

Provincial policies on campus sexual violence are inconsistent across Canada, say researchers

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Incidents of campus-based [sexual violence](#) and gender-based violence are not new. Though, in the past decade, there has been increased awareness and action from campus administrations in response to campus sexual violence.

In 2021, students at Western University [protested rape culture on campus](#) following allegations that [women were being drugged and sexually assaulted during orientation week](#). Police investigated, but no charges were laid. Western [launched a task force on sexual violence](#) and mandated consent and [violence](#) prevention training for students.

In 2015, [Dalhousie University](#) suspended 13 dentistry students for misogynistic and sexually violent social media posts targeting women classmates. The students were allowed to graduate after a [restorative justice program](#).

These are not one-offs. Campus-based [sexual harassment occurs almost](#) daily and often [goes unreported](#).

Varying provincial responses

Sexual and gender-based violence operate on a continuum that ranges from [misogynistic comments](#) to gender-motivated hate-crimes.

Between 2015 and 2021, [student-led calls for change](#) and a need to build safer campuses led most [Canadian provinces](#) to mandate universities and colleges to formally [adopt sexual violence policies](#).

Post-secondary institutions' approaches to [preventing and responding to sexual violence aren't consistent](#) across the country, and how institutions follow policy mandates in provinces [can differ](#).

Provinces have mandated post-secondary policy in varied ways. For example, British Columbia's [Sexual Violence and Misconduct Policy Act](#) requires post-secondary institutions to establish policies that are publicly accessible and focused on preventing violence. Policies must lay out reporting processes, be reviewed every three years and include diverse student group consultations when policy is created and updated.

In 2022, Alberta's Minister of Advanced Education and Associate Minister of Status of Women sent a [letter to post-secondary schools](#) calling for a stand-alone policy. This policy is to be informed by guidelines from [Courage to Act](#), a "[federally funded initiative to address and prevent gender-based violence on Canadian campuses](#)" prioritizing survivor-centered measures.

Manitoba's [Sexual Violence Awareness and Prevention Act](#) requires colleges and universities to develop policies that focus on consent education and culturally sensitive measures, yet offers unspecific language requiring universities and colleges to raise awareness about sexual violence. Policies must outline reporting processes, including academic accommodations.

Ontario's [Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act](#) requires post-secondary policies pertaining to sexual violence and harassment to be publicly accessible and include [trauma-informed practices](#). Policies must also list on/off-[campus](#) resources, outline the reporting process and academic accommodations. Creating and updating policies must include consultation with student governing bodies. Training on policies must be available to the campus community.

Québec's [Act to Prevent and Fight Sexual Violence in Higher Education Institutions](#) requires higher education institutions to develop stand-alone policies that account for individuals at higher risk of experiencing violence. It outlines reporting processes, including measures for confidentiality and the prohibition of gag orders.

Québec universities and colleges must give all students [education about sexual violence](#) upon arrival, and yearly education to all student leaders, staff and faculty. Colleges and universities must outline safety infrastructure to counter sexual violence and create a code of conduct for relationships involving people with campus authority. All members

of the campus community must receive sexual violence training, and there must be a standing committee with diverse campus representation to create and update sexual violence policies.

Nova Scotia and public universities created a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) addressing sexual violence policies. Universities are required to adopt stand-alone policies with a commitment to prevent sexual violence. Policies must outline the reporting processes and resources available on/off-campus. Universities must consult with student governing bodies and create a working committee to promote sexual violence education.

Prince Edward Island's [Post-Secondary Institutions Sexual Violence Policies Act](#) requires that post-secondary bodies have policies outlining reporting procedures. It specifies a need for culturally sensitive measures, and academic accommodations. Student input must also be engaged during policy development.

Saskatchewan, New Brunswick plus Newfoundland and Labrador still [have no provincial mandated requirements](#) related to post-secondary institutions and sexual violence.

These examples suggest the extent to which there are differing degrees of specificity guiding post-secondary schools' policy creation and implementation.

Survivor-centered approach needed

A lot is promising: there are explicit calls for prevention, support and response efforts. But many requirements are unclear and vague. For example, [Ontario's](#) requirement for student consultations and training are left up to individual schools to interpret.

Experts who have examined campus policies about sexual assault and gender-based violence note that campuses often respond to sexual or gender-based violence in ways that increase surveillance and security. This approach is not survivor-centered or preventative in focus.

Even with policies, students can feel unsupported. [There's a nationwide lack of clarity around what happens when](#) a report is made.

While some [provinces have made some changes](#) to their initial mandates, change is infrequent and policies become outdated.

Campus-based [sexual violence policy](#) recommendations and [research](#) is [continuously evolving](#). [Evidence-informed tools](#) are available to post-secondary institutions to support developing relevant policies.

There is lots of hard work being done to support [students](#) and we see pockets of improvement nationwide. But efforts will remain sporadic until there is an established system that ensures [accountability](#) for consistent survivor-centered and trauma-informed policies across the country.

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