

# Addressing campus sexual violence: New risk assessment tool can help administrators make difficult decisions

March 7 2023, by Sandy Jung and Jesmen Mendoza

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How do universities and colleges build safer campuses, and better respond to [incidents of sexual and gender-based violence](#)? There isn't a

simple answer to this question.

Whatever the response, any solution involves making difficult decisions based on valid tools.

We are part of a national collaborative initiative to [address and prevent sexual and gender-based violence at post-secondary institutions](#) in a survivor-centered, and [trauma- and violence-informed way](#).

We have been co-leading a project to create an evidence-based community risk assessment tool for [campus](#) administrators and sexual violence support staff to use when formulating campus policy about [sexual assault](#) and gender-based violence, and when responding to incidents.

## **Informed policy needed**

[Culture change movements](#), [documentaries and media](#) reporting on sexual [assault on campuses](#) have brought to light the need to go beyond supporting victims and merely responding to incidents of sexual violence—and focus on the overall campus safety.

Such increased attention has obligated institutions to devote specialized campus resources to develop policies, increase survivor support and establish programming to address the multiple forms of systemic oppression that intersect with gender-based violence.

## **Surveillance, security responses**

Campuses often respond to sexual or gender-based violence by choosing approaches involving surveillance, greater security measures and punishment—what might be called a carceral approach, reminiscent of

prisons.

Some campus administrators believe that [police presence](#) and other [security measures](#) make campus a safer environment.

These mainstream approaches work only to safeguard the institution from scrutiny. They put the onus on the victim in most cases, rather than a preventive approach that keeps survivors safe.

These efforts may ultimately fail to instill trust in survivors, as reports show that victims of sexual assault, especially [women of color](#), are less likely to report sexual violence to police or submit a [formal complaint to the university](#).

## **Decisions about victims, the accused**

Neglected in these resources, however, are processes that guide decisions about those who have been accused of sexual and gender-based violence.

Most policies prematurely outline potential consequences for the accused and rush to ask how the individual should be disciplined. Instead, these policies should first ask how a decision should be made about the person who has caused harm: For example, is the person at a high risk of perpetrating further harm? What should be done about the person's access to the campus environment and other students?

In odd contrast, the [criminal justice](#) field gives less consideration to the victim and more time and resources to the perpetrator, asking how they are evaluated, what sentence they should get—and what intervention should be applied.

There is a need to balance resources that are focused on both victims and the perpetrators.

## **New national framework**

A Canadian social change consultancy dedicated to gender justice and equity, [Possibility Seeds](#), collaborated with over 300 experts and advocates from across the country to outline a national framework to address and prevent sexual and gender-based violence at post-secondary institutions.

A report emerging from this work, [called Courage to Act](#), identified the importance of a coordinated response to incidents of campus gender-based violence including policy responses. Our work to create an evidence-based risk assessment tool emerged from needs highlighted in this report.

## **Need for formal, relevant tools**

It has been generally accepted by the criminal justice field that assessing risk on the basis of personal impressions—what's known as [unstructured judgements](#)—does not yield risk assessments that are as accurate as when people use structured and validated tools.

A structured risk tool ensures that we avoid making decisions based on personal subjectivity and inaccurate beliefs.

In the end, a structured and valid tool would help ensure that fair and consistent decisions are made. This ultimately protects the rights of those involved and helps keep the whole campus community safe.

## **Tailored to post-secondary communities**

Some may wonder: Why reinvent the wheel when the justice system already uses risk tools to make decisions about criminal offenders?

However, these tools were developed for use with justice-involved adults, tend to focus on antisocial behaviors and attitudes, and assess specific risks for partner abuse, sexual violence or general violence.

Research suggests that [young adults](#) studying in [post-secondary communities](#) are less likely to have antisocial traits (such as having serious criminal records, illicit drug dependency or poor employment records). This said, it is true that sexual or gender-based violence on campus may be perpetrated by anyone, not necessarily by students, and also that university affiliation does not guarantee pro-social or non-violent behavior.

Also, campus sexual and gender-based violence includes a broad spectrum of harmful behaviors that can't be easily pigeon-holed into sexual violence or partner assault.

These behaviors can include coercively controlling, sexually harassing or trolling or abusing people online in ways that do not necessarily involve physical contact but can cause tremendous distress to victims.

## **Four factors**

This risk assessment tool will be freely available in fall 2023 and is intended to be used by all support providers on campus. It is not intended for use to purely predict future behavior, but rather, to help campus administrators make determinations regarding risk management.

The tool helps administrators and sexual violence support staff consider four factors related to:

- the survivor/victim;
- the post-secondary community;
- the incident of [sexual violence](#);

- the respondent, or the person who has caused harm.

## Safely planning with victims

In addition to the tool's use to assess the respondent's risk to commit further sexual or gender-based violence, the tool may help administrators and post-secondary support staff to create a safety plan with the victim.

Also, identifying a respondent's specific risk factors can help campus administrators target the respondent's problematic areas that likely led to their harmful behaviors. Administrators and support staff can conduct an institutional risk audit that would help evaluate where increased allocation of resources would make the most sense in order to have a positive impact on campus safety.

To build safer campuses, we can start by using a community risk assessment to make [difficult decisions](#) about a person who has caused harm, and where to allocate resources to prevent future incidents of sexual and gender-based [violence](#).

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