Red Zone risk for campus sexual assault before extensive research on the topic was completed and published.

The Red Zone period is characterized by an increased risk of sexual violence, particularly for first-year students, due to factors such as orientation events, parties, and new social dynamics (Follingstad & Barczak, 2023). Educational institutions must take proactive measures that are purposeful and with intent during this time to inform, provide education, prevent sexual violence, and provide support for students.

The concept of a Red Zone is identified as a temporal period in which students are said to be at increased risk for unwanted sexual encounters. The period identified as risky varies from the first few days or weeks of the initial fall semester for first-year students to the entire first semester for both first-year students, including those who transfer from

other institutions (Matray, 2020). The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services of the U.S. Department of Justice stated that “College students are the most vulnerable to rape during the first few weeks of the first and second years. In fact, the first few days of the first year are the riskiest. Kimble et al. (2008) and Daigle et al. (2024) found that first-year students were at a higher risk for unwanted sexual experiences than second-year students, particularly throughout the fall semester. Additionally, conventional wisdom among institutions of higher education is that the highest risk of sexual assault is in the first or second year of school.

Sexual misconduct impacts college students. Specifically, first-year students demonstrate an increased risk of experiencing sexual assault (Carey et al., 2015; Cranney, 2015). The most common factors associated with sexual assault are increased binge drinking, chronic alcohol use, recreational illicit drug use, and parties (Abbey, 2002; Mellins et al., 2017; Messman-Moore et al., 2013; Moylan et al., 2019), also including casual sex encounters, such as hooking up (Flack et al., 2016; Moylan et al., 2019). Public attention surrounding the term “red zone” suggests that students be vigilant during this period. For example, an advocacy organization, Know Your IX (n.d.), writes that 84% of female victims report being sexually assaulted during their first four semesters on campus. The organization Me Too Movement (n.d.) suggests that the Red Zone is the time spanning the start of the fall semester through Thanksgiving break, when more than 50% of all college sexual assaults are statistically found to occur. The University of Minnesota started the Red Flag Campaign in the fall of 2021; the campaign encourages friends and other campus community members to say something when they see warning

signs (red flags) for sexual assault. Edrington (2023) discussed South Dakota State University's "It is On Us" campaign, a proactive initiative aimed at eradicating sexual misconduct and victimization on college campuses. The university is actively participating in the cultural movement to alter the prevailing situation on college campuses significantly. Drawing from Talcott's (2013) findings at North Dakota State University, it is revealed that a considerable number of college students facing sexual harassment or assault are victimized by individuals known to them. Talcott further emphasized that freshmen females are particularly vulnerable, given their new surroundings, reduced parental supervision, and engagement in novel activities like alcohol and illicit drug use as they navigate social interactions, addressing this critical issue.

National Broadcasting Company news highlights that the period from the beginning of the fall term to Thanksgiving break is the Red Zone. A period during which students, especially first-year students, face a heightened risk of experiencing sexual misconduct on campus (Bowman et al., 2018). This research examines critical aspects of the red zone phenomenon, including its contributing factors, the impact on victims and the campus community, and an evaluation of existing prevention and support measures. Based on victim reports, the study aims to formulate actionable responses for survivors and foster discussions within the college community about potential interventions and policies to reduce the prevalence of this issue (Mennicke et al., 2022).

## **Yellow Zone**

In their research, Richards and Rennison (2022) noted that yellow-zone faculty, staff, and students frequently encounter misbehavior that falls between clearly acceptable and unacceptable categories. As a result, the consequences that go unmanaged through conventional Title IX compliance models are viewed negatively in the campus community. Colleges and universities must develop and adopt campaigns and transparent policies to promote positive social change. Encouraging open discussions about healthy relationships and boundaries can help create a safer and more respectful campus environment. Additionally, providing avenues for reporting and addressing problematic behaviors can help support those affected and prevent the normalization of inappropriate conduct. (Cantor et al., 2019).

There are various forms of sexual harassment, such as unwanted gender harassment, compulsion over sex, and sexual attention (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; GoAli, 1995; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Leskinen et al., 2011). Using pressure to achieve sexual coercion is known as manipulation or force to make someone engage in sexual activity against their will. A serious violation of an individual's trust, autonomy, and consent is a wide range of behaviors, including emotional manipulation, *Quid pro quo*, and threats of physical force. Unwanted sexual behavior refers to any form of sexual behavior or advances that are unwelcome, unwarranted, or not reciprocated. Unwanted sexual attention is a form of harassment and can have a significant negative impact on the well-being of the person experiencing it. (Fitzgerald et al., 1988, 1995; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Leskinen et al., 2011). Gender harassment is described as a form of

harassment that is based on an individual's gender. It can include unwelcome behavior, comments, or actions that target someone precisely because of their gender. This type of harassment can create a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment for the campus community (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; GojAli, 1995; Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Leskinen et al., 2011; Klein & Martin, 2021).

Richards and Rennison (2022) emphasized the difficulty posed by yellow-zone actions reported to Title IX offices, acknowledging their influence on the individual making the complaint and the broader campus community. However, until Title IX investigations confirm a policy breach, institutions often do not address most yellow-zone conduct. Klein et al. (2021) highlighted the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment (SH) in academic settings, with a percentage between 37% and 67% of students reporting such events. These primarily involve inappropriate comments (referred to as pervasive yellow-zone behaviors) made by fellow students. According to Richards (2019), participants frequently discovered that their accusations of sexual harassment were deemed unworthy of punishment, indicating a notable disparity between the experience of the survivors and the educational consequences of sexual harassment.

Rennison (2018) discussed specific actions in the yellow zone behaviors as singular occurrences, like buttock or breast grabs (i.e., not pervasive), as well as bullying or sexist comments (i.e., not severe). While often not considered a sanctionable event, such occurrences can significantly adversely affect the affected student's experience with the Institution of Higher Education (IHE) and be detrimental to the school. This observation aligns with Richards' (2015) research findings, revealing that the complaint

and the investigation process within Title IX offices, coupled with the lack of findings of a violation, do not correspond with prevailing notions of what constitutes sexual harassment. The disconnect between expectations for safety and existing policies creates confusion and frustration among both complainants and campus leadership.

Research conducted by Mazer and Percival (1989), Pinchevsky et al. (2020), Sandler (1994), and Klein and Martin (2021) has shown that sexual harassment can have negative consequences for students. These consequences include decreased ambition, lower self-confidence, impaired concentration, insomnia, depression, another mental health diagnosis, and physical health issues. A study conducted at Iowa State University, as referenced by Sandler (1994), indicated that 13% of students refrained from attending courses or work owing to the perceived threat of sexual approaches. Additional research (Spencer et al., 2024) takes into consideration that sexual harassment and sexual assault at Midwest campuses have developed prevention programs to reduce the negative consequences of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Sexual harassment poses a significant threat to students, like issues of alcohol or illicit drug abuse, eating disorders, and mental health diseases, as highlighted by Guyton et al. (1989). The uncontrolled prevalence of yellow-zone behaviors underscores the need to address and prevent such misconduct to safeguard college students' welfare.

Sexual harassment, misconduct, and victimization among university attendees are demonstrated by low academic results, deteriorating mental health, and a poor sense of well-being. Hill and Silva (2005), for instance, discovered that 35% of the male students and 68% of the female students identified being traumatized by their sexual harassment

victimization, while 16% of female students reported that their victimization hindered their ability to pay attention in class. Other research has found that college students who experience forms of sexual misconduct victimization have adverse mental health and substance abuse outcomes (McGinley et al., 2016). Lesbian, gay, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) sexual harassment victims report higher rates of educational disruption, feeling ashamed, guilty, and embarrassed, while also feeling more fearful than pupils who identify as heterosexual students (Hill & Silva, 2005).

An additional confirmed result of being a victim of betrayal by an institution is what sexual misbehavior feels like. Betrayal by institutions occurs when an institution fails to prevent or address harm or trauma that falls within its scope of responsibility. This can manifest when the institution ignores, minimizes, or mishandles reports of misconduct, abuse, or injustice, thereby perpetuating further harm to those affected (Cafer & Rosenthal, 2022; Smith & Freyd, 2013). Compared to victims who have not encountered institutional betrayal, sexual assault victims who have experienced this type of betrayal are more likely to report adverse outcomes linked to trauma and anxiety. (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

According to Rennison (2018), the yellow-zone behaviors include one-time occurrences like buttock or breast grabs, as well as bullying or sexist remarks (i.e., not severe). Although this conduct may not constitute a policy infringement, it can negatively impact the harmed individual's experience within the IHE and is detrimental to the campus climate. Whether or not investigations are conducted, yellow-zone behaviors reported to Title IX offices are viewed as problematic by the complainant and many

others in the campus community. Nevertheless, many of these yellow-zone actions go unchecked by the institution unless a policy infringement is shown through an investigation. The disregard for and development of promising practices for these incidents prompted this particular issue. To achieve this, we offer six unique pieces that examine the characteristics and scope of yellow-zone conduct, as well as the harm it causes individuals. To this end, we present six original articles that explore the nature and extent of yellow zone behavior, its damaging effects on individuals and institutions of higher education (IHEs), and procedures and policies organizations should consider to help prevent and manage incidents (Richards & Rennison, 2022).

### **Green Zone**

To address the issue of sexual harassment within college or university settings, potentially within the framework known as “green zone” training or something noted as a preventative first step, many higher education institutions implement various prevention of sexual misconduct and response training programs for their students, faculty, and staff (Mellins et al., 2017). There is very little peer-reviewed research on United States campuses, as most of it is based on Canadian officials' findings.

Potential programs could primarily be focused on prevention training, educating participants about what is identified as sexual harassment, consent, and ways to prevent sexual misconduct from occurring (Johnson et al., 2017). Bystander intervention training programs like Green Dot teach individuals how to intervene safely and effectively when they observe sexual misconduct or harassment (DeGue et al., 2014). This training examines rights and responsibilities, as well as institutional preventative practices and

responses to reported incidents, typically informing students of their rights under Title IX. This federal mandate prohibits sex discrimination and maintains a harassment-free environment. Many campus programs aim to shift the culture, replacing a negative culture with one that is deeply rooted in respect, consent, and clear communication, one that does not tolerate sexual misconduct in any form.

### **Awareness of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment on College Campuses**

Incidents of sexual misconduct and serious sexual assault occurring on college campuses are serious and widespread issues. Many college campuses have programs and resources developed to educate students about these issues, support survivors, and address the problem through policies and reporting mechanisms. According to estimates, 20%–25% of American college students have been victims of sexual assault (Fisher et al., 2000; Cox et al., 2014), prompting universities to enhance or develop policies and programs to prevent sexual assault. Campus sexual assault is a problem for public health. However, differing study approaches (e.g., many definitions of sexual misconduct, assessments, tests, and measurement timeframes) and low response rates impede the process of defining the problem's extent (Mellins et al., 2017).

Like in other studies (Fedina et al., 2016; Narvaja, 2016), compared to men, women were more likely than men to experience any sexual assault (28.0% vs 12.0%). Additionally, data suggest that during 4 years of college, there is a cumulative risk of sexual assault, with over one in three women between the ages of 18 and 24 reporting having been assaulted by their senior year. The majority of the assaults, according to research, appear to occur during the first year, especially for women. This confirms

earlier research on the “red zone” impact on women, which holds that the first year is a particularly crucial period for preventive measures (Matray, 2020).

McMahon et al. (2018) conducted a study that indicated a concerning trend in sexual misconduct among students. Their findings demonstrated that 25% of the participants reported experiencing any form of sexual misconduct. Educational institution policies and prevention programs should prioritize helping students understand the situational factors in which these acts are more likely to occur and encourage students to report to university officials. The psychological developmental stage of emerging adulthood is emerging (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Described as the maturation stage between the ages of 18 and 24, emerging adulthood is the transitional stage between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood (Mellins et al., 2017). Unfortunately, it is also when the likelihood of committing various crimes and becoming a victim increases (Fisher et al., 2000; Piquero et al., 2002). Understanding the type and scope of college students’ experiences as sexual victims during the transition to emerging adulthood over the previous 20 years has caught the interest of researchers. Understanding that university campuses are not exempt from any forms of criminality, and the fact that it is uncertain how widespread sexual victimization research has led to policies and programs providing for the victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

### **Hazard and Preventive Measures**

Types of misconduct are serious issues that occur on college campuses worldwide. Understanding the risk and protective factors associated with these behaviors

can help institutions better prevent and respond to reported incidents. Risk factors are associated with a higher likelihood of an unfavorable event (Steele et al., 2022).

Common risk factors include alcohol and illicit drug use, which can impair judgment and reduce inhibitions, resulting in an elevated danger of perpetration and victimization (CDC, 2019), lack of awareness or education when students are not educated about consent and respectful behaviors, they might inadvertently engage in or experience harassment or assault, perpetrator characteristics concerning certain attitudes and beliefs, such as hostility towards women or acceptance of violence (CDC, 2019). Campus climate, including fraternity and sorority membership, can relate to an increased risk of being a victim of or engaging in sexual violence because of cultural norms within this living environment. Moylan and Javorka (2020) discussed environmental and organizational factors such as the availability of alcohol and social or athletic groups fostering hypermasculine norms that could play a role in sexual harassment and sexual assault. Students may also be living away from home for the first time, lacking many of the rules and norms the students grew up with, exposing incoming and sophomore pupils to more significant risks; sexual assault happens everywhere, and it occurs most often to traditionally college-age women (18–24), away from home and the value system established by the family system (Basile, 2015; Fisher et al., 1998; McCluskey-Fawcett et al., 2001). Additionally, socioeconomic position and family ties may be risk factors. Obstacles to pursuing higher education can include financial standing and being a first-generation member, and as a result, are associated with higher risks of sexual harassment and campus sexual assault (Mellins et al., 2017; Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). Increased

access to and assistance with understanding campus-specific policies, such as reporting procedures and accessing medical and mental health services, may be necessary for first-generation and low-income students. As defined by Payne (2009), SES encompasses generational poverty, which involves students attending higher educational institutions as first-time family members with limited knowledge of college campus environments.

Connection with family provides an opportunity to develop sympathetic personality traits and offer constructive parental role modeling for handling conflict (CDC, 2019). By promoting open communication, respect, and healthy relationships within the family, individuals may learn to recognize and address inappropriate behavior. Families can also impart values of consent and boundaries., This is crucial in preventing sexual misconduct. Additionally, strong family support can empower individuals to seek help and report incidents. Chan et al. (2023) stated that a supportive family environment can foster a culture of respect and safety both within and outside the home.

Prevention on college campuses requires a multifaceted approach; addressing both risk and protective factors is essential for preventing on college campuses, sexual assault, and harassment. A strong campus community can be fostered by promoting students' mental health and ensuring the availability and accessibility of robust resources, including counseling support (Bubbers-Jones, 2023). Proactive campus leadership can help prevent and identify protective factors. They can develop campus policies on sexual behavior that are clear and well-articulated, along with enforceable consequences for violations. A strong connection to the community or family will help address a lack of

awareness and provide substantial support in navigating newfound socialization (Setia, 2016; Basile, 2015).

It has been demonstrated that school diversity and students' school experiences are related (Chan et al., 2022). Racial and ethnic background does not inherently prevent sexual assault and harassment. However, understanding and being sensitive to diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds may play a role in creating more inclusive and respectful campus communities, which can contribute to the overall effort to prevent sexual misconduct (Staples & Fuller, 2021). This culturally competent approach to education and programming can more effectively reach students from diverse backgrounds by considering the various beliefs, values, and social norms each group may hold regarding sex, consent, and gender roles (Gomez, 2022).

Cultivating an environment that builds trust and respects racial and ethnic diversity will help build confidence in the institution and its commitment to diversity. Engaging racial and ethnic campus organizations in the conversation about sexual harassment and sexual assault can ensure a broader engagement across the student body (Allen et al., 2022). The campus environment must aim to combat stereotypes and stigmas, dismantling biases and attitudes that contribute to a culture in which sexual misconduct is minimized or excused. Campus leadership must understand the barriers that students from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds may face in seeking help, such as the cultural stigma or distrust of authorities (Chan et al., 2021).

Addressing issues related to race and ethnicity is crucial. Still, it should not overshadow the necessity for comprehensive approaches to preventing sexual harassment

and assault, including incorporating consent education, bystander intervention programs, and fair reporting mechanisms into a multifaceted institutional strategy led by the administration, aiming to foster a safe campus climate that values and acknowledges the richness of diverse backgrounds.

### **Characteristics of Sexual Misconduct on University Campuses**

Continuing to remain a concern of U.S. institutions of higher education, sexual misconduct presents various characteristic patterns and implications. Campus sexual assault research has identified mimicking similarities to assault patterns found in a comprehensive community; men are less victimized than women, and stranger assaults are infrequent (Fedina et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2000; Narvaja, 2016). A significant number of acts of sexual misconduct on campuses involve familiar people, such as classmates, acquaintances, and even friends, rather than strangers. Experienced less frequently are stranger victimizations. According to data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, victims on campus are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted by someone known to them than by a stranger (Baum & Klaus, 2005). Studies indicate that stranger assaults on campuses are 34% more frequent than off-campus incidents, which are 10% less common (Williams & Bierie, 2015). Statistically, women in college, and in particular females aged 18–24 years old, are at an elevated risk of sexual assault compared to their male counterparts. However, it is essential to note that sexual violence can occur to anyone (Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

Research indicated that consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs is widespread in the university community (Presley, 2002) and is an eminent correlate of all forms of

misconduct (Abbey, 2002). However, the methods through which victim and offender alcohol consumption contributes to campus sexual assault are complex and characterized by variety. There is often an association with alcohol and illicit drug consumption, either by the victim, the perpetrator, or both., The fact that it can be used as a weapon to incapacitate a victim and thus prevent them from giving consent is a precipitating factor. Previous data indicate that close to half of all sexual assault perpetrators were under the influence of substances (alcohol or illicit drugs) during the sexual assault (Abbey, 2002). Additionally, Narvaja (2016) found that over 75% of the college victims of rape and around 23% of victims of sexual violence on U.S. campuses were incapacitated (e.g., alcohol intoxication). Compared to the general population, where only 37% of sexual assaults are estimated to involve alcoholic beverages or illicit drug use (Greenfield, 1998).

Studies and surveys have indicated that sexual harassment and violence are everyday experiences on campuses of higher learning, with varying statistics often showing disturbingly high rates of occurrence. The comprehension of sexual misconduct of college men remains behind our understanding of the victimization of college women; there is minimal research indicating an increased risk of sexual misconduct for men while in college (Hamby, 2014). Sinozich and Langton (2014) looked at the NCVS to compare college students with victims not in college who experienced sexual assault. Looking at men in the same age range as women in our research, aged 18–24 years old, we find that men not attending college accounted for only 4% of aggravated sexual assaults; by

contrast, male victimizations accounted for nearly 20% of sexual assaults of those students enrolled in college.

Sexual activity without explicit consent, where consent cannot be given due to incapacitation or where it is coerced through force or threat, constitutes sexual assault (Yeban & Richmond, 2023). The culture of the campus can have a noteworthy effect on the incidence and documentation of sexual assault. Sexual assault on U.S. campuses is widely underreported. Victims may fear retaliation, not believe that justice will be served, or feel overwhelmed with guilt and shame, thus being traumatized. This prevents them from reporting the incident (Budd et al., 2017). Cantor et al. (2018) state that only 25% of rape victims on campuses and less than 10% of survivors who experienced other forms of sexual misconduct reported the incidents to college leadership. Spencer et al. (2017) found that victims of sexual assaults were unlikely to formally document the incident to campus leadership if the individual was known rather than unknown. Ethnic and racial minorities often fail to report.

Campuses that actively foster a culture of respect, consent, and awareness typically boast enhanced resources and support systems. These include a broad range of services such as counseling, advocacy, student health services, and legal assistance, providing comprehensive support for survivors.

There is also an increasing focus on prevention programs that educate students about consent, bystander intervention, and the resources available to college students. Cox et al. (2014) posited that survivors who formally report their assault open the door to needed resources on college campuses. Campus SaVE refers to the recent Violence

Against Women Act (VAWA) amendments that require colleges to make public details about victim advocacy, counseling programs, legal aid, and other means available to provide for survivors when they make the university officials aware of sexual harassment or sexual assault incidents (Goodmark, 2022).

These characteristics, as outlined by Fowler et al. (2016), It does not encompass the entire scope of harassment or misconduct of a sexual nature on campuses across the nation due to the sheer honesty, complexity, and individual nature of each incident. Measures to address and facilitate programs aimed at minimizing sexual assault on U.S. campuses are evolving as awareness increases, and these institutions work to create safer environments for all students. Creating safer campus environments concerning all forms of sexual misconduct is a multidimensional issue that requires a comprehensive approach (Cox et al., 2014). Regular campus climate assessments focused on sexual misconduct are necessary to evaluate the efficacy of intervention programs and identify areas for improvement, which is crucial for driving change. Creating a safe campus environment is an evolving challenge that requires the participation and commitment of the entire community, including administrators, faculty, students, and local stakeholders.

### **Documenting Misconduct on U.S. Campuses and Barriers to Documentation**

Documentation of sexual misconduct at U.S. college campuses are an urgent problem that must be addressed and resolved (Streng & Kamimura, 2015). Creating a secure and encouraging learning environment requires kids to report such instances and have access to support services quickly. Nevertheless, several obstacles still prevent

victims from coming forward and seeking help, despite the urgent need to address these issues (Guiora, 2022).

Initial reporting procedures include utilizing Title IX coordinators on campus, following protocols for reporting sexual assault and harassment. Initial reports to the Title IX office can be made in person, online, by email, or by phone. Some colleges offer anonymous reporting options to encourage reporting of on-campus incidents (Spencer et al., 2017). As it relates to training and reporting behaviors, according to Choh et al. (2013) and Fisher et al. (2003), numerous sexual assault survivors experience uncertainty regarding the definition of assault. Statistics have found that victims were unlikely to stigmatize their assault if the assault did not conform to their definition of what they perceived as “real” sexual violence (Gavey, 2005; Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Dumont et al., 2003). Weiss (2021) suggests that a singular reason victims fail to report the act of violence to the police is that they believe the misconduct was not significant enough to report, further suggesting that adequate training is needed for students. Lack of awareness, as students might not be aware of the reporting procedures or confusion about what constitutes harassment or assault, demonstrates that students may not clearly understand what behaviors are considered harassment or assault, further leading to underreporting. It remains essential to examine the adverse effect on academic progress as college campuses develop preventative measures addressing all forms of sexual misconduct on U.S. campuses.

Upon reporting, victims are typically provided with information about support services, which may include student medical services, legal assistance, academic

accommodations, and mental health counseling to address suicide ideation, post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety. Ahrens (2007) and Moore and Baker (2018) discussed that it is also imperative to investigate the multiple indicators that might lead the victim to decide to report sexual misconduct to the university. Is the report a way to solicit assistance, or is it more casual, like conversing with family and support systems about the procedure? Research indicates that close to 66% of individuals receiving information through informal disclosure encourage the survivor to make a formal report. Those who have been victimized and are encouraged to report the sexual misconduct by their support system are significantly more likely to report sexual misconduct to law enforcement (Cox et al., 2014; Paul et al., 2013). As such, one could conclude that informal disclosures may also lead to victims formally reporting the sexual assault to university officials.

Concerns related to sexual misconduct on campuses continue to receive attention. The 2019 AAU survey concluded that, while in attendance at U.S. campuses and universities, 13% of attendees experienced inappropriate sexual encounters (including penetration and contact), and more than 40% had encountered sexual violence (Cantor et al., 2020). Barriers to reporting include fear of retaliation from the perpetrator or their friends, which can lead to hesitation to report the incident (Kaya et al., 2020; Spencer et al. (2017) posit that the social stigma associated with being victimized by sexual misconduct can be a powerful deterrent. Cultural background and societal norms can affect a survivor's willingness to report, as some cultures stigmatize the discussion of sexual issues (Mennicke et al., 2022). Victims might fear judgment, gossip, or

ostracization from peers. Stoner and Cramer (2019) discuss how victims worry about being believed and taken seriously, as well as the possibility of being held liable for the incident. At the most basic level, if college and university leadership can be expected to overcome the institutional trust issues, if students believe that the institution will or will not manage the case properly, stakeholders in the campus community need to be cognizant of campus-based assistance that provides efforts and processes aimed to assist students who have experienced sexual harassment or assault (Brubaker, 2019).

To improve reporting, campus leadership must focus on education, increasing awareness and understanding of sexual harassment and assault, expanding and publicizing support resources, and establishing better training for staff, faculty, and all incoming students (Cantor et al., 2019). This results in a more straightforward and transparent reporting process, all to build trust and eliminate potential barriers.

Many campuses are working to improve the reporting process and address these barriers through policy changes, education campaigns, and increased resources for victims (Tilley et al., 2021). It will be essential to foster a campus environment where students feel safe and supported in reporting sexual misconduct and where they can trust that their concerns will be respected and handled with the seriousness and confidentiality they deserve.

### **Incident Rates and Demographic Groups**

Incidents of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct can vary across different demographic groups on college campuses. Materializing research demonstrates that, compared to non-transgender undergraduate students, all forms of sexual misconduct are

notably more prevalent within this population (Cantor et al., 2015; Coulter et al., 2016; Narvaja, 2016), and juxtaposed with heterosexuals, sexual aggression and misconduct are considerably elevated among bisexual and gay/lesbian undergraduates (Blosnich & Bossate, 2012; Blosnich & Hornm, 2011; Coulter et al., 2017; Latinas et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2011). Gender minority students (e.g., gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual, and pansexual [LGBT+] people) make up a significant percentage of sexual-minority populations, ranging from 10% to 20%. Notwithstanding the firmly set gender disparities and sexual orientation in sexual harassment and assault cases, little is understood about what puts sexual and gender-minority people at an increased risk for various forms of misconduct. challenging

Data examining race and sexual misconduct is compounded and presents more questions than it answers. Research shows that non-Latinx Women experience more harassment than other demographic groups (Buchanan et al., 2009). Still, women of African American and mixed-race backgrounds face a higher risk and severity of harassment (Moylan & Wood, 2016). Hill and Silva (2005) and Kearney and Gilbert (2012) indicated existing evidence that demonstrates greater risk or severity of harassment for women of other ethnicities, particularly African American and mixed-race women (Buchanan et al., 2009; Yoon et al., 2012). Moylan and Wood (2016) and Fethi et al. (2023) posited that Hispanics/Latinas and other international students reported increased rates of sexual intimidation in comparison to domestic students. Students of color remain marginalized in multiple ways that interact with various forms of sexual aggression; SES, factors such as being a first-generation member to attend college, make

it challenging to navigate uncharted territory, and to turn to a support system that has no experience in higher education. Additional factors that students of color and SES face are language and cultural norms that are specifically interconnected to sexuality, mental health, and gender roles (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). Furthermore, Intersectional research, as posited by Else-Quest and Hyde (2016), describes how social categories such as gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability intersect and interact with one another. Crenshaw (1989) and Follingstad and Barczak (2023) defined intersectionality as the understanding of how interconnected systems of power and oppression influence individuals' experiences and shape social structures. Students from multiple marginalized identities (e.g., gender identity, ethnicity, sexual identity, and race) remain increasingly likely to experience campus sexual assault. Transgender People of Color have a greater chance of experiencing sexual assault than their transgender white counterparts (Stapels & Fuller, 2021). To better understand this, an analysis of campus sexual assault through the lens of intersectionality should be applied to consider identities, offering a deeper insight into the lived experiences resulting from multiple identity characteristics. Well-being is based on an individual's complex relationships with their immediate surroundings, including academic settings, workplaces, and home. It also considers informal and formal social structures, institutional patterns, and social norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The World Health Organization and the CDC endorse a multi-level ecological model that diagrams the interconnected associations at the community, interpersonal, individual, and societal levels. These encompass social contexts such as

friends, family, social relationships, personality, and socioeconomic factors that influence the community (Alliance, 2018).

### **COVID-19 Pandemic and Campus Sexual Assault**

Anderson (2020) posits that the COVID-19 pandemic (during and post-pandemic) has effectively exacerbated the mental health challenges of students who had to deal with campus sexual assault and isolation. Interestingly, this occurred despite many institutions of higher education going to remote learning and hybrid learning models of education, and students continued to remain exposed to sexual harassment and violence despite the academic setting. At the peak of the epidemic, data indicated gender-based violence would rise by as much as 20% due to the shelter-in-place mandate that resulted in the isolation of those who showed a higher susceptibility to mental health issues (Rieger et al., 2022). Multiple media sources have also reported research indicating a rise in gender-based violence incidents (Rieger et al., 2022).

Gender based violence continued to increase with the increased economic stress and decreased social outlets, and support was reduced because of the pandemic (Rieger et al., 2022). As a result of the pandemic, Title IX faced new, restrictive regulations (Walker, 2020). This meant that licensed mental health workers and students dealing with campus sexual assault may have endured increased barriers preventing a rapid response to campus sexual assault (Bennett et al., 2014). Shelter-in-place orders and quarantine conditions added to social isolation and, as a result, elevated stress levels impacted the rates of violence due in part to following the medical directions of the quarantine process, which could have meant cohabitating with the perpetrator of the violence (Bennett et al.,

2021). Economic distress hindered students' ability to leave unwanted, unsafe places to live, as the closure of on-campus housing and the loss of retail and food service jobs due to the shutdown exacerbated financial instability (Most, 2020).

### **Summary**

The myriad forms of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct on U.S. campuses remain a significant and disturbing issue that has attracted considerable research interest (Tilley et al., 2020). Sexual violence affects the lives of millions of people each year. Sexual aggression and misconduct cases persist as alarming and prevalent crimes on U.S. college and university campuses, impacting 13% of all students (Truman & Langton, 2019). This study focused on females in their first and second year of study, aged 18–24. McMahon et al. (2018) posited that this time frame and age group is the period of highest risk for sexual violence. Inappropriate sexual conduct can occur between any members of the campus community and creates a hostile environment that can interfere with or limit one's capacity to engage or benefit from the institute of higher learning programs or activities. Harassment is viewed as the occurrence of unwanted sexual advances, solicitation of sex, and various forms of physical or verbal harassment that are sexual (Miodus et al., 2022). Sexual assault encompasses criminal acts where perpetrators engage in non-consensual or objectionable sexual conduct with their victims (Cantor et al., 2019). Sexual assault ranges from inappropriate touching to rape and can be committed by strangers, acquaintances, and even intimate partners. On college campuses, there is a particular concern about the prevalence of sexual assault at social gatherings, within living environments, or in groups on campus (Guiora, 2022).

Regulations and compliance are addressed federally with Title IX, a federal statute in the United States that prohibits any form of sex discrimination in the academic setting and has served as a critical instrument for addressing sexual violence on college campuses (Tilley et al., 2022). Institutions of higher learning that receive federal funding must comply with Title IX requirements by providing a positive and enriching learning environment for all students and establishing a transparent system for reporting and adequately handling complaints of sexual misconduct. Under the Clery Act, colleges and universities with 7,500 or more students are required to develop and publish an annual report containing data on crimes occurring on or near their campuses. An important feature is that higher education institutions consult a broad range of campus security authorities to develop the report. Developing three essential purposes: (a) develop a standard method by which crime is reported and documented, (b) mandate the sharing of accurate data to key stakeholders (current students and their families, prospective student and their families, faculty and staff and the surrounding community), (c) reduce criminal activity, the Clery Act provides this essential data to current students, prospective student, and community stakeholders (Janosik et al., 2015). This study relied on publicly available information reported in Title IX documents and the Jeanne Clery Act to develop and analyze the statistical data necessary to address the research questions.

Current estimates are as high as 20%–25% of college students who are victimized by sexual assault in the United States (Fisher et al., 2000; Cox et al., 2014; Mellins et al., 2017). Certain circumstances may place students or student populations at greater risk of experiencing sexual violence on campus. Personal circumstances and identified risks are

variables associated with the increased likelihood of an unpropitious outcome (Steele et al., 2020). Common risk factors include consumption of alcohol or illicit recreational drug use, the prevalence of hookup culture, attitudes and beliefs towards women, campus climate, including fraternity and sorority membership, and other environmental factors that impact social behaviors, such as athletic groups that foster hypermasculine norms (Moylan & Javorika, 2020). Students living outside the home for the first time often disrupt the structure to which they were previously accustomed. SES plays a role in risk factors, as students may lack experience within their family system to help them navigate the college experience. Education in consent, the reporting process, and the availability of campus support systems are crucial in minimizing risk. Women, transgender, non-binary students, and racial and ethnic minorities are at higher risk, according to many studies (Tillewein et al., 2023).

The theoretical framework is crucial for the clarity, organization, and structure of this study. Grounded in socioecological and intersectional theory, this research will demonstrate logical connections that contextualize individual experiences within the broader campus community. Ecological models encompass an evolving body of theory that applies to research on processes and conditions. The concept of bio-ecological systems will be developed to provide insight into the students' understanding of belonging (El Zaatari et al., 2022). Worthern and Wallace (2017) posited that intersectionality theory would enhance our understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity intersect and shape our unique experiences and vulnerabilities, providing insight into potential disparities in incidents among different demographics. Additionally,

utilizing intersectionality theory as an analytical framework will allow the research to examine inequities in rates, dangers, and the occurrence of sexual harassment victimization, taking into account aspects of the perpetrator (Campe, 2021).

Reporting and documenting sexual aggression and misconduct on college campuses remains an urgent problem and needs to be addressed and resolved (Streng & Kamimura, 2015). Reporting rates for sexual harassment and assault are generally low. Literature states that many students do not report their experiences due to a lack of trust in the reporting process, fear of not being believed, concerns about confidentiality, fear of retaliation, and the social stigma associated with being a victim of sexual violence. Additional reasons include cultural backgrounds related to societal norms or the stigmatization of discussing sexual issues (Cantor et al., 2019; Guiora, 2022; Spencer et al., 2020). Many campuses are working to improve the reporting process and address these known barriers by implementing policy changes, educational campaigns, and increased resources—including medical, mental health, and legal aid—for victims (Tilley et al., 2021).

The operational development of how colleges and universities handle sexual assault is under investigation, which erodes confidence in campus administration (Guiora, 2022). Colleges and universities should enhance the campus environment by prioritizing education, expanding support networks, and streamlining reporting processes (Cantor et al., 2019). It is essential to foster respectful cultures, promote consent education, and implement bystander intervention techniques. Research indicates that preventative and educational programs are beneficial in reducing sexual harassment and assault

(Goodmark, 2022). According to Cox et al. (2014), formal reporting of assaults makes it possible for survivors to receive essential campus resources.

There are several challenges faced by institutions in handling cases of sexual violence, from ensuring fairness in the adjudication process to balancing transparency and privacy (Papp & McClelland, 2021; Orchowski et al., 2023). Additionally, fostering a campus culture that does not tolerate sexual harassment and assault remains an ongoing challenge. Although considerable research has been conducted, gaps remain in understanding the full scope of the issue (Fedina et al., 2016). There is an ongoing debate and study into the most effective prevention and response strategies. Addressing the immediate need for prevention campaigns, education, the development of a comprehensive range of policies, a reporting process, and campus community resources will prove paramount in driving social change for colleges and their communities.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

This chapter elucidates the methodological framework adopted in this inquiry to investigate the connection between a set of independent variables and the frequency of detailed occurrences of sexual harassment as well as assault on campuses and universities in the United States, chiefly focusing on the Midwest states. In this chapter, the research design and rationale will be outlined. Given the nature of the research questions and the objectives, a quantitative research approach was selected. Quantitative research provides a method for studying a specific group within a larger population. This research method used scientific inquiry and relied on archival data to measure specific characteristics of a sample population (Allen, 2017). This choice was driven by the need to deliver numerical data suitable for statistical analysis to test the hypotheses outlined in Chapter 1. The study's findings may have a significant impact on students' well-being, academic success, and the overall campus climate (Cantor et al., 2018; Krebs et al., 2016).

In this chapter, I outline the research design and rationale, providing an overview of the study's setting and population. This chapter delves into the study's research methodology, providing a comprehensive understanding of the techniques and approaches used to gather and analyze the data. A quantitative study was deemed appropriate because it focused on the quantity or number of a particular characteristic or item (Litosseliti, 2018). A quantitative approach enabled me to examine multiple questions across multiple campuses, synthesizing data deductively as I addressed the research questions during the empirical investigation. Creswell (2024) posited that

quantitative research effectively measures data comprehensively and addresses questions of reliability and validity. Ahmed (2021) stated that reliability refers to delivering the same (or near the same) results. Validity, however, can be more problematic as it aims to demonstrate that the study accurately measures what it intends to measure.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

In this study, I employed a quantitative research methodology that enables a systematic investigation across multiple universities simultaneously through a deductive process. This approach allowed me to empirically test theories related to campus safety predictors of sexual harassment and assault at higher education institutions, providing a basis for generalizable and replicable findings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) posited that research refers to numbers, statistics, or categories once the methodology and variables are established. The methodological approach provided insight into the population being studied. “The behavior or experience measured by the predictive variables occurs before the behaviors or experiences represented by the criterion variables” (Lodico et al., 2010). Predictive research design “identifies variables that will predict an outcome or criterion for further data analysis” (Creswell, 2015, p. 342). This predictor variable set the stage for something that could occur later due to the development of programming, training, and potential programs that could primarily be focused on prevention training, educating participants about what is identified as sexual harassment, consent, and ways to prevent sexual misconduct from occurring (Johnson et al., 2017). A predictive study utilizing archival data can function as a correlational study, with a primary difference: “The behavior or experience measured by the predictive variables occurs before the behaviors

or experiences represented by the criterion variables” (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 289). The statistical information will be archived from public sources provided by colleges and universities, as mandated by the Jeanne Clery Act, Title IX, and the Department of Justice. Colleges comply with the Clery Act by taking specific actions to ensure compliance. The resulting ASR must be published and publicly available by October 1 of each year. Title IX explains to the college administration how to understand federal civil rights law and file a potential complaint through the investigative and resolution process. Title IX and its program are established to prohibit sex-based discrimination on college campuses (Brubaker, 2019). The Department of Justice (DOJ) plays a significant role in addressing sexual harassment and assault through the enforcement of these federal laws and mandates (Cantor et al., 2019). The federal government requires these safety reports and surveys for institutions of higher education, which are made public.

Using non-experimental archival data in this research offers several advantages, providing a robust framework for examining patterns, trends, and causal relationships within large datasets. Non-experimental archival data, including records from Title IX, the Clery Act, and other documents and datasets, enable research that is less susceptible to bias introduced by the researcher’s interaction with subjects. Archival data often spans across extended periods, enabling longitudinal studies, which are essential for understanding long-term trends and outcomes; for this study, I sought to determine the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault, examining archived data provided by colleges and universities in the United States as they adhere to The Clery Act and Title IX mandates. Gathering information from public domain sources enables the

simultaneous analysis of large populations and multi-campus data. Creswell and Guetterman (2018) have published studies that use quantitative data sources, such as measurement instruments, observation checklists, and reports, and draw on public statistics and subsequent analyses. This non-experimental design presented a causal comparison of institutional data across multiple campuses, utilizing reports under the Clery Act and Title IX. The research simultaneously compared multiple populations and sites as the event had already occurred (Creswell, 2012). A correlational design enables the researcher to use correlational statistics to describe and quantify the degree of association between two or more variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Using publicly available archival and historical data to compare campus security progress with established predictors and quantitative techniques facilitates the replication of the study. This replicability is a cornerstone of scientific inquiry, as it will minimize errors over time. Archival data repositories and databases provide access to a wide range of data types and subjects, including historical documents specific to geography and government data. The DOJ, the DOE, and additional mandated filings provided diverse data, enabling this research to explore multifaceted questions across various disciplines.

The independent variables (see Table 1) will influence students' experience of school safety by examining factors related to school-level demographics, including race, gender, and SES. Dependent variables (see Table 2) will consider the dimensions of time, as this is moderated by temporal risk (i.e., red zone) and behavioral risk (i.e., yellow zone behaviors; Follingstad et al., 2022; Rennison, 2018). Additionally, the intended study's moderating variable is age, specifically among females aged 18 to 24 years. The

moderating variable may influence the strength and direction of the relationships between students' overall safety, school-level demographics, the risks involved, and the frequency of reported incidents of sexual misconduct.

**Table 1**

*Independent Variables and Measurements*

Variable	Definition/Description	Type	Measurement
Independent variable	Race	Nominal	School-level demographics
	Gender	Nominal	
	Socioeconomic status	Interval	
	Age	Ordinal	

Race refers to humans based on physical, social, and cultural characteristics, including skin color, cultural background, and ancestral lineage (Flores, 2020).

Gender encompasses a range of characteristics that differentiate masculinity and femininity, whereas sex refers to the biological differences between males and females. Gender encompasses social, cultural, and psychological aspects that influence identity and behavior (Bird & Rieker, 2012).

SES is defined by Bornstein and Bradley (2003) as broadly encompassing factors such as income, education, and belonging, and is understood to guide its understanding. SES is a composite measure that captures access to resources, privileges, and social capital.

Age is a fundamental demographic variable crucial for understanding patterns and changes across various biological, psychological, and social domains (Malcolm et al., 2005).

**Table 2**

*Dependent Variables and Measurements*

Variable	Definition/Description	Type	Measurement
Dependent variable	Prevalence of school safety incidents, dimensions of time (moderated by temporal risk and behavioral risk)	Ordinal and nominal	Temporal risk—Red Behavioral risk—Yellow

When considering ethical considerations, using archival data can help to sidestep ethical concerns associated with primary data collection and the protection of sensitive information, protecting the privacy of the survivors of harassment and assault on campus.

The decision to employ a quantitative methodology is grounded in its suitability for addressing the specific nature of the research questions, which seek to quantify relationships between the socioecological theory as it helps conceptualize the individual experiences of students within a broader campus environment, guiding the examination of how school-level factors contribute to the prevalence of sexual misconduct incidents (Cantor et al., 2019). Intersectionality theory, on the other hand, enhances our understanding of how multiple dimensions of identity intersect to shape unique

experiences and vulnerabilities, shedding light on potential disparities in these incidents among different demographic groups (Campe, 2021). Both theories align with the research problem by offering a holistic perspective on the factors influencing campus safety policies and programs aimed at examining sexual misconduct. They support the quantitative explorations of these dynamics and inform strategies for intervention and prevention (Brubaker et al., 2017). Pinchevsky et al. (2020) examined situational contexts that involve self-reported consequences and responses to victimization.

### **Setting**

The setting for this research was non-experimental archival data accessed on college websites through the Clery Act, the DOJ, and Title IX, as well as federal financial aid data, providing information from university and college campuses located in the United States. This study examined 124 public and private 4-year colleges and universities, enrolling 1,563,983 students (U.S. DOE National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022-2023). Females comprise nearly 60% of enrollment, and males comprise just over 40% (U.S. DOE, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022-2023). Thirty-seven percent of student enrollment is diverse. Most Midwest collegiate students are White; 53.4% of college students and 55.5% of White or Caucasian students attend 4-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Additionally, this approach facilitated a broader examination across differing populations at multiple institutions, enhancing the external validity of the findings. Throughout this chapter, the methodological decisions are justified, aligning with the

study's overarching aim to contribute to the existing body of knowledge concerning sexual inappropriateness on U.S. campuses and to impact social change.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this study is cross-sectional, which is foundational to its integrity, credibility, and scholarly contribution. Using a cross-sectional design, multiple variables can be investigated simultaneously (Kelly et al., 2018). Transparency is essential to the reliability and validity of research findings, as it is a central tenet of scientific research.

### **Population and Sampling**

This study focused on campuses across the United States with first- and second-year students. This study examined all student populations; however, it focused on females aged 18–24, as they have been identified as being at the highest risk of experiencing these issues. I examined the specific academic years 2021, 2022, and 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic should be considered, as post-COVID numbers and reporting integrity may be skewed positively, potentially due to reduced physical enrollment resulting from the shift to academic delivery methods (Marri et al., 2022). Prior et al. (2020) discussed purposive sampling as it enables the selection of participants based on specific criteria that are relevant to the research directive; in this study, I extrapolated archival data from 18- to 24-year-old female students, narrowing down the data further SES (generational college experience, financial status, and belongingness), extracurricular activities, and living environment also provided data to be analyzed in this study.

Stratified sampling ensured the sample accurately represented the campus community by accounting for critical demographic data, and the use of both sampling strategies enhanced the validity and generalizability of the research findings. The population provides data on campus size, while the sample, which represents a small percentage of the study, reflects the characteristics of the target population. G\*Power is an invaluable tool that ensures this study is designed with sufficient statistical power, thereby enhancing its reliability and validity (Faul et al., 2007, 2009). This study used G\*Power to perform a linear multiple regression analysis to determine the sample size. The concept of power in statistical terms refers to the likelihood that a study will detect an effect when one is present (i.e., the ability of a test to reject a false null hypothesis; Kang, 2021). This can provide insights into whether an inconclusive or null result might be due to insufficient power rather than the absence of a natural effect. The process of sample estimation involves establishing research goals and inferences to develop hypotheses, selecting appropriate statistical tests, determining a power analysis method, and inputting the required variables for analysis. This ensures the overall quality and accuracy of the study (Kang et al., 2020).

For this study, I focused on colleges and universities throughout the United States, covering each geographic region, as well as those mandated to provide data under the Clery Act and Title IX. Title IX is a federal law passed in 1972 to ensure that female and male students in educational settings are treated equally and to protect students' rights from all forms of sexual misconduct. In total, 120 colleges were examined from 2021, 2022, and 2023.

## **Reliability of Data**

Black (2023) posited that assessments concerning the accuracy of the Clery reports vary, stating that archival data is a valuable resource for understanding past events. Utilizing archival data was essential for approaching the questions with a critical eye toward their reliability, biases, context, and preservation status. In some instances, data suggest that crime victimization on college campuses, especially sexual victimization, is not as bad as assumed. However, questions arise when comparing on-campus populations between current and previous data.

Tyne (2022) stated that under Title IX, colleges must ensure that someone who experiences sexual violence or sex-based discrimination is cared for and given access to support services. The concepts of power and validity are both crucial, but they refer to different aspects of research design and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The validity of this research is practical and can be utilized to predict the outcome of future behaviors as well as develop structured processes to impact social change by developing methods and programs that reduce sexual harassment and assault in U.S. college institutions. The accuracy of Clery Act reports and Title IX reporting will critically determine whether the findings can be trusted and applied to real-world situations. In quantitative research, power refers to the likelihood that a study will detect an effect when one is present. While validity and power are distinct concepts, they are related in that they both contribute to the overall quality and reliability of research findings (Creswell, 2012).

Colleges and universities must produce and disseminate the Annual Security Report by October 1 each year. To comply with the timeframe and statistical data requirements, each institution collects data from the Public Safety Department/Campus Police, the local law enforcement agency, and other relevant stakeholders within the campus community. The annual security report is attested and released to the public (Fields, 2023).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the research questions and hypotheses to understand the factors that predict campus safety. I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 29) to ensure high accuracy in future decision-making. The resulting data and statistics were used to analyze research assumptions, report results, and improve processes (Morean et.al., 2021).

RQ1. To what extent, if any, is there an association between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, considering the moderating variables of temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors)?

$H_01$ : There is no statistically significant association between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, as reported to the Title IX office or presented in each university's Clery Act summary, when accounting for the moderating variables of

temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

*H*<sub>11</sub>: There is a statistically significant association between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, as reported to the Title IX office or presented in each university's Clery Act summary. This association is moderated by temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

RQ2. To what extent is there a relationship between the percentage of the student population that is first generation and the prevalence of sexual violence on United States colleges and university campuses, if any, do school-level demographics, including variables such as race, gender, and SES, quantitatively predict occurrences of sexual harassment and assault incidents on campuses while considering the moderating variables of temporal risk (red zone) behaviors and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

*H*<sub>02</sub>: School-level demographics, including variables such as race, gender, and SES, do not quantitatively predict the occurrence of sexual harassment and assault incidents on campuses when accounting for the moderating variables of temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

$H_{12}$ : School-level demographics, including variables such as race, gender, and SES, quantitatively predict the occurrence of sexual harassment and assault incidents on campuses. These predictions are moderated by temporal risk (red zone) and behavioral risk (yellow zone behaviors).

RQ3. What is the relationship, if any, between campus size and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?

$H_{03}$ : There is no statistically significant relationship between campus size and the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault on United States college universities and campuses.

$H_{13}$ : There is a statistically significant relationship between campus size and the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence on college campuses.

RQ4. Can gender composition, the percentage of first-year students, and the size of the student body predict the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?

$H_{04}$ : There is no statistically significant relationship between gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and size of student body in predicting the prevalence of sexual violence in colleges and universities in the United States.

$H_{14}$ : There is a statistically significant relationship between gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and size of the

student body in predicting the prevalence of sexual violence in colleges and universities in the United States.

Research Questions 1, 2, and 3 require a binary correlation, while Research Question 4 requires a linear regression analysis.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis for archival data involves processing historical data from various sources, including reports by Cleary et al., DOJ reports, Campus Climate Surveys, and Title IX data. Klein et al. (2016) emphasized the significance of regression analysis as a crucial statistical method for identifying relationships between variables, making predictions, and understanding research by considering how one or more independent variables relate to the dependent variable. Developing readable tables and harmonizing the datasets allowed for a comprehensive analysis. Time series and comparative analysis were relevant to this study for archival data. Analyzing archival data is a meticulous process that requires consideration of the reporting methods, the origin, and the context in which it was created. However, it can uncover invaluable insights into the events and experiences, telling the story of the campus climate and culture as the research is utilized to shape and impact the campus community.

### **Validity**

Validity is crucial, as it determines whether the research truly measures what it claims to measure, thereby ensuring research integrity (Kenny, 2019). Validity is about the accuracy and appropriateness of the conclusions, inferences, and actions based on this study's findings (Roebianto et al., 2023). Validity encompasses several key aspects,

including content and construct validity. Validity will enhance this research by facilitating further consideration of generalization, application to real-world problems, and the development of future scientific knowledge.

Threats to validity can lead to incorrect assumptions or conclusions about relationships between variables. Validity threats can compromise the integrity and applicability of the findings. Researchers must identify potential threats to validity and develop proactive strategies to minimize the risks (Clarke et al., 2023).

### **Ethical Procedures**

This study utilized archival data, and I considered several ethical factors to ensure the responsible and respectful handling of data. Given the sensitivity of the data in this study, protecting the student respondents is a vital aspect of the Institutional Review Board's responsibilities as colleges and universities complete the mandated reporting. Specific ethical areas of concern are but are not limited to informed consent, data anonymization, beneficence and non-maleficence, respect for persons, data security, and secondary data analysis (Rumbold & Pierscionek, 2017).

By considering ethical principles and using archival data, researchers can uphold confidentiality, integrity, and respect for all individuals while conducting responsible research (Pychlau et al., 2023). By considering these moral considerations, researchers can ensure they conduct their study responsibly and ethically when using archival data in psychology research.

## Summary

This chapter delved into the complex and pervasive issue of sexual misconduct on college campuses across the United States. Shaw (2019) stated that this pervasive problem is supported throughout campus surveys in the United States. Organizations such as RAINN (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network) provide valuable resources and statistics related to the issue of sexual assault and harassment. This chapter outlined methodologies used to research this critical subject, including quantitative approaches to understand the prevalence, impacts, and administrative responses to these incidents within the college context.

This chapter underscored the critical need for multifaceted strategies to combat sexual harassment and assault in institutions of higher education. Chapter 3 outlines the data analysis plan for this study. Campbell and Goodman-Williams (2023) posited that analyzing archival data when considering sensitive material provides an overall protective measure respecting the information and the individual respondents. Analyzing archival data demonstrated the need for a concerted effort among the administration, policymakers, educators, students, and community stakeholders to foster a campus community that is safe, supportive, and responsive to the needs of all students.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the issue of sexual harassment and sexual assault on college campuses has garnered significant attention. Understanding incidents impacting safety in this context is vital for developing effective interventions and policies. This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative study, which aims to assess the factors that impact the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault on U.S. colleges and universities. This study and subsequent results aim to shed light on the critical incidents of safety among students regarding sexual harassment and assault on college campuses. This study aims to identify gaps in awareness of college-level risk factors, laying the groundwork for institutions to foster a safer, more supportive educational environment.

When reviewing the Clery Act data from each of the 120 colleges, this study examined academic years and reports for 2021, 2022, and 2023. The data focused on forcible and non-forcible acts. They evaluated the reports with the following criteria: sexual assault, intimidation, dating, domestic violence, stalking, fondling, rape, and statutory rape and incest, although in each of the 120 colleges or universities, there were zero reported cases of incest in the years observed.

Clery report statistics support that most of the reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault cases on U.S. college campuses are reported in the fall semester, particularly in September and October. This period often coincides with the return of students and the start of the academic year. However, it is important to note that reporting patterns can vary by institution.

### Descriptive Analysis

The variables in this study included the number of first-generation students, total student body enrollment at the college, the percentage of females to measure gender distribution, and the incidence rate of sexual harassment and sexual assault. This section presents the descriptive statistics for the rates and explains how they were recoded (see Table 3). The data reflect a wide variability in institutional size and incident rates, indicating diverse institutional profiles. Key variables from 119 colleges and universities focused on:

- First Generation (First Gen): Proportion of first-generation college students.
- Enrollment: The total student population of an institution.
- Female: Proportion of female-identifying students on campus.
- Each of these variables was also categorized to facilitate more precise analysis of patterns.
- Incident Rate: Prevalence of sexual violence per student or 1,000 students (Incid 1000).

**Table 3**

*Variable Descriptive Statistics*

	<i>N</i>	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
First gen	119	.600	.100	.700	.329	.106
Enrollment	119	82599	89	82688	12806.10	13996.230
Female	119	.460	.270	.730	.580	.073
Incident rate	119	.100	.000	.100	.010	.015

### First Generation

The average percentage of first-generation students across the examined colleges was 32.90% ( $N = 119$ ;  $SD = .11$ ), with percentages ranging from 10.0% to 70.0%. Due to the extensive range, the colleges were further coded as 1 (0.0–25.0%), 2 (25.1–50.0%), or 3 (50.1–75.0%). Once re-coded, 34 colleges (28.6%) fell into Group 1, 82 colleges (68.9%) into Group 2, and 3 colleges (2.5%) into Group 3 (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*First Generation Colleges by Code*

Code	Frequency	Percent
1	34	28.6
2	82	68.9
3	3	2.5
Total	119	100.0

### Enrollment

The average enrollment across the colleges examined was 12,806.1 students ( $N = 119$ ;  $SD = 14,996.2$ ). Enrollment ranged from 89 students to 82,688 students. To account for the extensive range, the enrollment was further re-coded as 1 (1–1000), 2 (1001–2500), 3 (2501–5000), 4 (5001–10000), 5 (10001–20000), 6 (20001–30000), 7 (30001–40000), 8 (40001–50000), 9 (50001–60000), or 10 (60001–85000). As presented in Table 5, more than 70% of colleges were coded as 2–5 (71.4%;  $N = 85$ ).

**Table 5***Enrollment by Code*

Code	Frequency	Percent
1.00	9	7.6
2.00	18	15.1
3.00	17	14.3
4.00	24	20.2
5.00	26	21.8
6.00	10	8.4
7.00	10	8.4
8.00	3	2.5
10.00	2	1.7
Total	119	100.0

**Gender**

Gender distribution was operationalized as the percentage of the student body that was female. For the colleges examined in this study ( $N = 119$ ), the mean percentage of female students was 58.0% ( $SD = 0.073$ ). The percentage of students ranged from 27.0% female to 73.0% female. Due to the extensive range, the colleges were further coded as 1 (0.0%–25.0%), 2 (25.1%–50.0%), or 3 (50.1%–75.0%). Once re-coded, six colleges (5.0%) fell into Group 1, 63 colleges (52.9%) fell into Group 2, and 50 colleges (42.0%) fell into Group 3 (see Table 6).

**Table 6***Gender by Code*

Code	Frequency	Percent
1.00	6	5.0
2.00	63	52.9
3.00	50	42.0
Total	119	100.0

**Incident Rate**

Rates of sexual violence were calculated as the number of incidents per 1,000 students enrolled. Incidence rates ranged from .00 to 100.00 ( $M = 9.65$ ;  $SD = 15.25$ ). Again, due to the large range across the sample, incidence rates were re-coded as 0 (0-10), 1 (11-20), 2 (20-29), 3 (30-39), 4 (40-49), 5 (50-59), 6 (60-69), 7 (70-79), 8 (80-89), 9 (90-99), or 10 (100). Rates were missing for three colleges ( $n = 116$ ). Ninety-four percent of colleges were categorized as 1-3 (see Table 7).

**Table 7***Incidence Rates by Code*

Code	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
.00	86	72.3	74.1	74.1
1.00	13	10.9	11.2	85.3
2.00	10	8.4	8.6	94.0
3.00	2	1.7	1.7	95.7
4.00	1	.8	.9	96.6
5.00	2	1.7	1.7	98.3
7.00	1	.8	.9	99.1
10.00	1	.8	.9	100.0
Total	116	97.5	100.0	
Missing	3	2.5		
Total	119	100.0		

**Results**

After calculating descriptive statistics, a series of inferential statistics was calculated to determine the relationship between the key variables and address the guiding research questions. First, to address the first guiding research question: Is there a relationship between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses? —A bivariate Pearson’s correlation was utilized. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between the percentage of females and the incidence rate,  $r(119) = .067, p = .466$ . Next, to address the second guiding research question—Is there a relationship between the percentage of the student population that is first generation and the prevalence of sexual

violence on college campuses? — A bivariate Pearson's correlation was utilized. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between the percentage of the student body that was first-generation and the incidence rate,  $r(119) = .043, p = .642$ . Third, to address the third guiding research question— What is the relationship, if any, between campus size and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses? —A bivariate Pearson's correlation was utilized. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and incidence rate,  $r(118) = .059, p = .527$ .

These correlations were then re-run using the re-coded variables presented in the previous section (see Table 8). When using the coded variables, (1) there was not a statistically significant relationship between percent female and incidence rate,  $r(16) = .072, p = .441$ ; (2) there was not a statistically significant relationship between percent of student body that was first generation and incidence rate,  $r(116) = -.004, p = .970$ ; and (3) there was a statistically significant relationship between enrollment and incidence using the coded variables,  $r(116) = -.246, p = .008$ . More specifically, the relationship between enrollment and incidence, as indicated by the coded variables, was negative and moderate, suggesting that as enrollment increased, incidence decreased.

**Table 8***Correlation Table for Coded Variables*

		Incident category	Female category	Enroll category	First gen category
Incident category	Pearson correlation	--			
	<i>N</i>	116			
Female category	Pearson correlation	.072	--		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.441			
	<i>N</i>	116	119		
Enrollment category	Pearson correlation	-.246**	-.109	--	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.240		
	<i>N</i>	116	119	119	
First gen category	Pearson correlation	-.004	.102	-.104	--
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.970	.269	.259	
	<i>N</i>	116	119	119	119

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Finally, to address the third guiding research question: Can the gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and size of the student body predict the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses? —A linear regression was employed using the coded variables. More specifically, for question four, the multiple linear regression was conducted to evaluate the extent to which gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and the size of the student body could predict the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses. At the 0.10 significance level, a significant regression was found ( $F_{2,112} = 2.559, p = .059$ ); however, these results are not important at the 0.05 level and are therefore considered to be approaching significance.

The  $R^2$  was .064 indicating that gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and the size of the student body explained approximately 6.4% of the variation in the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses could be explained by these independent variables. However, among the independent variables, first generation was not statistically significant ( $p = .693$ ), and female was not ( $p = .569$ ). Enrollment was the only statistically significant predictor of incidence rates ( $\beta = -0.185$ ;  $p = .009$ ).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presents the descriptive and inferential results of the analysis, guided by four research questions. Table 9 presents the conclusions for each hypothesis. Using the continuous data, the researcher fails to reject all four hypotheses at the 0.05 significance level. However, there was a moderate, negative correlation when using the re-coded variables for the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses based on campus size. These results, along with their limitations, are further discussed in Chapter 5.

**Table 9***Results by Research Question*

Research question	Hypothesis	Conclusion
Is there a relationship between the percentage of the student population that is female and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?	There is a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses based on the percentage of the student population that is female (two-tailed).	Fail to reject the null hypothesis; the results indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between the percentage of females and the incidence rate, $r(119) = 0.067$ , $p = .466$ .
Is there a relationship between the percentage of the student population that is first-generation and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?	There is a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses based on the percentage of the student population that is first-generation (two-tailed).	Fail to reject the null hypothesis; the results indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between the percentage of the student body that was first-generation and the incidence rate, $r(119) = .043$ , $p = .642$ .
Is there a relationship between campus size and the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?	There is a statistically significant difference in the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses based on campus size (two-tailed).	Fail to reject the null hypothesis; the results indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and incidence rate, $r(118) = 0.059$ , $p = .527$ . However, there was a moderate negative correlation when using the recoded variables, $r(116) = -.246$ , $p = .008$ .
Can the gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and size of the student body predict the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses?	Gender composition, percentage of first-year students, and size of the student body can significantly predict the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses.	Fail to reject the null hypothesis; $F[2,112] = 2.559$ , $p = .059$ .

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

Sexual harassment and sexual assault on college campuses in the United States represent pervasive issues that significantly impact students' safety, well-being, and academic success. Despite legal frameworks, campus policies, and awareness campaigns aimed at preventing such misconduct, incidents continue to occur at alarming rates, indicating gaps in effective prevention, reporting mechanisms, and support services.

In this research, I investigated the prevalence, causes, and response strategies related to sexual harassment and assault on college campuses. The study focused on identifying systemic vulnerabilities, evaluating the efficacy of existing policies, and proposing evidence-based recommendations or further research to foster safer, more inclusive campus environments.

The methodology of this study is cross-sectional, which is foundational to its integrity, credibility, and scholarly contribution. Using a cross-sectional design, multiple variables can be investigated simultaneously (Kelly et al., 2018). Transparency is essential to the reliability and validity of research findings, as it is a central tenet of scientific research. Archival data analysis involves processing historical data from various sources, including reports by Cleary et al., DOJ reports, Campus Climate Surveys, and Title IX data. Klein et al. (2016) emphasized the significance of regression analysis as a crucial statistical method for identifying relationships between variables, making predictions, and understanding research by considering how one or more independent variables relate to the dependent variable.

In this chapter, I will interpret the findings of this study, taking a deeper dive into the limitations of the study, considering the limited sample size, the change in how academics are delivered post-COVID-19, and the underreporting of sexual harassment and sexual assault on college campuses. Recommendations for further studies and campus implications will be addressed, considering potential research opportunities that explore possible reasons for the lack of reports, as this will impact prevention, policy, and campus practices.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The issue of sexual harassment and sexual assault on college campuses has garnered significant attention. Understanding incidents impacting safety in this context is vital for developing effective interventions and policies. This research presented the findings of a quantitative study, which aimed to assess the factors that impacted the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault on U.S. colleges and universities. This study and subsequent results aimed to shed light on the critical incidents of safety among students regarding sexual harassment and assault on college campuses. This study aimed to identify gaps in awareness of college-level risk factors, laying the groundwork for institutions to foster a safer, more supportive educational environment.

When reviewing the Clery Act data from each of the 120 colleges, I examined academic years and reports for 2021, 2022, and 2023. The data focused on forcible and non-forcible acts. They evaluated the reports with the following criteria: sexual assault, intimidation, dating, domestic violence, stalking, fondling, rape, and statutory rape and

incest, although in each of the 120 colleges or universities, there were zero reported cases of incest in the years observed.

Clery report statistics supported that most of the reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault cases on U.S. college campuses are reported in the fall semester, particularly in September and October. This period often coincides with the return of students and the start of the academic year. However, it was noted that reporting patterns varied by institution.

The Clery data supported Follingstad et al. (2022), who characterized an influx of new students, increased social activities, heightened alcohol consumption, and similar social dynamics. This makes it imperative for institutions to implement awareness and prevention campaigns. The research problem at the core of this study is a quantitative exploration of the connection between the predictability and prevalence of school safety of sexual assault and harassment incidents, specifically within the 18- to 24-year-old female demographic. The study, considering the influence of school-level demographics, aimed to develop targeted strategies for fostering a safer and more inclusive campus environment, recognizing that individuals within the 18–24 age range are particularly vulnerable to distinct types of sexual assault (Molstad et al., 2023). As a response to this urgent need, the purpose of this quantitative study was to analyze the connections or links between independent variables, predictors surrounding school safety and school-level demographics, and the prevalence of reported sexual assault or harassment on college and university campuses. The study also considered age as a moderating variable within the 18- to 24-year-old female demographic, examining its influence on the relationships

among the variables and the frequency of reported incidents. The research findings noted that academic delivery methods have changed; nonetheless, it becomes necessary to heighten our awareness of the lived experiences of those students in college. The various methods used by modern college campuses to deliver academic instruction, including traditional face-to-face classes, hybrid courses, and fully online formats, may skew crime reporting statistics. It is estimated that 80% of assaults go unreported, making the data incomplete and less accurate (Mennicke et al., 2022). Anderson (2020) posited that the COVID-19 pandemic (during and post-pandemic) has effectively exacerbated the mental health challenges of students who had to deal with campus sexual assault and isolation. Interestingly, this occurred despite many institutions of higher education going to remote learning and hybrid learning models of education, and students continued to remain exposed to sexual harassment and violence despite the academic setting. At the peak of the epidemic, data indicated gender-based violence would rise by as much as 20% due to the shelter-in-place mandate that resulted in the isolation of those who showed a higher susceptibility to mental health issues (Rieger et al., 2022). Multiple media sources have also reported research indicating a rise in gender-based violence incidents (Rieger et al., 2022).

Gender based violence continued to increase with the increased economic stress and decreased social outlets, and support was reduced because of the pandemic (Rieger et al., 2022). As a result of the pandemic, Title IX faced new, restrictive regulations (Walker, 2020). This meant that licensed mental health workers and students dealing with campus sexual assault may have endured increased barriers preventing a rapid response

to campus sexual assault (Bennett et al., 2021). Shelter-in-place orders and quarantine conditions added to social isolation and, as a result, elevated stress levels impacted the rates of violence due in part to following the medical directions of the quarantine process, which could have meant cohabitating with the perpetrator of the violence (Bennett et al., 2021). It is vital to increase awareness of sexual misconduct incidents as well as educate students on how to be an ally (Beaver, 2017).

Data indicated that 25% of women are victims of sexual violence. Though the sheer magnitude of campus sexual violence federal legislation increases, there remains minimal evidence suggesting that rates of sexual violence are decreasing. This quantitative study did not support the data; however, it is difficult to ascertain the reasons behind this contradiction.

The ASR, as mandated by the Jeanne Clery Act, is crucial for prospective students and parents to make informed decisions about university options. Although reporting universities have responded favorably to the Clery Act, ongoing difficulties remain after its implementation (Gerhing & Callaway, 1997; Jackson, 2023). These difficulties exposed the college administrators' uncertainty regarding reporting obligations and the reliability of including accurate data in admission packages. While the ASR Clery Act data was vital in this study, there appeared to be additional concerns, as this researcher noted that prominent public colleges and universities reported zero incidents of sexual harassment or sexual assault on their campuses during the three-year study period. Halstead et al. (2017) spoke to a lack of consistency in how sexual violence was referred to and measured, with a focus on data looking at formal disclosure, informal

disclosure, families' and friends' thoughts of disclosure, the process/effects of disclosure on the survivor, barriers to disclosure, and social support in the disclosure process. Furthermore, this study examined support services and additional resources on college campuses, focusing primarily on students' understanding and use of these resources and their subsequent suggestions. This study further considered increased risk factors, binge drinking, social living arrangements (fraternity/sorority memberships), and experiencing sexual assault before attending college, as elevated re-victimization rates were standard reports. This information has prompted universities to implement policies and programs to minimize or prevent sexual misconduct. The review by Holmes et al. (2015) highlights the effects of specific preventative measures and the implementation of a reporting system.

Sexual harassment on United States college campuses is a prevalent issue that has gained attention in recent years and is not only being studied today, but also prevention practices, training, and awareness campaigns are being implemented at the beginning of the fall and winter semesters on United States campuses and universities. Institutes of higher education are required to address and prevent sexual misconduct under the guidelines of Title IX, a federal civil regulation that prohibits discrimination based on sex in education (Brubaker, 2019). Many colleges have implemented policies and resources, such as awareness campaigns, reporting mechanisms, and support services, to support survivors and prevent future incidents (Guiora, 2022). Mennicke et al.'s (20) research determined that sexual harassment and violence prevention should be more extensive and align with a socioecological approach. Mechanisms can be applied to expand the role of

students, faculty, staff, institutional leadership, and community stakeholders in developing education and prevention programs that are crucial for promoting and preventing health issues.

This research proved several key findings including the prevalence of these issues, with data indicating 1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men experience sexual assault during their college year, this study did not wholly support this data but demonstrates a need for further research as studies reveal that many victims do not report incidents due to fear of stigma, retaliation, or lack of faith in the campus reporting systems.

The research highlights the importance of comprehensive prevention programs and supports Title IX initiatives that educate students about consent and bystander intervention. This study indicates disparities remain particularly among marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ students and students of color, who often face higher risks and additional barriers to reporting.

Furthermore, universities are increasingly implementing policy changes, improving support services for survivors, and adopting trauma-informed approaches. Nevertheless, gaps in enforcement, inconsistent responses, and ongoing challenges to campus culture hinder progress. This results in research being continued, focusing on multi-faceted efforts to reduce sexual violence, improve reporting mechanisms, and foster safer campus environments.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research on sexual misconduct on college campuses displayed several limitations:

- **Underreporting:** Many victims do not report incidents due to fear of retaliation, the stigma, the trauma in reliving the experience, or lack of trust in campus authorities, leading to biased or incomplete data.
- **Sampling Bias:** This research examined 120 college campuses across eight different definitions over three academic years, which may not have accurately reflected the United States' college and university campuses as a whole.
- **Variability in Definitions:** Differences in how sexual harassment and assault are defined within campuses and the student population can hinder the comparisons and synthesis of findings.
- **Recall Bias:** Self-reported data often underestimates or, in some cases, overestimates the actual occurrence. This data depends on participants' memory and understanding of sexual misconduct.
- **Limited Longitudinal Data:** Although it enables the collection of archival data, it introduces an element of difficulty in assessing trends over time or establishing causal relationships.
- **Stigma and Social Desirability:** Participants may minimize or deny their experiences to present themselves in a favorable light, leading to an underestimation of prevalence rates.
- **Institutional and Cultural Differences:** Variations in campus policies, academic delivery, campus culture, and reporting systems can impact both the incidence and reporting of incidents, complicating the synthesis of research findings.

- **Ethical and Privacy Concerns:** As always, addressing sensitive topics requires careful consideration of ethical implications. This study did not involve direct interactions with students; however, in campus reporting processes, the policy must protect students to facilitate reporting.

These limitations highlight the need for improved research methodologies, standardization of the definitions that encompass sexual harassment and sexual assault, and increased trust-building within campus environments to gather more accurate and comprehensive data.

### **Recommendations**

To reduce the prevalence of campus sexual misconduct, this research can be utilized as a starting point with the idea to improve the research, enhancing a deeper consideration as to why there remains under-reporting, perhaps a qualitative study working with student survivors, and student organizations established to provide a safe campus environment, working with school and community stakeholders. The critical need for multifaceted strategies to combat sexual harassment and assault in institutions of higher education remains at the forefront to provide a positive academic experience and an overall positive campus environment. To achieve this, I recommend implementing a comprehensive education and training program that includes mandatory, ongoing education on consent, boundaries, and respectful behaviors. Incorporation of bystander intervention training to empower students to intervene safely, and provide education on topics like drug and alcohol use, power dynamics, and cultural sensitivity—strengthen policies and reporting mechanisms by having clear, transparent policies that outline

unacceptable behaviors and consequences. Create an accessible and confidential reporting system for victims and witnesses. Ensure a timely and fair investigation process with protection against retaliation. Foster a respectful campus culture. Promoting programs and campaigns that challenge harmful stereotypes and promote respect. Enhance support systems to provide accessible counseling, medical care, and legal assistance for victims. Promote safe physical spaces by improving lighting and security across the entire campus. Install surveillance cameras and emergency phones, and deploy security patrols where necessary and during times that support overall concern and safety. Stakeholders on campuses continually monitor, assess, and evaluate programs and systems, demonstrating a genuine sense of care and concern.

Analyzing archival data will demonstrate the need for a concerted effort among the administration, policymakers, educators, students, and community stakeholders to foster a campus community that is safe, supportive, and responsive to the needs of all students. These recommendations, along with the continual striving to improve, will demonstrate a positive regard for students, their families, and the campus community, ultimately demonstrating a concerted effort for positive social change.

### **Implications**

Although the data were not statistically significant for the research questions, the study laid substantial groundwork that can enhance future research on a topic widespread across higher education. This research can lead to additional studies examining the reporting systems and seeking to understand the reasons behind underreporting. The research can inform the development of further prevention campaigns. Research can

delve deeper into the fall term and explore ways to reduce sexual misconduct on our campuses from the start to the fall break. A qualitative or mixed-methods study could be completed to examine this research and apply the findings to a personal survey of victims and witnesses. Research can explore collaborating with campus administration and community stakeholders to build trust in efforts to reduce victimization and enhance campus safety, without university administration displaying judgment. When considering these implications through the lens of overall safety and improvement, further research can enhance the campus culture and promote social change.

### **Conclusion**

Research using archival data related to sexual misconduct on 120 college and university campuses with eight different defining variables indicates that these issues remain significant concerns affecting student well-being, retention, and campus safety. Archival data revealed that sexual harassment and sexual assault are underreported due to fear of retaliation, stigma, and lack of trust in the institutional responses. Despite this, data suggest that a substantial proportion of students experience or witness such misconduct, prompting the need for this research. Although it was suggested that reporting has increased in recent years, the statistics did not support this claim. Data analysis shows fluctuations in reported cases, often influenced by previous reports, policy changes, increased awareness, and national movements. Data revealed persistent demographic disparities, post-COVID-19 implications, and increased effectiveness of prevention efforts across institutions, underscoring the need to address a problem that warrants attention from various campus and institutional organizations. While some

institutions have developed improved prevention and response measures, variability in effectiveness persists. Overall, this research underscores the critical importance of ongoing efforts to enhance data accuracy, refine prevention strategies, and foster a safer campus environment for all students.

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