

Many universities undercount sexual assaults on campus, research finds

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New research shows a pattern of underreporting of on-campus sexual assaults by universities and colleges across the nation, and some schools have continued to underreport even after being fined for violations of federal law, according to a study published by the American Psychological Association.

"When it comes to [sexual assault](#) and rape, the norm for universities and colleges is to downplay the situation and the numbers," said researcher Corey Rayburn Yung, JD, a law professor at the University of Kansas. "The result is students at many universities continue to be attacked and victimized, and punishment isn't meted out to the rapists and sexual assaulters."

Yung analyzed the numbers of on-campus sexual assaults reported by 31 large universities and colleges during audits by the U.S. Department of Education for compliance with federal crime reporting requirements. During the audits, the reported numbers of sexual assaults increased by approximately 44 percent on average from previously reported levels. After the audits ended, the reported number of sexual assaults in following years dropped to pre-audit levels, evidence that some schools provided a more accurate picture of sexual assaults on campus only when they were under federal scrutiny, the study concluded.

The research, which was published in the APA journal *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, included all large schools with on-campus housing and more than 10,000 students that were audited from 2001 to

2012. The study didn't provide individual statistics for each school, and some of the 31 schools didn't show a spike in reported sexual assaults during audits, Yung said.

The study used federal government data and scientific methods to confirm the opinions of many sexual-assault victims' organizations and others who believe that many universities and colleges ignore or downplay problems relating to sexual assaults on campus, Yung said.

"Colleges and universities still aren't taking the safety of their students from sexual assault seriously," he said. "The study shows that many universities continue to view rape and sexual assault as a public relations issue rather than a safety issue. They don't want to be seen as a school with really high sexual assault numbers, and they don't want to go out of their way to report that information to students or the media."

The 31 colleges and universities that were audited included some prominent public and private schools. Most of the federal audits were triggered by local complaints about the handling of sexual assaults or other violent crimes on campus. Other audits were conducted in conjunction with FBI investigations of local police jurisdictions, and a few universities were randomly selected for audits by the U.S. Department of Education.

Since the federal reporting requirements only cover on-campus crimes, the study wasn't able to track sexual assaults that occurred off campus or that weren't reported by victims, so the true number of students victimized by sexual assaults is probably much higher than the study results indicate, Yung said. The vast majority of universities that were included in the study reported no off-campus sexual assaults in any given year, even though federal regulations require a "good faith" effort to obtain that information from local police.

The study also tracked other serious crimes reported by the 31 schools, including aggravated assault, robbery and burglary. There was no similar increase in those crime statistics during federal audits compared to the dramatic jump in reported sexual assaults.

Under the Clery Act, universities and colleges may face fines of up to \$35,000 per violation of crime reporting requirements. Yung said he believes those fines should be higher because they haven't deterred undercounting of sexual assaults. "Even schools that were fined didn't have a long-term compliance effect," he said. "They seemed to behave the same as schools that weren't fined or those that didn't have any findings of wrongdoing."

A bill introduced last year in Congress, the Campus Accountability and Safety Act, would raise maximum fines to \$150,000 per violation and create a public database of campus sexual assaults from information provided by student surveys. Based on the study findings, Yung believes probation for violators and more frequent audits also are needed.

More information: "Concealing Campus Sexual Assault: An Empirical Examination;" Corey Rayburn Yung, JD: University of Kansas; *Psychology , Public Policy and Law*; Vol. 21, Issue 1; online, Feb. 2, 2015.

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