

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault in Early Adulthood: National Estimates for College and Non-College Students

Public Health Reports
2020, Vol. 135(5) 555-559
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DOI: 10.1177/0033354920946014
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Abstract

Young adults are at high risk for sexual harassment and sexual assault. Although attention has been given to prevention on college campuses, the need for prevention may be at least as high for young adults who do not attend college as for young adults who do. In October 2019, we administered a nationally representative survey of 893 adults to measure sexual harassment and sexual assault victimization during a recall period defined as “during college years” for respondents who had enrolled in college at any time or “ages 18-24” for respondents not in college. Reported rates of sexual harassment (32.7%) and sexual assault (24.6%) during early adulthood were similar for respondents who reported having ever enrolled in college and for respondents who reported never attending college. Women were more likely than men to report both sexual harassment (37.4% vs 22.4%) and sexual assault (36.0% vs 16.0%) during early adulthood. Compared with respondents aged ≥ 30 , respondents aged 18-29 were 105% more likely to report sexual harassment and 65% more likely to report sexual assault. Moreover, sexual harassment experiences predicted sexual assault victimization (adjusted odds ratio = 18.1). This study highlights the importance of attending to sexual harassment and sexual assault risks for young adults through research, policy, and criminal justice structures beyond institutions of higher education. Evidence that sexual harassment is strongly associated with sexual assault victimization of young adults highlights the importance of naming and stemming early behavioral transgressions across the US population.

Keywords

sexual harassment, sexual assault, college students, epidemiology, young adults

In 2006, activist Tarana Burke launched the collective “Me Too” movement to support women experiencing sexual harassment and sexual assault. The introduction of the campaign to broader audiences via the #MeToo social media movement has expanded national awareness since October 2017. This attention comes decades after sexual harassment was first legally addressed in workplaces through the 1964 Civil Rights Act.¹ Measurement of sexual harassment since the 1980s has focused on workplace settings,² where approximately 60% of women are victims.³ Compared with men, women are nearly 3 times more likely to report unwanted sexual experiences without contact, more than 2 times more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact (27.2% of women vs 11.7% of men), and 13 times more likely to be raped (18.3% of women vs 1.4% of men).⁴ In addition, the risk of sexual harassment and sexual assault is higher during early adulthood than in older adulthood.⁵ Although estimates of sexual harassment and sexual assault for nonbinary people are limited, 47% of transgender respondents to a national

opt-in survey reported having been sexually assaulted,⁶ which is comparable to the high rate of sexual assault experienced by women (45% report sexual violence other than rape).⁴ Outside workplaces, most research on sexual harassment among young adults relies on college samples, yet research on sexual harassment on campuses is less common than research on sexual assault on campuses.⁷ Research on sexual harassment is also less common than research on sexual assault among transgender and nonbinary people, who

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have higher odds of sexual assault victimization on campuses than either male or female students.⁸

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has long recognized that sexual violence is widespread,⁹ and the National Crime Victimization Survey suggested higher rates of sexual assault among women aged 18-24 who were not in college than their peers who were in college,¹⁰ attention has been focused on campuses through research and student activism.² Although campuses provide convenient research samples and a structure for prevention, they are not the only environment in which young adults face heightened risks of sexual misconduct (ie, sexual harassment and sexual assault). We examined survey responses of US adults who did and did not enroll in college to determine the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault during early adulthood.

Methods

Data

We collected survey data in October 2019 from a probability-based sample of 901 adults aged ≥ 18 , drawn from AmeriSpeak, a nationally representative membership panel with coverage of $>99\%$ of US households. The weighted panel response rate for 2014-2019 (American Association for Public Opinion Research Response Rate 3¹¹) was 24.1%.^{12,13} NORC administered the instrument online to facilitate respondent privacy. The University of Chicago NORC Institutional Review Board approved the study methods.

Respondents were first asked, "Are you now or were you at some point enrolled in college courses or a college program after high school?" The answer informed the programming of parallel recall periods "during your college years" or "from ages 18-24" for the key outcome variables of sexual harassment and sexual assault, and for the coding of respondents as current college students, former college students, or never college students. Eight respondents were missing data on sexual harassment and were excluded. The final analytic sample was 893 respondents.

Measures

Sexual harassment victimization. The sexual harassment indicator (coded 1 for any, 0 for none) was based on the validated American Association of University Women scale assessing exposure to any of the following 4 incidents: (1) unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures; (2) called [respondent] gay or lesbian in a negative way; (3) flashed or exposed themselves to [respondent]; or (4) showed [respondent] sexy or sexual pictures that [respondent] didn't want to see.¹⁴

Sexual assault victimization. We assessed sexual assault using 5 items: a 3-item author-developed measure based

on the Sexual Experiences Survey¹⁵ and 2 additional items from the American Association of University Women scale: whether someone had touched the respondent in an unwelcome sexual way or physically intimidated respondent in a sexual way.¹⁴ The Sexual Experiences Survey items queried for the respective recall periods if anyone had done any of the following "when [respondent] didn't want to": touched [respondent] directly or through clothing or kissed [respondent]; made a substantial but unsuccessful effort to have sex (oral, vaginal, or anal attempted sex) with [respondent]; had sex (oral, vaginal, or anal) with [respondent]. An indicator of sexual assault was coded 1 for any, 0 for none.

Sociodemographic characteristics. Two-thirds of respondents (67.1%) were enrolled in college courses or a program at some point after high school. Approximately 21% of respondents were aged 18-29 (vs ≥ 30); the mean age was 46.0 (standard deviation, 16.7), 51.6% were female, and 63.1% were non-Hispanic white (vs other race/ethnicity). Respondents indicated their annual household income according to 19 response categories ranging from $< \$5000$ to $\geq \$200\ 000$; we treated this measure as a continuous variable, and the average annual household income was \$40 000-\$49 999.

Analyses

We conducted analyses using Stata version 15.0 (StataCorp) using base and sample-specific poststratification weights to produce estimates that were representative of US adults aged ≥ 18 in 2019. We described bivariate associations of sample characteristics and sexual harassment and sexual assault outcomes. We used additional bivariate analyses to compare the sexual harassment and sexual assault outcomes by college enrollment (enrolled in college/did not enroll in college) and sex (male/female). We estimated separate multivariable logistic regressions predicting experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault, using the Wald χ^2 test of significance, with $P < .05$ considered significant.

Results

One-third of US adults (32.7%) reported sexual harassment and one-quarter (24.6%) reported sexual assault during early adulthood. Reported sexual harassment rates were similar for respondents who enrolled in college (30.4%) and respondents who did not enroll in college (29.6%). Similarly, we found no significant difference in sexual assault during early adulthood reported by respondents who enrolled in college (25.1%) and respondents who did not enroll in college (28.8%). Significantly more women than men reported sexual harassment (37.4% vs 22.4%; $P < .001$) and sexual assault (36.0% vs 16.0%; $P < .001$).

The odds of sexual harassment were 2 times higher for respondents aged 18-29 than for respondents aged ≥ 30 (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] = 2.05 [95% CI, 1.44-2.91]; $P <$

Table. Rates of sexual harassment and sexual assault during early adulthood in a survey of adults (n = 893), United States, 2019^a

Characteristics	Unadjusted odds ratio (95% CI)	P value ^b	Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI)	P value ^b
Sexual harassment				
Age, y		<.001		<.001
18-29	2.15 (1.54-3.00)		2.05 (1.44-2.91)	
≥30	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Sex		<.001		<.001
Female	2.07 (1.54-2.78)		2.08 (1.54-2.81)	
Male	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Race/ethnicity		.21		.88
Non-Hispanic white	0.83 (0.62-1.11)		0.98 (0.72-1.33)	
Other	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Annual household income (continuous)	0.95 (0.92-0.98)	.002	0.96 (0.92-1.00)	.03
College enrollment ^c		.81		.51
Yes	1.04 (0.77-1.41)		1.12 (0.80-1.56)	
No	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Sexual assault				
Age, y		<.001		.03
18-29	2.27 (1.62-3.20)		1.65 (1.04-2.61)	
≥30	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Sex		<.001		<.001
Female	2.96 (2.15-4.07)		2.94 (1.97-4.38)	
Male	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Race/ethnicity		.01		.13
Non-Hispanic white	0.68 (0.50-0.92)		0.74 (0.50-1.10)	
Other	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Annual household income (continuous)	0.94 (0.91-0.97)	.001	0.98 (0.94-1.03)	.50
College enrollment ^a		.23		.12
Yes	0.83 (0.61-1.13)		0.71 (0.46-1.09)	
No	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	
Sexual harassment		<.001		<.001
Yes	19.5 (13.4-28.2)		18.1 (12.3-26.7)	
No	1 [Reference]		1 [Reference]	

^aBased on data from an AmeriSpeak Omnibus Survey conducted in October 2019.

^bUsing the Wald χ^2 test, with $P < .05$ considered significant.

^cSurvey question asked, "Are you now or were you at some point enrolled in college courses or a college program after high school?"

.001) (Table). The risk of sexual harassment was 2 times higher for women than for men (aOR = 2.08 [95% CI, 1.54-2.81]; $P < .001$), and higher annual household income was associated with reduced odds of sexual harassment during early adulthood (aOR = 0.96 [95% CI, 0.92-1.00]; $P = .03$). Race/ethnicity and college enrollment were not significantly associated with odds of sexual harassment in the adjusted model.

The odds of being sexually assaulted during early adulthood were nearly 3 times higher among women than among men (aOR = 2.94 [95% CI, 1.97-4.38]; $P < .001$),

and the odds of reporting sexual assault during early adulthood were 1.65 times (95% CI, 1.04-2.61) higher among respondents aged 18-29 than among respondents aged ≥ 30 ($P = .03$). Respondents who were sexually harassed during early adulthood were nearly 20 times more likely than respondents reporting no early adulthood sexual harassment experiences to report sexual assault during the same period (aOR = 18.1 [95% CI, 12.3-26.7]; $P < .001$). Sexual assault during early adulthood did not differ significantly by race/ethnicity, annual household income, or college enrollment.

Discussion

Numerous studies have examined sexual harassment, including sexual assaults, in the workplace and sexual violence in college, but research on early adulthood risks relative to college attendance is limited. The results of our study indicate that the risk of sexual harassment and sexual assaults may be higher for college students than expected¹⁶ despite substantial attention given to curb campus sexual assault (eg, the 2014 White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault).¹⁷ Moreover, consistent with research across the lifetime showing that one-third of women and one-quarter of men are sexually assaulted,¹⁸ our study suggests that the high risks of sexual harassment and sexual assault during early adulthood are similar between people who attend college and people who do not. Attention to campus sexual violence may flow from having a defined community, an energized student population, concerned parents paying tuition, and an environment that facilitates policies, protocols, and prevention interventions. Concerns about excessive drinking, a known correlate of sexual harassment and sexual assault,¹⁹ may also drive the focus on sexual violence prevention in higher education.

The higher rates of sexual harassment and sexual assault during early adulthood reported by respondents aged 18-29 compared with respondents aged ≥ 30 may reflect methodological issues (recency bias), increases in sexual harassment and sexual assault, or greater awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual assault and/or greater willingness to report offending behaviors among younger adults compared with adults aged ≥ 30 . Evidence indicates increased incidence of sexual harassment during the 25-year period leading up to the turn of the century,³ a leveling-off since 2005 of the earlier decline in sexual assaults on women,⁵ and increased reports of sexual assault in military samples during 2004-2014.²⁰ Rigorous longitudinal trend analyses have been hampered by changes in measurement of sexual harassment and sexual assault.² Results should be interpreted with caution given the uncertain duration of college exposure among respondents and, thus, the comparability of the recall periods for these self-reported data. An agenda for studying sexual harassment and sexual assault among young adults in the United States should attend to risks across various community environments and the strong association between non-physical sexual harassment and sexual assaults. Further research in larger samples of college-age adults should investigate sequential patterns of sexual harassment and sexual assault by perpetrators.

Conclusion

Our study highlights the importance of community sexual harassment and assault prevention efforts beyond institutions of higher education and workplaces. Per the Centers for Disease Prevention STOP SV protocols,²¹ young adults who

do not attend college would benefit from as much public health attention to the prevention of sexual harassment and sexual assault as young adults who do attend college.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This study was supported by the authors' institutions, NORC at the University of Chicago and the University of New Hampshire Prevention Innovations Research Center.

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