

Campus Sexual Assault Series

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Crime Victims' Institute

College of Criminal Justice | Sam Houston State University



Safety Initiatives and Perceptions of Campus Safety

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Federal legislation, along with student activists and advocacy groups, have influenced how universities address campus crime and security. Traditional violence prevention and educational programming has included education/awareness campaigns, risk reduction efforts, bystander education, and targeted initiatives designed specifically for Greek life, athletics, and/or men (DeGue et al., 2014; Lonsway et al., 2009; Vladutiu, Martin, & Macy, 2011). Additionally, in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007, the federal government mandated college campuses to implement emergency systems that alert students and faculty across a wide variety of digital mediums of ongoing threats, such as active shooters (Fox & Savage, 2009).

Traditional programs, like those mentioned above, alter attitudes; few, however, have suggested substantial long-term changes in behavior (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Edwards, 2011; Lonsway et al., 2009; Moynihan et al. 2015). Scholars have argued there is a need for campuses to implement comprehensive programming that focuses on raising awareness, increasing knowledge, enabling help-seeking behaviors and peer support, and incorporating skills-based objectives (DeGue et al., 2014; Gidycz et al., 2011; Lonsway et al., 2009). Although research has evaluated the effectiveness of these initiatives, very few studies have examined how initiatives are associated with perceptions of safety on campus.

The current issue in the Campus Sexual Assault Series examines students' perceptions of safety notification procedures being used by one university and the association of these measures with perceptions of safety. The findings address key goals of campus climate surveys. Namely, the current report presents findings from a study that examines student experiences on campus and their attitudes toward safety overall. Conclusions can be used to inform safety

procedures and policies across institutions of higher education (IHE) in Texas.

Campus Safety Application and Safety Notification Messages

This Texas State University System (TSUS) school uses a campus-wide notification system to alert the university community of emergencies. It was introduced in the summer of 2008 and initially used three methods for alerting the university community: 1) voice and text message notifications on telephones, 2) e-mail notifications, and 3) TTY/TDD notifications for the hearing and visually impaired. The notification system has since expanded, providing the university community with emergency notifications through an outdoor warning system (including standing emergency towers on campus), social media, computer desktop alerts on campus, the system website, and a YouTube channel. Students and their parents can enroll in, and unsubscribe to, safety communications via their student account. The accessibility and tangible presence of the notification system aims at encouraging a safety-minded environment.

The notification system has sought to ensure the university community is prepared for an emergency or crisis and provides emergency plans to the campus community. Students can locate emergency information for inclement weather, bomb threats, active shooters, hazardous material, medical emergencies, evacuations, and campus closures through the system. Additionally, the notification system works to quickly distribute information about crises to the university community, allowing for real-time alerts of emergency situations on campus. These objectives reduce confusion and the negative consequences that stem from emergency situations.

Sam Houston
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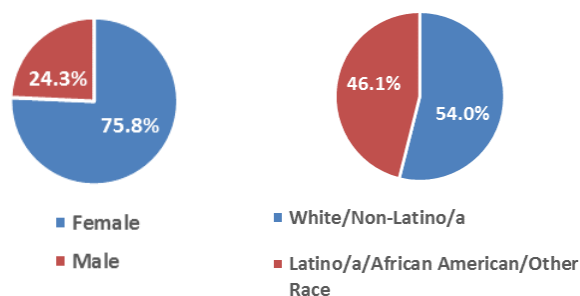
The safety application (app) is a mobile app that was released for the university community in 2013. Unlike other notification mediums, the app does not provide up-to-the-minute emergency notifications, but is a resource for the actions that should be taken during or after an emergency on campus. Some of the emergency resources include information about emergency planning, suicide prevention, and sexual assault.

Data and Sample Characteristics

Data were collected from students, aged 18 and over, via a mass e-mail sent to all students registered at this TSUS school. Over the course of one month, students received three e-mail solicitations for their participation in a campus-wide survey on safety. Students were offered incentives for their participation. In total, eight students were randomly selected to win \$100 Amazon.com gift cards. Another 72 students received a \$10 Starbucks gift card.

The electronic survey that was administered was adapted from the University of Kentucky's Campus Attitudes Toward Safety (University of Kentucky, 2015). Questions within the survey included perceptions of campus safety and knowledge of campus resources. In addition, students were asked about their experiences on campus, social attitudes, and utilization of services. In total, 1,583 students began the survey (7.73% of the student body). It was not possible to determine the number of students who read the email request but chose not to participate or elected not to open an email. Overall, 990 students completed the final question on the survey. Though findings do not apply to the entire student body because of how the data were collected, electronic-based administrations have advantages (Sue & Ritter, 2007), including cost. Results discussed here are based on the 889 respondents who had valid information on all measures included in analyses. Figures 1 and 2 present the sex and racial/ethnic breakdown of participants in the present study.

Figures 1 and 2. Sex and Race/Ethnicity of Participants

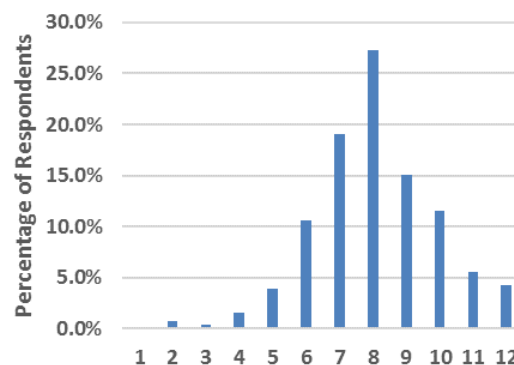


Measures

Perceptions of Safety. The student's perception of safety on campus was created from four separate questions: "[UNIVERSITY]¹ cares about my personal safety," "I generally feel safe on campus at night," "Violence is not a problem at [UNIVERSITY]," and "[UNIVERSITY] campus police can prevent

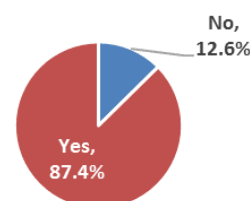
violence on campus." Responses to these four items were measured with a Likert-type scale and ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Responses across these four items were added together. Higher values on this scale indicated the respondent felt safer on campus (*Mean* = 8.05, *S.D.* = 1.86, *Range* = 1.00 - 12.00) (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Perceptions of Safety on Campus



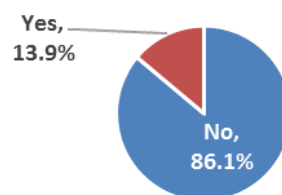
Safety Messages. Respondents reported if they, "signed up to receive [UNIVERSITY emergency notification system] messages, crime bulletins, notices, and/or alerts." Respondents could either check "yes" or "no" on the survey (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Election for Safety Messages



Safety Application. Respondents were asked to report if they, "have the [UNIVERSITY] phone app." Respondents could either check "yes" or "no" on the survey (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Safety Application Descriptive Statistics



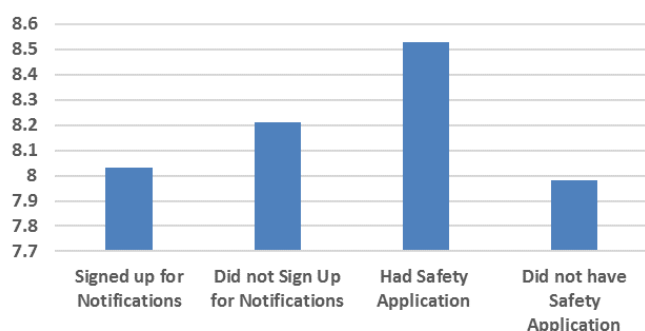
Results

Overall, respondents viewed the campus as relatively safe (*Mean* = 8.05, *Range* = 1.00 - 12.00). Those who signed up for emergency notifications did not view the campus as any more safe than respondents who did not sign up for the

¹The survey identified the university, but for the purpose of this report, it will remain anonymous.

emergency notifications. In fact, respondents who did not sign up for notifications were only slightly more likely to perceive the campus as safe ($Mean = 8.21$) than counterparts ($Mean = 8.03$). In comparison, respondents who enrolled in the safety app were more likely to report the campus to be safe compared to those who did not enroll in the safety app. The average score on the perceptions of safety scale for those who enrolled in the app was 8.53 compared to an average of 7.98 for those who did not enroll (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Perceptions of Safety on Campus by Technology Enrollment



Discussion

Enrollment in the safety app—but not the broader messaging notification system—was associated with increased perceptions of safety on campus. Perceptions of increased safety among students who enrolled in the safety app may be a result of self-selection. Students who voluntarily download this app may be more proactive in the safety measures they take. It is also possible that the app enhances perceptions of safety because students feel better equipped to handle emergency situations, whereas messages simply provide real-time notifications of incidents on campus. Recall, the safety app provides users with emergency resources including information about emergency planning, suicide prevention, and sexual assault. Having this type of information readily available may result in students feeling more empowered and better situated to handle emergency situations. In addition, many components of the messaging notification system do not allow the student to opt out, including desktop notifications. With that said, future research should aim at identifying the mechanisms that facilitate perceptions of increased safety in relation to the safety app. Interviews with students may be the best approach for answering these questions.

In the end, this study is an attempt to understand the effects of technological strategies used at this TSUS university to enhance campus safety. Future research is needed to uncover the best strategies to improve perceptions of safety on college campuses. The current study has provided some insight into these discussions. Future research is necessary to establish best practices on college campuses and ensure the safety of students.

Implications for Texas IHEs

Findings from the present study can inform safety procedures for other IHEs in Texas. The mobile app and companion website is only available at the institution where the research was conducted. Indeed, it may be beneficial for other IHEs to develop and distribute a similar app designed to promote a safety-minded environment. Given the technological ease in which apps can be developed, the creation of such apps may be a cost-effective option to promote safety on campuses. In addition to the app, the University also has the information available on a website and a YouTube channel. Other IHEs can make emergency preparedness as well as event preparation information available on their websites. It is also important that the link and information is easily accessible from the IHE's main webpage.

College campuses have been mandated to implement notification systems to alert the university community of ongoing threats or changes to daily operations. Participants at the current university actually perceived the campus to be less safe when they received the messages than respondents who were not enrolled in the notification system. It is important then for administrators and public safety officers to only use the notification system on an as-needed basis (e.g., during emergencies). Future research should examine the processes behind how implementation of these safety notification systems alters students' perceptions of safety.

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Resources

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE

National Center for Victims of Crime: 202-461-8701

Texas Association Against Sexual Assault: 512-474-7190

Campus Climate Surveys

University of Texas Campus Climate Survey

<http://diversity.utexas.edu/ccrt/>

University of Kentucky Campus Climate Survey

<http://www.uky.edu/CATSseesafety/>

About the Authors

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