Response from Sexual Assault Survey Researchers to “A Call to Reduce Sexual Violence on College Campuses: Towards Effectively Assessing Campus Climate”

We applaud the White House for recognizing the magnitude of sexual violence on college campuses and recommending action steps through its Not Alone Campaign. This commentary is written by researchers who collectively have published over 340 peer reviewed scientific studies over the past 30 years related to sexual violence, including a large-scale representative national survey; longitudinal studies of victims and perpetrators; and methodological studies of best-practices to measure sexual assault. The authors of this commentary include the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) Collaborative, which authored the revised SES, the most well known and commonly used measure of sexual assault (as noted in the White House report).

We agree that surveys of sexual assault incidence and prevalence provide important information at a national and local level. Because many large scale surveys have been conducted since the 1980’s, all of which document the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses (and in society as a whole), we suggest that institutions would benefit from seeking information relevant to their own campuses from existing methodologically sound research that has been peer reviewed.

We offer our support and expertise to move the Not Alone Campaign forward. Measurement of sexual misconduct is important not just to estimate the size the problem, but also for evaluating the impact of intervention and prevention programs that strive to reduce unwanted sexual behavior. Given the central role in achieving the aims of the campus climate survey, we offer the following recommendations on measuring sexual assault:

RECOMMENDATION 1: Sexual assault subject matter experts should provide a detailed critique of the survey toolkit, develop a module of questions that will be included in all campus climate surveys, and suggest optional modules that may be appropriate to local settings. These experts should develop recommendations that will allow for comparisons across campuses and over time. Finally, a safety protocol should be established to guide data collection and analyses.

Campus climate surveys should

- Be informed by the substantial body of existing knowledge from the scientific literature.
- Address potential problems associated with respondent safety (e.g., experts need to work with campus Institutional Review Boards to ensure human subject protections).
- Assess various forms of sexual coercion using culturally-appropriate methods.
- Assess the full range of sexually violent experiences and tactics, including those that involve verbal coercion, penetration, contact and noncontact sexual acts, and incapacitation due to alcohol or drugs.
- Include topics important to campus communities, such as experiences of multiple forms of victimization, including bullying, harassment, cyber-assault, stalking, and intimate partner violence (i.e., poly-victimization).
- Meet the needs of diverse student groups, including ethnic/racial minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students (LGBTQ), and members of fraternities and sororities.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The White House Office on Violence Against Women and the Department of Education should collaborate with NIH, NIJ, and CDC to increase research funding opportunities to enhance our understanding of the etiology, prevention, and treatment of sexual violence on college campuses.
Other gaps in knowledge exist that may not be addressed by the climate surveys and merit rigorous research that:

- Follows students from high school through college to better understand experiences over time.
- Identifies environmental and contextual factors that contribute to risk of sexual assault, including school climate and student history of sexual assault experiences. This is an improvement upon simply documenting the pervasiveness of campus sexual assault.
- Informs development of additional sexual misconduct policies beyond those mandated by Title IX.
- Guides the development of prevention and intervention programs that are sustainable by diverse college campuses.
- Evaluates the effectiveness of policies and programs over time.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Designated federal funding is needed to provide subject matter expertise and to support the conduct of campus climate surveys.

Campus climate surveys will be expensive to conduct because of the time and expertise required for safe and scientifically sound data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

- Example: The Krebs et al (2007) study, which was highlighted in the White House report, received $419,339 in NIJ funding, which was approximately $62/student respondent (this would be approximately $75/student respondent in 2014). It is unlikely that institutions could absorb the costs of such an effort within their current budgets.

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