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How Well Are College Campuses Handling Sexual Assaults?

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ABSTRACT

Sexual assault is an overlooked concern on college campuses. While the information is getting more coverage, news, and more conversations are being held about sexual assault (Moyer, 2024) still not enough is being done and the information is being hidden or “swept under the rug” (Sacharczyk, 2023). Gathering evidence from criminology and sociology, this project focuses on collecting qualitative content data and an analytic approach to news articles to consider the common themes and relationships between what is being covered in the news and what is happening behind the scenes. Most especially, my interest lies in researching the sense of protection that is brought forth when discussing college sexual assaults, the information that is available to the public, and whether students' voices are being heard. Overall, results provided information on the types of students and institutions that were protected as well as whether students' voices were censored. More importantly, discussed was the role of Title IX and whether they were fulfilling their duties or if the institutions were doing enough to aid sexual assault relief and intervention.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

In America alone, a person is sexually assaulted every 68 seconds (RAINN). To bring that into perspective, an American is sexually assaulted every minute. That gives someone one minute before they could be the next survivor or victim. Although, there is no given number to report the number of sexual assaults that occur on college campuses because of the lack of reporting. Around 1 in 10 students become victims of sexual assault every year (Bryant, 2024).

From depression to anxiety to physical health to sexual health and so much more, a sexual assault alters one person's entire life. (England & Wales). 1 out of 6 women in America has experienced an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (RAINN, 2020).

The average age range of those who experience sexual assault is between 16-25 years old (RAINN, 2020). On average, this is the time that most young adults are attending college. Most of the time, this is when students are away from their parents for the first time in their lives. They are forced to make their own decisions and be their own people. Sometimes, this is not always the best thing. According to a study by USA Today, 13% of students experience sexual assault while attending college. However, if we look at the details, that is a vast underrepresentation of what happens on college campuses. On community college campuses alone, there are tendencies to underreport sexual assaults to seem safer to the public and because they do not offer housing to the students, so they do not feel responsible for anything that takes place outside of classes (Howard, et. al., 2019). On top of that, students tend to remain silent rather than report something that has happened to them (Bogart & Stein, 1987). A study done by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center concludes that 63% of all sexual assaults go unreported to the police (Hanson,

et. al., 1999). This can be due to fear, shame, fear of retaliation, certain policies that are in place at a university or by the justice system, and many other reasons (Kimble, 2018). 13% may not seem like a lot but when put into perspective along with what typically occurs on college campuses and how many assaults statistically go unreported, college campuses are the prime breeding ground for crimes like these to occur.

Various characteristics come into play when thinking about college campuses and how that affects the number of sexual assaults that occur. From the types of housing offered or lack thereof to the prevalence of substances to the athletic program size and income to the presence or lack of Greek life and the campus police safety and resources. Although safety seems to be a significant deal to colleges and how they run, many students do not even know the extent of protective resources that their campuses are supposed to offer (Thomas-Montford, 2020). Campus police tend to lack a face on campus, many students do not interact with campus police unless they get into trouble (Howard, et. al., 2019). This puts a damper on the reputation that campus police are supposed to uphold since it provides fear and negativity for students (Howard, et. al., 2019). It prevents a connection between students and the campus officers as it prolongs the negative connotation many already have about police officers (Howard, et. al., 2019). Therefore, students refuse to reach out even if they do need help (Thomas-Montford, 2020). Along with resources, many students do not even know that Title IX exists which leads to increasing underreporting when a sexual assault does occur on campus (Johnson, et. al., 2023).

Through the many factors offered on a college campus, the main reason sexual assaults occur is because of the lack of education and knowledge.

Upon the various studies, characteristics, and questions that are still present about college campuses, we bring up the question of How well are College Campuses Handling Sexual

Assaults? In this study, we look at thirty different news articles that discuss sexual assaults on college campuses or bring up any topics that pertain to sexual misconduct on college campuses. This study works to find common themes and purposes of the articles which provide a wide array of information spanning from all sides of sexual misconduct. The analysis confirms data relating to lack of support on all sides, lack of education or awareness, if there is a sense of protection, and brings to question whether students' voices are being heard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual Assault on College Campuses

After research on Title IX and the purposes they are supposed to uphold, a study identified the presence or absence of eight virtues: “definitional clarity, inclusion of all groups within the definition of who may qualify as a victim, inclusion of all groups in the definition of who may qualify as a perpetrator, the requirement of use of force in the commission of the crime, reference to the intoxication or incapacitation of the victim, reference to the intoxication of the perpetrator, degrees of sexual assault, and the level of knowledge required for the perpetrator to infer consent to the sexual act.” (DeMatteo, et. al., 2015). Anyone who resides in the United States will not be discriminated against because of their sex from any activity, extracurricular, or group that receives federal funding and those who do not abide by this law will face federal regulations and consequences. (Dematteo, et. al., 2015). Further studies focus on students' comfortability with reporting sexual misconduct on campus. It was found that 45.8% of students are uncomfortable with the fact that all university employees are mandated reporters (Johnson, et. al, 2023). There needs to be an improvement and more transparency when it comes to Title IX and the mandated reporting system (Johnson, et. al, 2023). Title IX has developed throughout the years and works to explain what the basis of Title IX is as many do not even know what it is used for. (Reynolds, 2019). Although there have been developments, there are more complaints against Title IX rather than reports that support Title IX and what they do. (Reynolds, 2019). To increase prevention and see results then there needs to be better sexual education (Anderson & Whitson, 2005). With the lack of education and focus on sexual education and misconduct, there is a constant increase in sexual assaults especially with college women as the survivors (Anderson & Whitson, 2005).

When it comes to differences between 4-year universities and community colleges, institutions have a more limited role at community colleges because they do not offer residential housing and the sexual assaults occur off-campus with more nonstudents, family members, or significant others. They do not have as much data or cannot get as involved because it is out of their jurisdiction, and they try to make their campus seem safer than it is. (Howard, et. al., 2019). Other factors, such as the presence or lack thereof of Greek life, also ramp up the number of sexual assaults that occur. Regardless of the housing situation, community colleges that do not have Greek life still report similar amounts of sexual assaults. (Howard, et. al., 2019). If anything, community colleges tend to underreport to make their campuses seem safer and to save money by not having as much supervision, security, and housing (Thomas-Montford, 2020). Community colleges that do not rely on campus safety resources or lack campus officers still have similar rates of sexual assaults compared to any other campus. (Thomas-Montford, 2020). While community colleges still provide high numbers of sexual assaults with a lack of Greek life, major institutions provide living areas that allow even more sexual assaults to occur. The data shows that many sexual assaults occur in college dorm rooms regardless of the extra amount of supervision including Resident Assistants and Coordinators that are in the building compared to off-campus or non-residential housing where there is no supervision (Curcio, 2017).

Another common factor that provides higher reports of sexual assaults revolves around athletics. Coaches work to bring awareness to sexual assault and sway their players away from committing acts of sexual violence (Tredinnick and McMahon, 2019). Staff works towards prevention and campus resources particularly with student athletes (Tredinnick, 2022). However, staff and coaches do not always make a difference when their players are committing these acts.

If anything, coaches, and staff are more inclined to protect their players, their program, and their funding.

Risk Factors of Sexual Assault

We can also look at how sexual assault and misconduct affect colleges and the community. Looking at the side of the institution and workers for Title IX, we see that coordinators and those who advocate for sexual assault face negative outcomes and backlash because of their position. The data used involves psychosocial and organizational factors that describe advocates' opinions on how sexual assaults are handled by the institutions and brings us to the hypotheses that involve believing that advocates will have negative perceptions about how sexual assault is handled, that psychosocial factors will affect how sexual assault is handled, and so will organizational factors (Nightingale, 2023). Although stating that psychosocial factors did not negatively impact their work, advocates are more likely to be affected by burnout, fatigue, trauma, as well as other factors due to their jobs and the situations they are placed in (Nightingale, 2023). Another result stated that the lack of knowledge surrounding Title IX, but institutions, faculty, and staff is one of the biggest hindrances that affect perceptions of sexual assault and its outcomes (Nightingale, 2023). Many regret filing a report with Title IX in the first place. Many also do not know about Title IX or do not know what they do because the information about Title IX is either not very well known or students are not informed that they have this resource on their college campus (Reynolds, 2019).

Other risk factors include the environments provided by the college that students attend. Evidence shows how privilege and partying work together to create an environment where men feel the need to take advantage of women. (Sweeney, 2014). Based on results and the high number of results stating that the participant had experienced a sexual assault and even more

results stating that alcohol was involved, brings us to the conclusion that alcohol makes a significant effect on how many sexual assaults occur especially in college (Boyle & Walker, 2016). There are more reasons that sexual assaults occur than just alcohol abuse. (Abbey, et. al., 2004). These involve personality type, childhood experiences, experience with alcohol, the relationship between perpetrator and survivor, etc. (Abbey, et. al., 2004). Alcohol gives off the impression that survivors are more willing to participate in sexual acts which makes them likely targets for sexual assaults (Lorenz and Ullman, 2016).

Not only do sports contribute to sexual assaults on college campuses but they also provide risks and hostile environments. Data shows that sports contribute to sexist and dominant ideals to which perpetrators play out in real-life scenarios in which cause them to spur violence, especially sexual violence against others (Crosset, et. al., 1996).

Further toxic masculinity and males trying to prove themselves to their peers is prevalent in Greek life. Peer pressure is high in Greek life and contributes to sexual assault numbers (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2019). Alcohol is also involved in which tension is high and spots in fraternities or sororities tend to be at risk if orders are not followed. (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2019).

Newspaper Coverage of Sexual Assaults

The evidence found in news articles that focus on sexual assaults on college campuses is recent and is being covered more actively now. The articles used in this study range from the years 2022 to 2024. However, the news sources tend to be more local and cover news within a smaller area. Based on the sources, there were a few major wide-name new stations such as Fox,

CNN, and USA Today. The majority of news about sexual assaults and college campuses was mostly covered countywide or by the school's news source. Many of these sources provide videos as well as further in-depth interviews with students and how they feel about the situation. These news sources work in our favor because they capture multiple sides of one story. Regardless of whether the news favors the victims or survivors over the perpetrators, they still work to tell all sides of one story.

METHODS

Procedure

Data and Methods

In the social sciences, there is a strict focus on how people feel and the examination of what certain data means to people (Krippendorff, 1989). Unlike natural scientists who focus on facts, social scientists focus more on how people feel about data such as images, sounds, texts, or any other material that would cause a meaningful connection in people (Krippendorff, 1989). These types of analysis allow for a significant assessment of the data presented (Krippendorff, 1989). It is about making conclusions about data and its context and how it relates to each other on a meaningful level that allows specific feelings about the data to arise (Marsh & White, 2006). This leads me to use content data analysis to compare the data I find with the feelings that arise based on keywords that align with my research.

The data collection in this study involved thirty-one news articles that had any mention of Title IX, sexual assault, or sexual misconduct. The articles involved came from google news and were decided based on the snippet of information that was shown before the link could be clicked on. The goal was to find any connections and common themes among the articles. I conducted a Google search in the news tab of various keywords such as “Title IX”, “college sexual assaults”, “Title IX and athletes”, “Title IX and Greek life”, “Title IX issues in higher education”, “Title IX and lack of sexual education”, and “Issues with Title IX. The articles that coincided most effectively with my research were dated as early as April 2022 until January 2024. The methods used involve qualitative content coding. This involved looking for keywords that would be found in the articles that would relate to what I was studying. I analyzed specific

keywords such as “Title IX”, “sexual assaults”, “sexual misconduct”, “Greek life”, “athletics”, and “college campuses”. I found a good mix of thirty-one different articles that discussed each of these topics in detail and I made key notes on each of the articles that mentioned any of the keywords listed. I decided upon articles that stuck out to me based on the title of the articles and the summaries that were provided on the search page. I tried to avoid any news articles that mentioned politics or the political gain that was used for politicians in the discussion of reforming Title IX. I found articles relating to colleges and students more relevant to the data that I was trying to collect.

Data Analysis

I read through each article and created an Excel sheet to note the title, the source, the date, quick notes, and if the article included anything important such as videos of interviews or any statistics. I expanded upon the articles further by creating columns that ask if the article involves mentions of lack of institutional support, whether athletics are involved if students voices are being heard, the lack of responsibility taken by Title IX according to their stated roles if there is a sense of protection for an involved party, who is covering the story if a staff or faculty member is an involved party if faculty/staff and/or students were aware of the events occurring if Title IX issues are discussed, if Greek life is involved and if sexual education is mentioned as something lacking. Each of these columns also involves a sub-column that mentions the implications of each question asked. Implications would include any detailed information about the questions that were asked and would involve the answers that were found in each of the articles. I coded each article by answering yes or no to the question asked in each of the columns and I furthered that information by allowing another column to expand and

explain why I had answered yes or no to the previous question. After sorting each article, I looked for common themes amongst the articles by sorting each one by whether they involved the asked criteria. This works into my qualitative content coding as it helps to tell me the information that I am looking for, but it also helped to weed out any articles that did not follow any of the common themes I was noticing. It especially helped to make other themes clearer and for me to make those connections about the information I was finding in the articles. Common patterns I was searching for were any mentions of support whether that be for the Title IX officers, for the perpetrators, or the students. Whether there was support or a lack of support, I was looking for information on that. I also looked for themes of awareness and how public certain information was. I most importantly looked at whether students' voices were being heard and if there was sympathy for those who came out about their stories and experiences.

In the following table, I show the coding of each article and how each one fits in at least one of the columns I mentioned.

CODING TABLE

Coding that is Mentioned	Lack of Institutional Support for Title IX Mentioned	Athletics are Involved	Student Voices are Heard	Sense of Protection	Staff Member Involvement	Issues of Title IX Discussion	Lack of Sexual Education Mentioned	Mentions of Accessible Information
Type of News Covering Story								
Local	2	1	5 (1 magazine)	10(1 magazine)	2	6	5	1
National	0	2	1	3	1	1	1	0
College-Based	1	2	2	6	2	3	1	1
Total	3	5	8	19	5	10	7	2

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to look at a variety of news articles and magazines to see if there were more discussions about sexual assaults and more specifically on college campuses. It was to look at the perspective of sexual assaults on colleges on all sides of the argument. From the point of view of those who handle the sexual assaults, those in positions of authority, to those who have been affected by a sexual assault.

Looking at the chart provided, there is a significant variation between what the articles and one magazine mention and the comparison of what type of news is covering it. On a national level, it seems that there is the least amount of coverage on a national level which is not entirely surprising considering that there is an issue of this information being covered up or swept under the rug and hidden from the public eye. Based on the thirty articles plus one magazine, it is concerning that the highest number of articles in my coding is nineteen, and that discusses the sense of protection that is mentioned in the articles. It is unfortunate that many articles in my study mention of sense of protection whether it be the protection of the institution, or its more privileged students, or its staff. Unfortunately, there is little to no mention that the victim is being protected.

Previous research and news tend to focus on the history of Title IX and the political propaganda that follows based on the mobilization that was stated to be made by a political party. A lot of news also used to focus on statistics and characteristics that would make a college more susceptible to higher numbers of sexual assaults. There were also issues about trust in the Title IX system and whether institutions would be effective in aiding those who have experienced or have been affected by a sexual assault.

Even though it was not mentioned, there is a question of whether students can find confidence in authoritative figures on college campuses. Many times, that starts and ends with how unsuccessful college campuses have been in aiding survivors of sexual assault and bringing their perpetrators to justice. A lot of that must deal with the protections that are placed on perpetrators as well as institutions.

In the study I present, there is a focus on allowing the victims' and survivors' voices to be heard as well as their fellow peers. To me, that is one of the most important things. Students, victims, and survivors alike are afraid of sharing their stories and that is why it is one of the items that I decided to code for.

Limitations

There were a few limitations when it came to my study. The limitations include that the only articles I accessed were from Google News. It would be a better source of data if I had used other sources and other options as Google News may be biased or may only show me data that I would find useful or attractive since Google searches are normally based on my search history and my algorithm.

Another limitation stems from the fact that my sources only involve data that is recent. This data only includes articles from 2023 to 2024. While that might be useful in moderation and to keep up with the times, it also lacks the evolution of the topic over time. It does help to prove that this is a famous topic and is something that is more willing to be spoken about now considering the amount of information that was found and the data that was found within the numerous articles.

Future Research

Future research should aspire to find further evidence of whether there are solutions to this worldwide epidemic and whether more people are speaking up or if sexual assault is going to continue to remain a topic that is kept under the covers. Prior research lacks the amount of data and details that I was fortunate enough to find and also claims to be one of the few if any articles that mention sexual assault on college campuses in specific contexts.

It will be fascinating to see how attitudes and behaviors are affected in the future and how people will respond to this information. My goal is to see a change and a betterment for society and the community but that will only happen with the help of others.

I also believe that It will be beneficial to see where this research goes and to see if the studies continue or if they falter and suddenly lose public interest.

RESULTS

The final analysis of the thirty-one news articles involves conclusions over ten categories. Amongst various implications, there were common themes found throughout the articles. Three articles mentioned the lack of institutional support that Title IX offices receive on college campuses. Five articles mentioned athletic involvement relating to sexual misconduct. Seven articles involve students' voices being heard. Four articles mention Title IX's lack of responsibility in coherence with their stated roles. Nineteen articles mention the protection of an involved party in a situation that involves sexual misconduct. Five articles talk about the involvement of a faculty or staff member in an offense of sexual misconduct. Thirteen articles mention that a faculty or staff member and/or student(s) were aware of a sexual offense that was occurring. Ten articles mention issues found with and about Title IX. Seven articles provide information that involves the idea that the lack of sexual education could be one of the main reasons that sexual assault is a main issue in our society and on college campuses. Only two articles mention that there is a lack of information provided about Title IX and the crimes that are committed on campuses. While looking at the overall data, there seems to be less information about the mentions of how difficult it is for the institution and its Title IX officers. There is an unbalanced number of articles that mention Title IX's lack of support compared to articles that mention the issues that are related to Title IX. If anything, there seems to be a trend of encouraging institutions and their workers to do more.

Is Title IX Enough?

A common theme around all these articles is "enough". Is enough being done to aid college students? Is enough being done to aid Title IX officers? Is there enough data being

shared publicly? Is there enough sexual education? When looking at this theme, all articles are connected in this way.

The most common statement seen throughout three of the articles is that Title IX and each of the institutions are not doing enough to aid survivors. Too much is being done to aid perpetrators and protect the university. It is difficult enough for students to come forward and report their sexual assault and even when they do, “it’s often swept under the rug,” (Sacharczyk, 2023). Not only is not enough being done but seemingly nothing is done at all when it comes to responding to sexual assaults. In this article, a young woman was interviewed about her past trauma and assault, and she is now an advocate for victims, however, she says that we contribute to a society of rape culture because we allow these things to happen and do not do enough to prevent or aid in the after affects. (Sacharczyk, 2023).

In response to that, Title IX offices have stated that they do not have enough resources or support to assist students properly. Title IX officers are often overworked and when they do try and do the right thing, they face consequences and are reprimanded (Sacharczyk, 2023). Cal State LA specifically reports the underdeveloped infrastructure which causes a lack of support and resources necessary to carry out their role (Kuchison, 2023). It seems that there are authoritative issues that need to be solved to provide a better service to students and their community.

Protecting Whom?

Athletes

Another theme is one based on the protection of athletes. For Example, Jacoby and Kuchar in USA Today article report on a new NCAA policy that states vetting athletes and

asking about their history of sexual misconduct and violence can all be done just by asking them (Jacoby and Kuchar, 2023). In this case, athletes are protected immediately as the NCAA implements a new policy where they take athletes at their word for their former sexual misconduct and violent acts (Jacoby and Kuchar, 2023). If an athlete answers “no” to the questions asked of them, the university takes them on their word and allows them to play (Jacoby and Kuchar, 2023). These institutions work on a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” (Jacoby and Kuchar, 2023), basis and do not want to know whether their athletes have a history of sexual misconduct or violence. While student athletes are expected to uphold the honor system, none of them want to tarnish their career or reputation and do not want to risk their playtime and spot on the team.

In a panel done by Penn State which comprised of a a current professor of Penn State, a nurse who worked closely with sexual assaults, a lawyer, and a alumna of the school who had not been back to visit Penn State in te past forty-six years. The former student states that “Penn State placed greater emphasis on athletics than it did students.” (Moyer, 2024) According to this article, the alumna of Penn State argues that when looking at the Jerry Sandusky case, that information was hidden for far too long and allowing Sandusky to continue as a coach while team members as well as fellow coaches knew what was happening proves Penn State is willing to hide the truth behind athletics to save their reputation (Moyer, 2024). The Jerry Sandusky case was one that changed how the public eye viewed the esteemed Pennsylvania State University, Jerry Sandusky was a former coach for the Penn State Nittany Lions football team but he was sexually abusing and molesting young boys who belonged to a program that he ran (Massey & Moyer, 2023). The former student believes that little has changed today, and that Penn State seems to hold the same loyalties to their athletics that they did when the Jerry Sandusky case emerged into public knowledge. As this panel occurred in January of 2024, the panel organizer

had been requesting a representative from Penn State Athletics since November of the previous year (Moyer, 2024). However, no one from Penn State Athletics came forward to represent the organization on the panel.

University

Another theme on the sense of protection stems from the protection of the University itself. While the institution is supposed to work to protect its students and the community, it tends to protect its reputation more than anything else (Oliver, 2023). Although common knowledge among students, faculty, staff, and other leaders at Ithaca College about the relationship between a student and an associate dean, nothing was being done about the known information (Panwar & Pierre, 2024). In another article, a panel was devised to discuss how a former Penn State student and football player was a known sex offender and yet no information was known about him, even to this day as his case is not very well known (Moyer, 2024). The lack of public information allows us to believe that Universities want to cover their tracks and save face or protect their reputation rather than their students (Moyer, 2024). In one of the articles, a student was discouraged from reporting her story to the police and she was told that nothing good would come of it (Fazio, et. al, 2023). A religious institution told a student that she would be reprimanded for sharing her story and that she was not raped but that she “had sex” and that it was also partially her fault since she had been under the influence (Bollag, 2023).

Survivors

Unfortunately, there was no detailed information on how survivors were protected. There was a lack of mentioning that survivors were protected at all.

Are Students' Voices Being Heard?

In short, the answer is yes. In various articles, students are being interviewed and sought out to share their stories with the public. In some of the articles, the coverage is based on a student's own account of what is happening on their campuses. A student mentioned a lack of information being shared by the public and Pittsburgh's NPR news station covered his story along with evidence and articles that prove he was reaching out to the campus police along asking other students if they were having the same issue of being refused information (Massey, 2023). In the panel on Penn State's campus, students were allowed to ask questions and share their stories wondering why none of the information was "getting to the top." (Moyer, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is fair to state that sexual assault is now an up-and-coming topic, and it is something that is now being taken seriously. I hope that more information and news can be shared about how to help survivors and possibly how to prevent further sexual assaults from occurring. I hope that the conversation continues and that more students' stories are heard. However, It is important to note who deserves blame in these situations.

While we are quick to blame Title IX and their refusal to carry out a full investigation and fully support a survivor, it seems there are underlying issues and institutional issues that need to be addressed. It seems the problem tends to stem from the University and the institutions that are quick to protect their reputation and not give the resources needed for Title IX and their officers. While Title IX cannot fully be to blame because of the lack of resources they are provided, they must take responsibility for the lack of efforts towards their cause and the lack of knowledge about what they do.

I hope this continues to be a conversation that promotes further research and awareness for this cause and allows for greater conversations about sexual assaults, not just on college campuses, but also on the grander scale.

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