

College admission questions rarely identify criminal behavior

April 16 2013

A new study shows that neither criminal background checks nor pre-admission screening questions accurately predict students likely to commit crime on college campuses.

"In an effort to reduce campus crime, more than half of all American colleges ask applicants about their [criminal histories](#) or require [criminal background checks](#)," said study author Carol Runyan , Ph.D., MPH, and professor of epidemiology at the Colorado School of Public Health. "But there is no real evidence to show this reduces campus crime."

Colleges across the U.S. ramped up [background checks](#) after the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre which killed 32 people and wounded another 17.

Yet Runyan found that only 3.3 percent of [college seniors](#) who engaged in misconduct actually reported precollege criminal histories during the admissions process. And just 8.5 percent of applicants with a criminal history were charged with misconduct during college.

The study surveyed 6,972 students at a large southern university. It found that students with criminal records prior to college were more likely to commit crimes once admitted but the screening process rarely identified them.

"We didn't look at cheating or minor alcohol offences," Runyan said. "We focused on significant offences like assault, robbery, property crimes, driving under the influence of alcohol, marijuana use and other

drug-related crimes."

While colleges are generally safe environments, students can be both perpetrators and victims of crimes that pose risks to the entire campus community, Runyan said.

She noted that earlier studies had reported that up to 14 percent of all college men admitted to some kind of sexual assault or coercion while 30 percent of university males and 22 percent of females said they had driven under the influence of alcohol in the last year. Also, 19 percent of students reported [illicit drug use](#).

Still, the screening questions have proven a weak tool in identifying would-be campus criminals, Runyan said.

Runyan's findings indicate that students who engage in criminal activity during college are more likely to have engaged in misconduct prior to college, whether they admit it on their applications or not. However, she said current screening questions on the college application often fail to detect which students will engage in misconduct during college. And most of those who have records before college don't seem to continue the behaviors in college.

Even if the screenings could identify likely troublemakers, Runyan said, colleges would have to decide whether to admit the students given that the odds of them committing a crime on campus would still be low. And much of the reported precollege crime involves marijuana use and is not violent.

Another complication is possible discrimination. Students from more affluent backgrounds, who tend to be white, can often pay to have their early criminal records expunged while others, including many minorities, can't afford it.

"Based on our work, I cannot say with confidence that colleges should stop asking about criminal backgrounds, but I would use caution in thinking that this is the best strategy to address crime on campus," said Runyan who directs the University of Colorado's Pediatric Injury Prevention, Education and Research Program. "We need to ensure a safe and supportive environment for all students rather than limiting [college](#) access for students who may need extra help."

More information: The study was recently published in the journal *Injury Prevention* and will be presented by Runyan at a conference in June.

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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