New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Believing. Healing. Preventing.

SURVIVOR SURVEY REPORT

College Sexual Assault Survivors' Experiences in New York State

© 2022 NEW YORK STATE COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT

Contents

About the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault 3
About the Survivor Survey and Report 4
Demographics of Survey Participants 4
Reporting Patterns Among Sexual Assault Survivors on College Campuses 5
Survivors' Experiences with the Title IX Reporting and Investigation Process 6
Survivors' Experiences with Rape Crisis Programs and Hospitals 9
Survivors' Experiences with Law Enforcement 10
Conclusion 14

About the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault

The New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NYSCASA) is a private, non-profit coalition of community-based rape crisis programs, survivors, and survivor-supporting professionals located throughout New York State. Our mission is to end all forms of sexual violence and exploitation and address the impacts of sexual assault through an anti-oppression framework.

NYSCASA strengthens responsive services for all sexual violence survivors and works to increase effective sexual violence prevention efforts by engaging in policy analysis and legislative advocacy; providing training, consultation, and resources; supporting rape crisis programs with some pass-through funding; and collaborating with a variety of advocates, activists, survivor-supporting professionals, and other stakeholders to promote victim services and prevention efforts that are high quality, comprehensive, culturally appropriate, and widely accessible.

NYSCASA's work is supported by: The New York State (NYS) Department of Health; NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services; NYS Office of Mental Health; NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence; NYS Office of Victim Services; US Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, members, and donors. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of any funder.

About the Survivor Survey and Report

NYSCASA launched the Survivor Survey in 2017 to create space for survivors in New York State to share their perspectives and experiences with accessing and seeking services from various social and legal systems after their victimization. The data was collected from July 2017 through January 2022. The survey asks participants to share where they have been assaulted and their experience in seeking services.

This summary report focuses on the experiences of survivors who experienced sexual violence during their time in college. This report was authored by Sana Abdelkarim, with assistance from Chel Miller.

A companion report, which summarizes the experiences of survivors across New York State, regardless of their student status, is available at **www.nyscasa.org/survivor-survey-report**.

Demographics of Survey Participants

56 out of 226 survey responses represent participants who experienced sexual violence as college students. Most respondents identified as female (87.5%), and the remaining respondents identified as non-binary. Furthermore, 71% of respondents identified as white, 13% identified as having multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds, 7% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 5% identified as Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 4% identified as Black or African American.

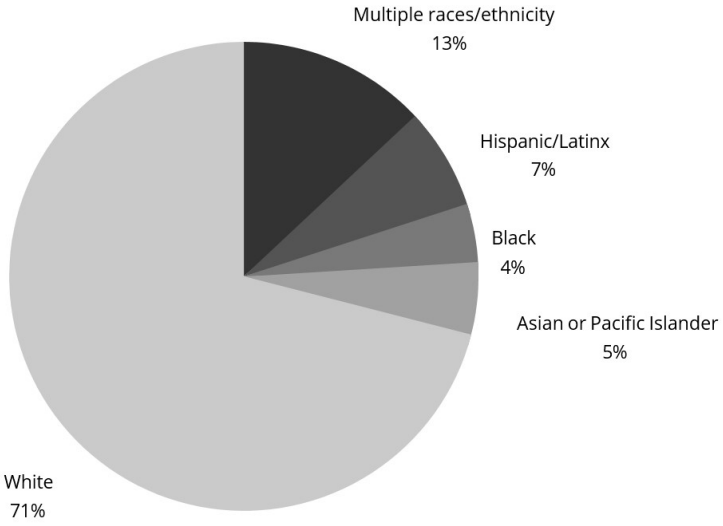

Fig. 1: Demographics of survey participants

Reporting Patterns Among Sexual Assault Survivors on College Campuses

The Survivor Survey asks participants to share their experiences reporting their assault and seeking help. Specifically, we asked respondents to share their experience with or the barriers that prevented them from seeking help from the following systems:

- Reporting the incident to the Title IX coordinator and pursuing the university investigation process;
- Seeking care from a local rape crisis program or hospital; and
- Reporting the incident to law enforcement.

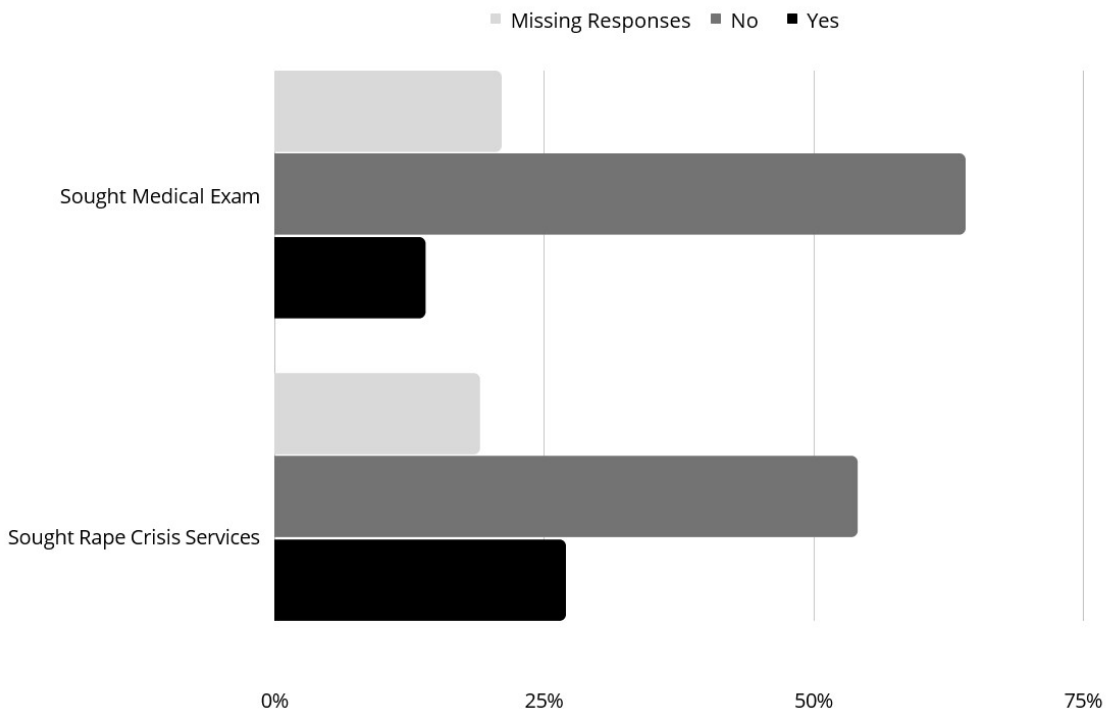

Fig. 2: Survivors' responses about whether they sought medical exams or rape crisis services after their victimization

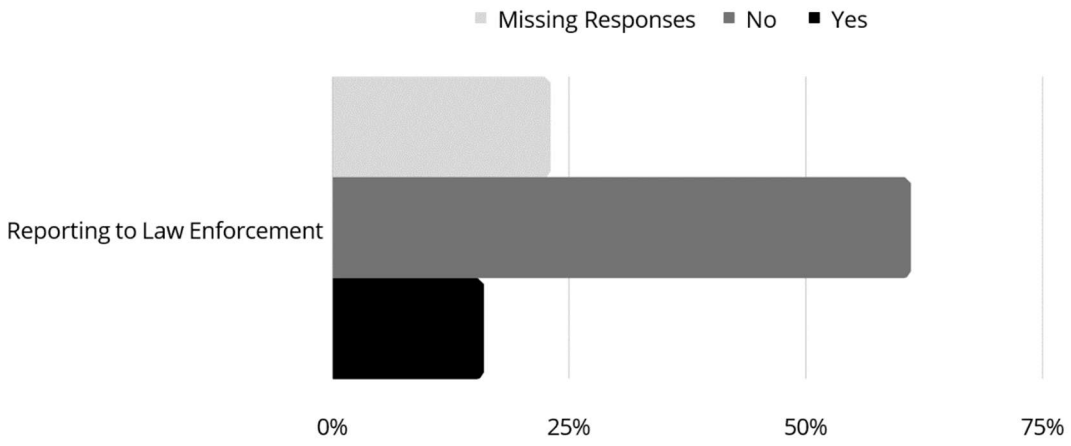

Fig. 3: Survivors' responses regarding whether they reported to law enforcement

Survivors' Experiences with the Title IX Reporting and Investigation Process

Title IX regulations specify that when students report sexual assault to their college or university, campus officials are obligated to connect students to services, including counseling, victim advocacy, and legal assistance. Therefore, for many college sexual assault survivors, reporting sexual assault to Title IX coordinators is the first step to accessing services. Because of this important connection, it is essential to understand barriers that prevent students from reporting to the Title IX office. Understanding the barriers can help campus administrators and victim advocates develop strategies that make reporting more accessible, thus enabling students who are survivors to utilize the services offered by the university and the community to help mitigate the consequences of the assault.[1]

The Survivor Survey results indicate that 63% of survivors who were in college when they were victimized did not report their victimization to Title IX coordinators, and 45% of those who reported chose not to pursue an investigation process.

[1] Spencer, C., Mallory, A., Toews, M., Stith, S., & Wood, L. (2017). Why sexual assault survivors do not report to universities: A feminist analysis. *Family Relations* 66(1), 166-179.

Survivors have many reasons for choosing not to report their experiences to Title IX coordinators. The majority of survivors (67%) said they did not report because **they did not know who their Title IX coordinator was and where to report the assault**. This speaks to students' lack of knowledge about reporting Title IX's violations in general and reporting sexual assault in particular.

At the same time, some survivors shared other barriers. Survivors who experienced **victimization off-campus indicated that they did not know they could report such experience or access support services on campus.** For example, one survivor shared "I was attending college but was raped off-campus. I did not know there were any services or support for me."

The survey responses demonstrate that student survivors did not fully understand their rights and Title IX regulations in the university. Survivors who experience victimization off-campus are too often not aware of their eligibility to access services on campus and off-campus. These services may include typical sexual assault services like mental health support, hospital accompaniment, legal accompaniment, and other services provided by local rape crisis programs. In addition, those students can seek academic accommodations so they do not fall behind in school while dealing with the consequences of victimization, or housing accommodations to provide a safer living situation.

Survey respondents who experienced **victimization within a domestic or romantic relationship** were also hesitant to report their victimization. This hesitation could stem from various issues, including fear of retaliation or not being believed. Survivors of college sexual assault did not report their victimization to their Title IX coordinator because **they felt that they might not be believed because they were in an intimate relationship with the person who harmed them**. One survivor explained "I felt I would not be believed because it was a boyfriend." This is a common experience for survivors who experience sexual assault as part of intimate partner violence.

Some survivors shared that a personal inability and **unwillingness to admit that they experienced victimization**, even to themselves, prohibited them from coming forward and reporting the assault. One survivor shared "I was not comfortable with admitting to anybody, including myself, that I had been assaulted." This is another common

experience for sexual assault survivors. Many survivors tend to avoid confrontation and want to forget the incident ever happened. Thinking and talking about such a traumatic experience can feel painful for many people and it can feel better in the moment to avoid the topic.

On the other hand, survivors who chose to report their victimization to the college's Title IX coordinator shared a wide range of experiences. The majority (45%) said **they did not feel believed or listened to during the Title IX reporting process**, while 36% said **they did not understand the process**. In contrast, 18% of them felt that they were believed and understood at every level of the process.

Clear communication from the Title IX coordinators about the possible outcomes of an investigation is necessary to build trust in the response systems and foster a help-seeking culture when it comes to experiencing sexual assault. Survivors' responses to survey questions indicate that **Title IX offices at New York State colleges inconsistently communicated with—or failed to communicate with—students who reported experiencing sexual violence on campus**.

Some survivors did not feel that there was any resolution resulting from reporting their victimization. One survivor explained "I reported about a year after the incident when my abuser returned to campus after a hiatus. I felt listened to and believed, but [...] pretty much nothing happened after." For those survivors, the desired outcome of reporting was focused on investigating the incident and establishing consequences for the person who had harmed them.

For other survivors who reported their experience to the Title IX coordinator, **going through the investigation was transformative and helped them feel safer on campus**. One survivor explained "[The Title IX coordinator] understood, they believed me, and they issued the guy a letter stating he was not allowed on any campus property." Another shared "I don't think that I would have survived without the help of my Title IX coordinator or my advocate."

In terms of possible accommodations offered to survivors who reported experiencing violence in their college, **only 36% were provided academic and/or housing accommodations**. Some survivors believed that once they declined to go through with the investigation, their requests for housing accommodations were not fulfilled. According to

one survivor "[the Title IX coordinator] then asked if I wanted to participate in an investigation into their harassment, and I said no, it didn't feel safe to self-identify like that during my fourth week of college. [...] There was no follow-up, and those boys were my downstairs neighbors the next year."

This is another example of **poor communication of expectations and regulations for survivors on college campuses**. Title IX coordinators and college administrators must connect survivors to services and provide accommodations to them to ensure student wellbeing on campus. Title IX coordinators need to communicate clearly to survivors the meaning of each step of the Title IX reporting, investigation, and adjudication process and the consequences of proceeding or declining to proceed in each step. At the same time, the unresponsiveness of college administrators to such requests to accommodate students' needs (whether housing or academic) could make survivors vulnerable to further victimization. It could also break the link of trust between students and their Title IX coordinator and put student survivors at risk of falling back academically and not achieving their educational goals.

Survivors' Experiences with Rape Crisis Programs and Hospitals

Although the national protocol for sexual assault medical forensic examination is to prioritize victims of sexual assault as emergency cases, this does not seem to align with survivors' experiences. Survivors who obtained a sexual assault forensic examination overwhelmingly shared negative experiences when seeking medical care. One survivor shared that they waited 9 hours in the emergency department to be able to complete the exam. It is important for survivors to be treated immediately, not only to ensure timely treatment but also to ensure patient privacy. Waiting too long in the emergency room could be dangerous for survivors and inhibit survivors from seeking necessary medical care.

Survivors shared several reasons that prevented them from seeking services from rape crisis programs. **Some survivors report not knowing that rape crisis services exist in their counties**. One survivor shared, "[I] didn't know that one existed as support." Another survivor said,"I only found out about my local rape crisis program a day ago." This speaks to students' lack of knowledge about services in the

community that can support them. Although reporting to Title IX coordinators could be one way that survivors could be connected to services, college administrators should ensure that students know about services off-campus so that they can seek support if needed.

Furthermore, because of the trauma that sexual assault survivors endure during their victimization, **it can be very difficult for some survivors to speak about their victimization**. A survivor explains, "I went to [local rape crisis programs] for two therapy sessions. I stopped going because it was too hard to talk about." Avoidance is a common experience among survivors of sexual assault; it is a survival mechanism in many cases.

On the other hand, those who could access services at their local RCP shared positive and, in some cases, **transformative experiences**. A survivor shared, "[many] years after I was raped, I reached out to my county's rape crisis program for therapy. It opened a door for me that I thought had been forever locked. They taught me how to trust myself again."

Another explained, "The advocate from my local rape crisis program is the reason I survived and understand how hard but valid healing is." Another survivor said, "I believe my therapist saved my life and allowed me to start a journey of healing." Another stated, "I didn't reach out to [local rape crisis program] until almost a year later, but their support was immediate and significant."

These testimonies speak to the importance of seeking help from local rape crisis programs. Sexual assault victimization can have significant detrimental impacts on survivors' lives. **Seeking and finding the appropriate support for the survivor can be life-saving**, as many of the survey respondents have shared. Therefore, it is paramount to make sure that survivors can find help and services are accessible to them to start their healing journey.

Survivors' Experiences with Law Enforcement

Survivors of college sexual assault who participated in the survey overwhelmingly did not report their victimization to law enforcement. Only 16% of respondents reported their assault to law enforcement, while 61% chose not to report the assault to police. This aligns with

national statistics: nationally, only 12% of college student survivors report to law enforcement.[2]

There are many factors that contribute to survivors' hesitation to report their assault to the police.

Survey respondents shared that they **do not trust the legal system** and fear that they will not be believed because of the circumstances around their victimization or their identities. When asked about the factors that prohibited their willingness to report to the police, a survivor shared that "having a disability and being outside the gender binary were both factors." Another survivor explained, "Marginalized people don't trust law enforcement." These statements show that survivors who are part of historically marginalized communities were less likely to trust that law enforcement would help them.

Survivors shared **doubts that law enforcement would believe their stories** or that they could **get the outcome they wanted for the pain** that a criminal legal system process could cause them. One survivor shared, "I didn't feel there would be any real outcome for the pain it would take." Another respondent said, "I felt that no one would believe me, or I would blame for what happened. I thought I had no proof." Survivors seem to have low expectations of law enforcement and the legal system's response to their complaints or testimony.

The testimonies shared by survivors speak to the historical lack of trust in police and law enforcement to help marginalized communities. **Survivorhood is an intersectional experience** in which victims/survivors have multiple social identities, and they tend to want to protect themselves from further harm. Hence when survivors anticipate a bad experience interacting with law enforcement, they tend to not seek help or support from them. For this issue to be rectified, **systemic changes** to how the legal system works in support of survivors need to be implemented.

Survivors also shared fears that because they had been **consuming alcohol when the assault happened, the police would seriously doubt their testimony**. One respondent explained "I had been

[2] Kilpatrick, D. G., Resnick, H. S., Ruggiero, K. J., Conoscenti, L. M., and McCauley, J. (2007). Drug-Facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study. https://doi.org/https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/219181.pdf

drinking (but was not drunk, I remember everything) and felt the cards were stacked against me. It felt like a typical he said/she said, especially because we knew each other."

The process of reporting and being questioned when reporting their assault seemed too painful to some survivors and created a barrier for them to report. One survivor shared, "I did not feel like I could trust the police to handle it respectfully and in a timely manner." Many survivors chose not to disclose their victimization to anyone because they felt that it was too hard for them to speak about their experiences. Other survivors explained:

- "[I] didn't dare tell anyone. I had fantasies of being protected, of receiving some justice, but the reality is that in those days, I had no faith in law enforcement."
- "I also didn't identify as a victim during the window of time I could have talked with law enforcement."
- "I told nobody at the time of my first assault as a child or second assault as a teen."

This is another example of avoidance as a coping mechanism for survivors. Avoidance is a factor that prohibits survivors from seeking help from all systems, including law enforcement. This speaks to the huge toll that such victimization takes on survivors' wellbeing. Therefore, avoidance is a big hurdle that could limit survivors' ability to seek support. When a survivor comes to terms with what happened to them and seeks support, law enforcement and other survivor-supporting professionals must resist asking questions about why a survivor "waited so long" to report and seek services.

Another barrier that prevents survivors from reporting is experiencing the assault within a domestic or romantic relationship. Many of those survivors felt that it could be complicated to report and investigate and that they would not get the outcome they wanted from the process.

Below are some of the testimonies survivors shared with us:

- "I was assaulted by an abusive partner, and because of that, I did not think that the police would even open an investigation."

- "The sexual abuse I experienced occurred when interacting with someone who I was ostensibly in a relationship with, but also at a distance. It included cyber abuse as well as rape and sexual assault during visitation."

- "Because my assault happened in the context of an intimate relationship and felt like a more complicated situation than what rape typically is seen as I didn't feel comfortable reporting to [law enforcement] because I worried that they would judge my experience as 'not bad enough to be rape'."

Survivors of sexual assault within intimate partner violence contexts who responded to the Survivor Survey were particularly hesitant to report the assault to law enforcement. Survivors of sexual assault in intimate relationships shared many common fears, including **fear of retaliation from their partner**, **fear of being judged or blamed for the assault**, and **fear of being misunderstood**. The dynamic of such relationships could complicate the meaning and the understanding of rape or sexual violence. College students are particularly vulnerable to such experiences because of the **social pressure surrounding dating life**, as well as the **lack of knowledge about what a healthy relationship looks like**. Therefore, **comprehensive sexuality education** is important to educate young people on how to make autonomous decisions about their bodies and lives. Comprehensive sexuality education can also ensure that law enforcement and other survivor-supporting professionals can identify harmful relationship dynamics.

Conclusion

Results from this survey indicate that college students who experience sexual violence on campus in New York State generally do not report their victimization or seek supportive services, including reporting to Title IX offices, reporting to law enforcement, seeking medical care, or seeking advocacy and therapeutic support from local rape crisis programs.

College student survivors are also less likely to report to Title IX coordinators. The top two reasons survivors shared for not reporting are experiencing victimization off-campus and/or experiencing sexual violence within domestic relationships. However, the lack of reporting does not minimize the negative impact of sexual violence on students' wellbeing, but it might prevent students from knowing what support services are available to them on campus and off-campus.

Title IX coordinators should collaborate with local rape crisis programs and hospital emergency departments to make sure that students are aware of these services and aware of what they can do to access the support even if they don't want to report it. In addition, Title IX coordinators need to ensure that students know their rights as college students within the university even if they are victimized off-campus and what services can be provided to them in the college and the county with the local rape crisis program. The goal should be to prevent and end sexual violence but also to provide all the necessary support that students need to minimize as much as possible the harmful impact of sexual violence on students' wellbeing.

Similarly, students are less likely to seek support services from a local rape crisis program or go to the hospital to seek medical help. Students might not know what services are available for them locally on and off-campus, even without reporting their victimization. In addition, people who were students at the time of their victimization but are no longer students are not aware of services that could be provided to them through their local rape crisis program.

College administrators, Title IX coordinators, and the campus community need to share this information with students widely so it becomes well known that victims and survivors of sexual violence can access various services at any time after their victimization to seek

confidential support even with they leave campus. The goal of the Title IX office and county rape crisis program should be to create a norm in which current and past survivors seek help and ask for services to minimize the impact of sexual violence on their daily lives.

For information about sexual assault survivors' experiences more broadly in New York State and further recommendations for improving survivors' experiences and access to support, access our companion report at **www.nyscasa.org/survivor-survey-report**.