

What Are College Students' Perceptions About Campus Safety?

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ABSTRACT

Crime and violence on college and university campuses have found their way into the media spotlight. As a result, criminal and violent acts have become issues that warrant research. We discuss literature focused on the potential contributing factors that may lead to violent behavior. Additionally, we review legislation intended to protect students and employees by keeping them updated on criminal activity. We also address institutions' responsibility to promote and ensure a safe learning environment. Last, we examine students' responsibility to self-protect. According to the US Department of Justice (as cited in Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000), victimization by a violent crime is increasingly common and the chance of being victimized today by a violent crime is greater than the chance of being injured in a traffic accident. Therefore, one need not speculate on why institutions of higher education are experiencing widespread unlawful activity. Instead, colleges and universities should concentrate on preventing these acts of violence. To understand college students' perceptions regarding campus safety, we surveyed 20 local college students, of whom 55% were female. Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 25. All classes (freshman through senior) were represented, with 85% of respondents enrolled as full-time students.

Keywords: Crime; Campus Safety; Violence; College; University

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have concluded that crime and violence are prevalent in higher learning communities. With the increase in campus violence highlighted by continued media coverage, we predicted that local college students would be concerned about their safety while on campus. As enrollment has increased, the nation's crimes have invaded the campus setting as more students from all walks of life and backgrounds can afford to attend college due to the availability of financial assistance. However, college campus violence has always existed. As documented by Schackner (as cited in Pezza, 1995), historians have noted that in the fifteenth century bloody and sometimes fatal encounters between townsfolk and students occurred; also, in 1807, rioting and rebellion resulted in the suspension of more than half the student body at Princeton University. On another occasion, as documented by Smith (as cited in Pezza, 1995), such acts resulted in the expulsion of a majority of Harvard College's senior class. As a result of such violent outbreaks, this research is focused on understanding college students' perceptions of campus safety. In this study, perception, as defined in the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on appearances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Volkwein, Szelest, and Lizottet (as cited in Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000) suggested that college campuses are fairly safe learning environments; the communities in which they are located experience 10 times the rate of violent crimes as the college campuses themselves. Many community college students, especially those in inner-city neighborhoods, have experienced threatening behavior as victims, perpetrators, or both (Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000). Flannery et al., Gladstein et al., and Singer et al. (as cited in Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000) suggested that the majority of traditional-age college students experienced some form of violent behavior during their high school years.

One of the major contributors to this violence is alcohol, as evidenced by eight of the references mentioning alcohol. According to an article in the *Journal of American College Health*, in 2002, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's Task Force on College Drinking characterized heavy drinking by higher education students as widespread, dangerous, and disruptive: (a) Researchers conducting national surveys found that approximately 40% of college students can be classified as heavy drinkers, often defined as having five or more drinks in a row at least once in the past two weeks, (b) an estimated 31% of college students meets *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), 4th edition, criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse, whereas 6% can be classified as alcohol dependent, (c) by one calculation, more than 1,700 students aged 18 to 24 who are enrolled in two- and four-year colleges and universities die annually from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, and (d) nearly 80% of these deaths are due to motor vehicle crashes. In addition, approximately 500,000 college students in this age range suffer alcohol-related unintentional injuries each year (DeJong, Towvim, & Schneider, 2007).

In "The Relationship between the Quantity of Alcohol Consumed and the Severity of Sexual Assaults Committed by College Men," the researchers suggested that intoxicated perpetrators may act more violently than other perpetrators (Abbey, Clinton-Sherrod, McAuslan, Zawacki, & Buck, 2003). Therefore, alcohol can be an indicator of the presence of crime or violence; where there is one, there is the potential for the other. However, other sources of crime are not directly related to alcohol.

One of the newer but more widespread crimes is "cyber crime." Cyber crime encompasses any criminal act dealing with computers and networks (called hacking). Additionally, cyber crime also includes traditional crimes conducted through the Internet, as elaborated by the Computer Crime & Intellectual Property Section, United States Department of Justice. In "Youthful Indiscretions," Fleming argued that social networking sites like MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook, a local favorite in the New England area, are producing more than reputation harm. They can also be sources through which predators gain access to the unknowing student population. This is no more evident than in the article about a 17-year-old Rhode Island girl who was reportedly drugged and raped by three men she befriended on MySpace (Fleming, 2008).

According to "Crime and Fear on Campus," a court ruling in the 1866 case of *People v. Wheaton College*, in which the courts upheld a postsecondary institution's prohibition of student membership in secret societies, resulted in a doctrine called "in loco parentis," literally meaning "in the place of parents" (Fisher, 1995). Additionally, this doctrine made it possible for universities to self-govern in providing care to students who have been entrusted to them and to provide safety for students in the absence of their parents. This doctrine also placed additional responsibility in the hands of the college or university and, as a result, made the institution liable for criminal victimizations. In subsequent cases, the courts imposed a duty on colleges and universities in two areas directly related to victimization: (a) a duty to warn students about known risks and (b) a duty to provide students with adequate security protection (Fisher, 1995).

In the spring of 1986, a college student at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania was awakened from her sleep in her dorm room by an assailant who brutally raped and beat her to death. This resulted in what is known today as the Clery Act, or Student-Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990. "The Effect of the Clery Act on Campus Judicial Practices" stated:

Congress has begun its work on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Amendments in 2003-2004, dealing with one of the issues of the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act (Public Law 101-542). Of particular importance to student affairs and law enforcement personnel on American campuses is Title II of this Act, now titled the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (hereafter Clery Act or Clery) (20 USC 1092 (f)). The law, previously known as the Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act of 1990, deals with requirements that institutions of higher education annually publish statistics regarding criminal activity that occurs on and around their campuses (Gregory & Janosik, 2003).

More specifically, the law requires all institutions of higher education to maintain a daily incident log and to publish an annual report that contains three years of campus crime statistics, in addition to disclosing their campus security policy to current and prospective students and employees. Also, the institution must immediately notify or warn the campus community regarding any crime or activity considered to be a threat to students or employees. To

verify whether local colleges and universities are complying with the Clery Act, we accessed the websites of the four major institutions located in Jacksonville, Florida. Table 1 displays data taken from the institutions' websites as reported in their 2006 Annual Crime Statistics Report. While all four institutions were in compliance, the statistics on reported campus crimes varied. Per the 2006 crime statistics disclosed for the University of North Florida (UNF), Edward Waters College (EWC), and Jacksonville University (JU), burglary was the number one crime reported, while motor vehicle theft was the choice at Florida Community College of Jacksonville (FCCJ). Additionally, FCCJ, UNF, and EWC reported incidents of alcohol and drug abuse, with UNF reporting 114 arrests and 188 referrals. These statistics support the claim that alcohol is a major contributor to campus crime. Weapons did not appear to be an issue; however, any report of weapons is cause for concern.

Table 1: 2006 Annual Crime Statistics Comparison

CRIME	EWC	FCCJ	JU	UNF
Robbery	1	-	-	1
Sex Offenses	-	-	1	-
Homicide	-	-	-	-
Burglary/Structure	17	2	24	10
Motor Vehicle Theft	-	3	-	5
Assault/Battery	-	2	6	3
Weapons	1	2	-	2
Arson	-	-	-	-
Alcohol/Drugs	2	9	-	114/188
Hate	-	-	-	-
Larceny	4	-	-	-

Note: EWC=Edward Waters College, JU=Jacksonville University, UNF=University of North Florida, FCCJ=Florida Community College of Jacksonville

Colleges are held more responsible for their actions or lack thereof as related to ensuring safety and keeping students current about how their concerns are being handled. As testament to failure to comply with the Clery Act, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the US Department of Education fined Miami University of Ohio \$27,500 for failing to give sexual assault victims written notice of the outcomes of disciplinary proceedings from the cases (Hoover, 2005).

According to "The Emergence of American Crime and Violence on the College and University Campus," the two Morrill acts affected the student population and gravely impacted campus crime. In 1862, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, which established land grant colleges. Subsequently, the Second Morrill Act, also established in the nineteenth century, helped increase the number of women and blacks attending colleges and universities (Bennett-Johnson, 1997). Additionally, colleges and universities, through their competition to increase enrollment, inadvertently became contributors to the upward spiral of criminal activity due to their lax acceptance policy. Even today, many historically black colleges and universities have an open-door policy, which means you need only a high school diploma or GED to be admitted. Since 1992, as documented by Lederman (as cited in Bennett-Johnson, 1997), all colleges have been required by federal law to compile annual statistics about crime on their campus. As stated previously, legislation exists to address crime, keep students and employees informed, and notify victims of judicial decisions. The Clery Act and similar legislation require that information to be readily available.

According to the 2000 US Census, released March 2004, the US population was projected to increase by 18 million in the age bracket 20-44, which is where the median age for traditional college students and continuing education students falls. In addition, women were expected to increase their share of college enrollment to 58% by 2011, up from 53% in 1986 and 56% in 1999 (Gerald & Hussar, 2000). Therefore, as the population grows, it is likely that concerns centered on self-protection will escalate. Whether one's preference is firearms, self-defense (martial arts) courses, changes in behavior patterns, or combinations thereof, the college student will be forced to protect himself or herself. With that in mind, the firearm is at the top of the list for protection.

Since firearms can be a strong deterrent to violence, it appears that the firearm is becoming a favorite tool of protection for the college student. However, there is debate on whether firearms are a good idea. According to "Allowing More Guns on Campuses Is a Bad Idea," panel member Jesus M. Villahermosa, Jr., stated that "even

among law-enforcement officers, shooting accuracy in emergencies varies.” If law enforcement officers who have undergone months of firearms training and continued recertification are still “missing the bull’s eye,” the college student or faculty member who is brandishing a firearm as a defense against an act of violence can be more of a danger than a help to themselves and the campus community. However, this has not stopped some states from considering legislation to allow students and faculty to arm themselves, and one state has enacted such legislation.

As an alternative to the firearm, as noted in “Bystander Approaches: Empowering Students to Model Ethical Sexual Behavior,” the bystander form of self-defense can become a critical part of proactively addressing crime. Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (as cited in Lynch & Fleming, 2005) revealed that 2.8% of female students experience rape or attempted rape in any given academic year. Additionally, Abbey et al., Himelein, Koss et al., and Synnovitz et al. (as cited in Lynch & Fleming, 2005) revealed that 50% of females indicated some form of unwanted sexual behavior. To thwart this type of inhumane act, other forms of self-defense, such as the martial arts, are becoming effective favored alternatives.

Taken from the *Guardian*, the Wright State University newspaper, “*Self-defense for college students essential*” said that “every college student should know at least a basic form of self-defense to protect themselves” This is especially true for women, who according to research, account for the largest number of victims. As support for the news article, Manuel Taningco, a sixth-degree black belt in karate and founder of Tama Martial Arts Center said that “having self-awareness and awareness of surroundings is what people need to have to feel safe.” Therefore, a martial arts defense course can not only teach people to defend themselves, but also help make them more aware of potential threats.

Nevertheless, as cited in Hughes et al. (2003), statistical reference from “Self-Defense and Martial Arts Evaluation for College Women: Preliminary Validation of Perceptions of Dangerous Situations Scale” revealed that

the highest risk age group for rape is between 15-24 years of age (Koss, 1993), and up to one third of college women are sexually assaulted during their college career (Finley & Corty, 1993). College women are twice as likely to be stalked as women in the general population; as many as one woman in eight is stalked each year (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Estimates of courtship abuse have ranged from 20% (Arias, Samios, & O’Leary, 1987) to 66% (Laner & Thompson, 1982) to 81% (White & Koss, 1991). According to U.S. Department of Justice statistics (1997), almost half of violent victimizations to women occur between the ages of 16 and 24 years. Women have reason to be fearful.

A more professional source of protection that should also be considered is campus security. To help ensure their safety, students should get to know security officers and their placement on campus as it relates to daily activities. Such relationships can lead to information regarding placement of surveillance cameras and monitored areas that can help in planning routes to take at disadvantageous times, such the nighttime when students go to and from libraries, study groups, and recreational activities. According to Edmund G. Skrodzki, executive director of campus safety and security at Johns Hopkins University, campus crime has dropped 43%, and he ascribes some of that decline to the security cameras that have had a big impact as deterrents (Fischman & Foster, 2007).

RESULTS

To understand college students’ perception of campus safety, we surveyed 20 local college students, of whom 55% were female. Respondents’ ages ranged from 21 to 25. All classes (freshman through senior) were represented, with 85% of respondents enrolled as full-time students. The measures of central tendency, the measure of validity, and standard deviation were calculated. The measure of central tendency includes the mean, mode, and median that numerically summarize the demographic data collected. The standard deviation, the most typically used measure of spread, summarizes how far away from the average the data values typically are. The demographic characteristics of the 20 respondents are displayed in Table 2.

The level of participation in campus activities is significant, as 50% or more of the respondents indicated that they are involved in activities outside the classroom. Of those participating in the survey, 50% are affiliated with a Greek organization, 50% are part of a group that focuses on crime and its victims, 60% have participated or

plan to participate in a “Stop Campus Violence” march, and 55% reside in campus housing. The off-campus students (45%) when responding to an open-ended question about why they elected to be non-residential students, provided varying answers: (a) being a Jacksonville resident, (b) less expensive to live off campus, and (c) no job to move off campus. We expected the respondent answers to be related to campus crime; however, this was not the case.

Table 2: Survey – College Campus Safety

Demographic Characteristics	Percentage	Central Tendency
Gender		
Female	55%	Mode 2
Male	45%	
Classification		
Senior	40%	Mean 3.1 Mode 4 Std. dev. 1.12
Junior	25%	
Sophomore	20%	
Freshman	10%	
Other	5%	
Age		
Age 17 – 20	20%	Mode 2
Age 21 – 25	65%	Mean 1.95
Age 26 – older	15%	Std. dev. 0.605
Enrollment Status		
Full-Time	85%	Mode 1
Part-Time	10%	Mean 1.2
Other	5%	Std. dev. 0.523

Although they journey to campus on a regular basis, none of the college students surveyed was able to list public or campus safety legislation with which they were familiar. Additionally, only one student listed a crime and/or support resource available on their campus, and that resource was security officers.

When asked about their expectations of safety while on campus, 70% of respondents said that campus safety was very important in their selection of college. Additionally, the sample group was asked to rank five security measures in order of importance, with “1” being the most important. The security feature respondents considered most important as a deterrence to criminal activity was security officers, followed by cameras, emergency call boxes, and lighting. An audible emergency alert system was not considered a factor in preventing campus crime.

The result of the ranking is consistent with college students’ perception of what a safe campus should encompass. When asked “What should be done to make your campus safer?,” 55% of those surveyed responded “more police or security officers.” Among the students, 45% feels that security is inadequate versus 30% who feels it is adequate. As a result, most of the students (9) feel unsafe, while only 4 students feel safe on campus. The remaining respondents were unsure about their personal safety while on campus. In addition, although the largest percentage of the student sample felt unsafe on campus, only 35% has considered withdrawing from college.

Since students feel that they are unsafe on campus, the ability to self-protect is essential. A correlation matrix was constructed to see whether there was a relationship between students who have taken a self-defense course and the wherewithal to avoid certain areas of the campus. The results reveal some correlation between the two.

Two questions concerned protection: “Have you taken any self-defense courses?” and “Do you feel that it is necessary to own a firearm for personal safety?” Overwhelmingly, the juniors surveyed had considered firearms, as well as taken a self-defense course; 60% had considered firearms and 80% a self-defense course.

As discussed within this study, alcohol plays an important role in college violence. Of the 20 college students surveyed, six participants admitted to consuming alcohol in some degree. However, upon comparing

genders, 33% of males admitted to consuming alcohol versus only 9% of females. Of alcohol consumers, most (67%) are juniors and seniors, of which 50% are seniors. Although only 30% of the sample group admitted to casual drinking, 60% of those surveyed indicated that alcohol is a contributing factor to crime on their campus as opposed to the 30% who feel that alcohol consumption has no relation to campus crime.

The respondents were asked to circle all crimes that they were aware of on their campus. Burglary was the number one crime identified, as represented by 17 responses. There were no known incidents of rape or other acts of violence listed. Although there were repeated acknowledgments of assault and battery crimes, only one person mentioned murder.

CONCLUSION

Crime on college and university campuses has become more and more prevalent. From the massacre at the University of West Virginia to senseless murders at Auburn University and the University of Florida, the hidden world of college violence has become part of the nightly news. With the population of the United States continually growing, the perception of safety on the college campus is definitely an issue warranting further research. As revealed in our study, the college students surveyed are indeed concerned about safety as they navigate the walkways and alleys of their campus. Being that students feel unsafe, they must take precautions to protect and educate themselves. Disturbingly, the participants were not familiar with any legislation passed on students' behalf to protect them or any safety material readily accessible on their campus.

However, note that the above results are not representative of the population, college students. Although the 20 participants were randomly selected, they do not represent a random sample of college students attending colleges and universities throughout the United States. Therefore, due to an abbreviated sampling time period and a small sample size, the findings of this study are not conclusive and should not be used to make any generalizations about college students' perceptions of campus safety. However, if we perform this study a second time, we will increase our sample size to include all geographic areas and both public and private institutions. Additionally, we will limit our questionnaire to only one open-ended question.

Notwithstanding that the findings are not generalizable, colleges must create a safe environment by implementing what students perceive to be effective security. Institutions should strive to "harden the target," a term used by criminologists to refer to those aspects of a plan that send the message that it will be difficult to perpetrate a crime or violence (Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000). Although most institutions already have security measures in place identified under "hardening the target" (e.g., security guards, cameras, alarm systems), according to Dwyer, Osher, and Warger (as cited in Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000), it is essential for each college to establish a crisis intervention plan that includes steps to be taken if there is concern that a student or employee might act in a violent manner. In addition, all school personnel need to be aware of the warning signs of violent behavior. Campus violence not only affects the victim, assailant, and those persons associated with both victim and assailant, but crime also affects the campus atmosphere and the institution. The recruitment of potential students and retention of current students as well as donor, alumni, state, and federal support can be jeopardized. Additionally, the institution, as well as college and university officials, may be held liable if it is determined that the institution failed to provide adequate security and report criminal activity. According to the *Providence Sunday Journal* (as cited in Pezza & Bellotti, 1995), in a radio address, former President Bill Clinton emphasized the need for greater personal security in the United States, stating that "[o]ur people have a right to feel safe where they live, work, play and go to school."

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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