

College students in minoritized groups feel less confident about peer support in event of sexual assault, study finds

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College students who identify as part of minoritized groups have more negative perceptions about how their peers might react if they were to

disclose experiences of sexual violence, a recent Oregon State University study found.

Researchers say the results indicate a need for colleges and universities to take a more intersectional approach—considering the ways students' racial, gender and sexual identities may overlap and affect their experience—in their efforts to provide safe environments for victims of sexual violence.

[The study](#), published in the journal *Violence Against Women*, used campus climate survey responses to gauge how students anticipated their community reacting to a disclosure of unwanted sexual contact. The survey asked students to rank the likelihood of outcomes including "Students would label the person making the report a troublemaker" and "The alleged offender(s) or their friends would try to get back at the person making the report."

While the questions gauged students' perceptions rather than specifically asking about lived experiences, those perceptions carry a lot of weight, said study co-author Jill Hoxmeier, an instructor in OSU's College of Health.

"The implication is that perception could impact disclosure behavior, and in a public health context, we know that people who have negative disclosure experiences are more at risk for poor health outcomes," Hoxmeier said.

Victims of unwanted sexual contact are already at higher risk for [health issues](#) including [substance use](#) and abuse, disordered eating and risky sexual behaviors, she said.

Previous research in the field has established that 20%–25% of women are sexually victimized during college, but the impact is not evenly

distributed.

Studies show students with minoritized gender and sexual identities are at higher risk for victimization, and women of color are less likely to report or seek help after a [sexual assault](#). Other studies have found that victims' experience of disclosing their assault and the reactions they receive upon disclosing can either help or hurt their overall recovery.

However, much of the body of research on this topic has relied on data from white women students, Hoxmeier said.

"In this work, my colleagues and I are trying to disaggregate people from broader racial and ethnic categories," she said. "We can't just lump everyone together. We can't use these homogeneous samples and assume that the findings speak for people of different identities, particularly with identities that are historically and currently minoritized and oppressed."

The study used [survey data](#) from 2,727 students at a large public university. About 33% of respondents identified as Asian American, 13% as Hispanic, 7% as African American and 5% in another racial or ethnic group. About 6% identified as having a disability and nearly 17% said they had a minoritized sexual identity. Overall, 17% were survivors of sexual violence.

Researchers found that students with any single minoritized identity—racial, gender or sexual—perceived anticipated peer support less favorably than their non-minoritized peers, and those perceptions became even less favorable among students with more than one minoritized identity.

For example, African American, Asian and Hispanic students perceived anticipated peer support less favorably than white students overall. But

Looking more specifically within subgroups, researchers found that while white women, African American women and Asian women reported roughly the same perception, African American men and Asian men reported significantly worse perceptions than their white male peers.

Among students with minoritized sexual identities, those with a disability had significantly worse perceptions of anticipated [peer support](#) than their non-disabled peers.

"I think that institutions can play a really big role in generating more accurate, more positive, more inclusive conversations about sexual violence, which helps create space for more positive disclosure experiences," Hoxmeier said. "Institutions really need to be invested in this work because of the impact it has on so many of their students."

More information: Julia O'Connor et al, Perceptions of Anticipated Peer Support for Survivors of Sexual Violence Among Students with Minoritized Identities, *Violence Against Women* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/10778012231200478](#)

Provided by Oregon State University

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