

Team reports on abuse of students doing anthropological fieldwork

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University of Illinois anthropology professor Kathryn Clancy is one of four researchers to report on the psychological, physical and sexual abuse of students during field studies at remote sites in the field of biological anthropology. The team presents its findings at the 2013 meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropology. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

College athletes are not the only ones who sometimes suffer at the hands of higher ups. A new report brings to light a more hidden and pernicious

problem – the psychological, physical and sexual abuse of students in the field of biological anthropology working in field studies far from home.

The report is based on an [online survey](#) and telephone interviews that, in a period of less than two months, elicited accounts of abuse from dozens of women and men working in the field of [biological anthropology](#).

This is a first attempt to systematically document the harassment, abuse or assaults young researchers sometimes face in the course of doing anthropological fieldwork at remote sites, said University of Illinois anthropology professor Kathryn Clancy, one of four researchers to present the new findings at the 2013 meeting of the American Association of [Physical Anthropology](#).

Most students and postdoctoral researchers consider field research a stepping stone to a better career, Clancy said.

"This is something that most biological anthropologists, cultural anthropologists and archeologists see as a fairly necessary experience," she said. "Some people can do an entirely lab-based project or a computer modeling project or a local project, but most of us need to go into the field."

The team recruited subjects through outreach on social media and websites devoted to researchers in biological anthropology. They heard from 122 men and women, more than half of whom had experienced or witnessed [sexual harassment](#), [physical abuse](#) or [sexual assault](#) at the hands of site managers, project directors or peers living and working at field research sites. The researchers defined sexual assault as "any kind of inappropriate physical contact, unwanted physical touching, assault, all the way up to rape," Clancy said.

"Overwhelmingly, we're seeing junior women being targeted by senior

men," Clancy said. "59 percent of respondents have experienced sexual harassment. Women are 3 times more likely to experience harassment than men. And 19 percent of respondents have been sexually assaulted."

The perpetrators of the harassment and assaults were usually men, but some women also abused their students. One female site director, for example, refused to let women leave the work site to urinate.

The researchers did not directly ask the respondents if they had been raped, but some of the respondents volunteered that they had been raped by research leaders or peers at fieldwork sites. Others reported that they had witnessed the systematic targeting of junior members of the research team for harassment or assault.

Such working conditions can have devastating effects on the health and wellbeing of those who are targeted and those who witness the abuse, Clancy said. They also force students to choose between their career goals and their desire to speak up for themselves or others.

Clancy and her colleagues noticed that larger, more organized research sites tended to have fewer incidents of abuse, harassment or assault than smaller, less formal fieldwork sites. Those who worked on teams that included women in leadership positions also reported less harassment and abuse. Some respondents said they noticed an uptick in abusive behavior when female leaders were absent.

"The larger a field site, the more organized you have to be, so you're more likely to actually have ground rules or a code of conduct, or a chain of command that prevents people from feeling they can get away with bad behavior," Clancy said.

The researchers are proposing that funding agencies like the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health require the

same kinds of protocols and oversight of researcher safety in the field that are routine in the laboratory.

"If we want to fund a postdoctoral researcher, we have to write a postdoc mentoring plan so that we prove that this postdoc isn't just going to be a lackey for us and that we're actually going to mentor them and train them and help them get a job," Clancy said. "I have to make sure my students have access to certain kinds of vaccines if they're working with blood. We have to go through Institutional Review Boards to protect our research subjects. We have to go through animal protocols to protect our animals. But we don't have to protect our researchers in the field."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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