

Researchers find less victim blaming in campus sexual assaults, but say solutions are still needed

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Women who have experienced sexual violence at fraternity parties have often been blamed for what happened to them. But new research on an

elite college campus suggests that it's becoming less common to fault the victim.

Women on that campus viewed institutional structures within the National Pan-Hellenic Council and the university as responsible for creating risky party environments conducive to sexual assault, according to a new study led by Simone Ispa-Landa, an associate professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University.

Fundamentally, the power dynamics and entrenched history at play in the historically white Greek life party scene haven't changed much since the "no means no" campus activism of the 1990s.

The study was published in the journal *Sociology of Education* on March 30, 2023. The findings are based on the results of 121 interviews with 68 sorority women from 2017–2019, including 53 rank-and-file sorority members and 15 sorority members who had special roles as risk managers tasked with making parties safer.

"Instead of shaming [young people](#) for wanting to socialize at parties, we should be creating safer conditions for them to do so," Ispa-Landa said. "Good policy meets people where they are."

Historically white Greek life on college campuses has a fraught history that is different from that of African American and other multicultural Greek life organizations, according to Ispa-Landa.

Many of today's historically white fraternities originated more than 100 years ago as a draw for wealthy young men, who often saw them as spaces where they could indulge themselves while surrounded by like-minded individuals from similar backgrounds.

Fraternities have always been able to host parties with women present,

and enjoy other privileges because their chapters often own large houses near campuses that are insulated from oversight. Members and alumni are also often influential, and Greek life retains a pull as a marker of social status.

Sororities, on the other hand, have long been prohibited from hosting parties with men present. Additionally, "house moms"—[adult women](#) who perform a supervisory role—also provide a modicum of oversight that contrasts with fraternities.

These dynamics have helped shape a unique environment, the study suggests, in which sorority women have little agency over the setting at parties. Blaring music, darkness, gatekeeping and drinks provided by men often contribute to an environment that puts women at risk.

In Ispa-Landa's study, women from a variety of sororities at an unnamed university were interviewed by graduate student co-authors about their perspectives on sexual assault and how to prevent it. They often pointed to their inability to host—and therefore retain control over—parties as a key factor underlying party rape culture.

Education efforts and accountability measures instituted by universities have not always effectively targeted the problem's root causes, according to interviewees, so women have taken it upon themselves to explore a few potential solutions.

Though the research took place at just one institution, Ispa-Landa said the findings likely have broader relevance. Similar strategies for dealing with the problem of [sexual assault](#) have been reported on other elite campuses.

Two internal strategies came up repeatedly in interviews as means by which sororities are seeking to make party culture safer at the focal

university in this study.

The first was to designate risk managers or "sober sisters" who abstain from drinking at parties, watch interactions between others and intervene if an incapacitated woman seems to be at risk of assault by removing her from an interaction with a man and offering to get her water or a ride home, for example.

Women reported that this strategy placed a great deal of responsibility on a small number of women, who often were newer members of the sorority. Social dynamics meant that it was sometimes hard for them to know when and on behalf of whom it was appropriate to intervene.

The second strategy was "blocklisting," a system in which men who were reported to have had predatory interactions with women could be anonymously flagged and removed from guest lists at "crush parties"—off-campus events at rented spaces that sororities have more control over—and sometimes also at traditional fraternity parties, by contacting fraternity leadership who controlled access.

However, many sororities drew a line at blocklisting an entire fraternity. The social costs of doing so, women said, were too high.

Ispa-Landa said that the reluctance of [women](#) to penalize entire fraternities was important to note, because it points to the strength of party culture, which is one of the reasons for being in Greek life in the first place.

"We need to be thinking about social-ecological changes that improve the parties and create alternatives, but in a way that still allows students to have the social outlets they crave," Ispa-Landa said.

At parties, having quieter rooms where people can talk, drink water and

eat, and temporarily escape from the din could lead to less risky behavior. Additionally, giving people the opportunity to socialize in more relaxed settings before parties—and reducing the expectation that they will go home with someone after—by offering food or entertainment alternatives, can provide an off-ramp that doesn't require eliminating parties altogether, the study noted.

More information: Simone Ispa-Landa et al, Navigating the Risks of Party Rape in Historically White Greek Life at an Elite College: Women's Accounts, *Sociology of Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00380407231163799](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407231163799)

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