

# Sexual Assault on College Campuses: Perceptions and Approaches of Campus Law Enforcement Officers

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Research has consistently shown that college students are at a disproportionately high risk of sexual assault (Fisher Cullen & Turner, 2000; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Recent national estimates suggest that between 20% and 25% of college women will experience either attempted or completed sexual assault during their college career (Fisher et al., 2000). Research has also indicated that less than 5% of college sexual assaults are reported to law enforcement officials (Fisher et al., 2000).

Colleges and universities have federal requirements through the Clery Act, Title IX, and Campus SaVE Act in regards to tracking the number of sexual assault cases, prevention efforts, and response to incidents of sexual assault. During the past few years, several universities have been charged with violating federal requirements. As a result, further consideration has been given to college sexual assault in general and how campuses are addressing incidents when reported to campus authorities.

When cases of college sexual assaults are reported to campus law enforcement and administration, they frequently require a coordinated response, as victims commonly have needs that span multiple departments on campus. Campus law enforcement departments are central to this response. To date there have been few efforts to study campus response to sexual assault or specifically campus law enforcements' approach and perceptions of sexual assault cases.

While there has been a significant amount of research dedicated to the study of police perceptions of sexual assault in general, there has yet to be a focused study of campus law enforcement. This is problematic because campus police officers are often the first, if not only, responders to crime that occurs on campus (Bromley, 1995). Campus police departments are typically fully integrated members of the criminal justice system (Bromley, 1995). Unlike mu-

nicipal departments, campus departments are under the purview of the college or university's administration (Bromley, 1995). This additional bureaucratic oversight influences the department's resources, training potential, and operation.

In order to add to the understanding of campus law enforcements' role in sexual assault cases, a survey regarding officer perceptions and agency response to sexual assault was administered to a group of campus police officers in Texas. This report will present results from this survey as well as provide some insight regarding how sexual assault is perceived and handled by campus law enforcement agencies.

## Sample

Campus law enforcement officers from colleges and universities in Texas (n=118) were surveyed for this study. The respondents ranged in age from 26 to 70 years old and had a mean age of about 45. The majority of the respondents were male (78.0%). Over half of the respondents were Caucasian (58.5%), 30.5% were Hispanic, 8.5% were African-American, 0.8% were Asian, and the remaining 1.7% identified themselves as belonging to a different race.

The majority of officers surveyed (61.5%) noted that they had gained previous experience in off-campus law enforcement prior to their current position on-campus. A vast majority of respondents (86.4%) had over 5 years of total experience in law enforcement, and only about 6% had fewer than two years of experience in law enforcement. On the other hand, only 50% of respondents had more than 5 years of experience specifically in campus law enforcement, and nearly 30% reported fewer than two years of campus law enforcement experience (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents	
Age (mean)	45.32 (26 - 70)
Gender	
Male	78.0%
Female	22.0%
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian	58.5%
Hispanic	30.5%
African-American	8.5%
Asian	0.8%
Other	1.7%
Previous Experience Off-Campus	
Yes	61.5%
No	38.5%
Length of Time in Law Enforcement	
Less than 1 year	0.8%
1 - 2 years	5.1%
3 - 5 years	7.6%
More than 5 years	86.4%
Length of Time in Campus Law Enforcement	
Less than 1 year	11.0%
1 - 2 years	18.6%
3 - 5 years	20.3%
More than 5 years	50.0%

Almost three-quarters of the officers surveyed (72.0%) noted that they had responded to at least one sexual assault while employed in their current position. Most officers (46.4%) had responded to between 1 and 5 sexual assaults, while another 23.6% had responded to more than 5 sexual assault incidents during their time as campus police (see Figure 1).

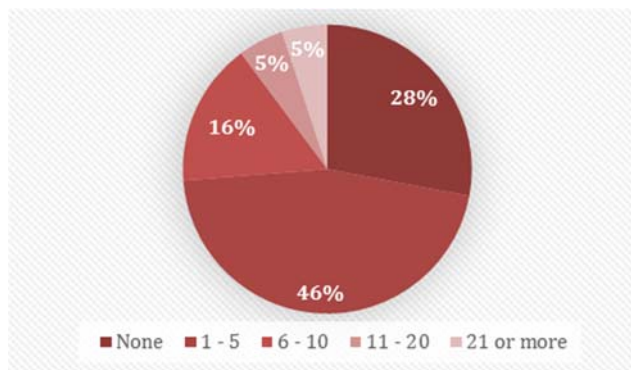


Figure 1: Officers Had Responded to Number of Sexual Assaults

### Campus Characteristics

Slightly more than half of the respondents (53.0%) reported that they worked at a 4-year public college or university. Nearly one-quarter of respondents (22.2%) worked at a 4-year private college or university, and 19.7% worked for a community or junior college. The number of students enrolled at the institutions where respondents were employed varied, from about 25% who were employed at colleges/universities with fewer than 5,000 students to an-

other 25% at colleges/universities with more than 20,000 students (see Table 2).

Table 2. Campus Characteristics	
Type of College/University Campus	
4-year Public College/University	53.0%
4-year Private College/University	22.2%
Community/Junior College	19.7%
Engineering/Technical College	3.4%
Other	1.7%
Number of Students on Campus	
Less than 5,000 students	24.8%
5,001 to 10,000 students	28.2%
10,001 to 20,000 students	22.2%
More than 20,000 students	24.8%
Estimated Frequency of Sexual Assaults on Campus	
None ever reported	12.0%
Less than once per semester	47.0%
Once or twice per semester	37.6%
Once a month	2.6%
Once or twice a month	0.9%
Sexual Assault Cases Resulted in Prosecution	
Yes	31.6%
No	41.9%
Don't Know	26.5%

Respondents were also asked to estimate how often sexual assaults occurred on their campus. The vast majority of officers estimated either less than one sexual assault per semester (47.0%) or between one and two sexual assaults per semester (37.6%). Very few officers estimated more frequent incidents (2.6% estimated once a month, while 0.9% estimated more than once a month). Only 12.0% of officers noted that they did not believe that there had ever been a sexual assault reported on their campus. Close to one-third of respondents (31.6%) noted that they were aware of at least one sexual assault case investigated by their department in which the District Attorney's office pressed charges against the suspect. Of the remaining respondents, 41.9% noted that they were not aware of a case that resulted in prosecution, while 26.5% were not sure.

### Specialized Training

Lonsway, Welch and Fitzgerald, (2001) contend that police officers who participate in specialized sexual assault training have a greater awareness of the consequences of victimization and may therefore have a different approach to responding to such crimes. There are multiple types of specialized sexual assault trainings available to police officers, including classes on the dynamics and investigation of sexual assault cases, victim management, and legal statutes. The majority of respondents in this study reported that they had received some kind of specialized training

on sexual assault. The most common type of training reported was investigation of sexual assaults (77.1%). Additionally, over half of respondents (59.3%) had received training on the role of alcohol or intoxication in sexual assaults, and 43.2% received training on identifying drug-facilitated sexual assaults. Victim sensitivity training was reported by 63.6% of respondents, and 53.0% noted that they had been trained on the trauma of victimization. Finally, 57.4% of respondents noted that they had received specialized training on federal requirements for sexual assault, such as the Clery Act and Title IX (see Figure 2).

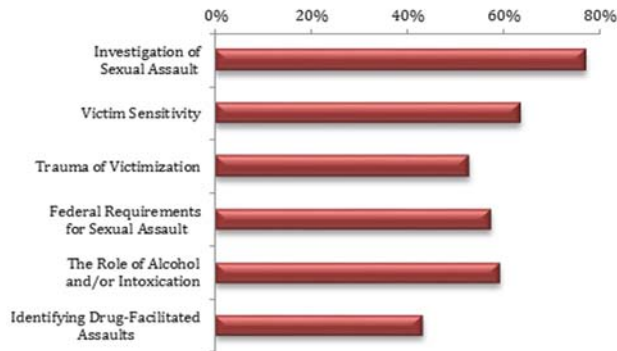


Figure 2: Types of Specialized Training Received

Respondents were also asked where they had received these trainings. The question was open-ended and included a wide variety of responses including: Clery Center, Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, Sexual Assault Family Violence Investigator Course, and local law enforcement offices.

### Understanding of Title IX and Clery Act

Respondents indicated a greater understanding of the Clery Act than Title IX. Figure 3 illustrates respondents' perceived understanding of these federal mandates. The majority of respondents (63.7%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they had a good understanding of Clery Act requirements as they apply to sexual assault, while 15.9% were "neutral" and 20.4% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that they had a good understanding. Respondents were also asked about their understanding of Title IX requirements as they apply to sexual assault and campus law enforcement. For Title IX, only 43.4% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that they had a good understanding, 22.1% were "neutral," and 34.5% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that they had a good understanding. Similarly, when respondents were asked if they agreed that they had a good understanding of Title IX requirements as they apply to campus law enforcement, 47.3% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" they had a good understanding, 19.6% were "neutral," and 34.5% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that they had a good understanding.

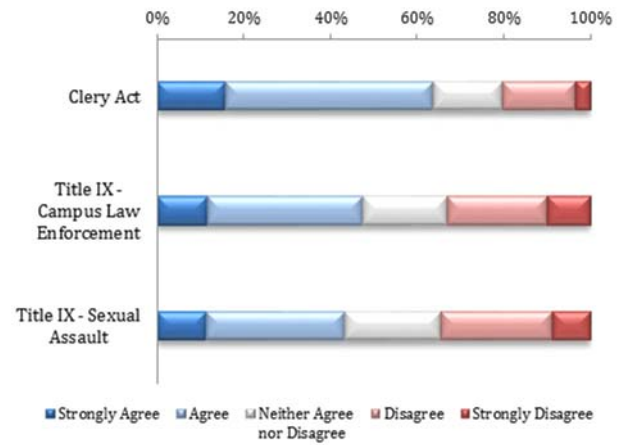


Figure 3: Reported Understanding of Clery Act and Title IX

## Perceptions of Campus Sexual Assault

Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of sexual assault and the response to such crimes. An overwhelming 87.6% of respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that sexual assault was a problem on Texas college and university campuses. There was less agreement, however, regarding whether or not sexual assault was problematic on respondents' own campuses. While most respondents either "agreed" (37.2%) or "strongly agreed" (14.2%) that sexual assault was a problem on their campus, 25.7% "neither agreed nor disagreed," 17.7% "disagreed," and 5.3% "strongly disagreed."

### Specific Agencies

Most respondents believed that sexual assault cases were treated seriously by law enforcement and campus agencies. Respondents thought campus police departments took sexual assaults the most seriously, followed by college and university administrators, campus government, and local law enforcement. Only one respondent (0.9%) believed that campus police departments failed to take sexual assaults seriously. Over half of the respondents (64.9%) "strongly agreed" to the statement that campus police departments took sexual assaults seriously, while 31.5% "agreed," and 2.7% "neither agreed nor disagreed" with this statement (see Figure 4).

With regard to other law enforcement agencies, over half of the respondents either "strongly agreed" (35.4%) or "agreed" (45.1%) that these entities took sexual assault cases seriously. For college and university administrators, 47.8% of respondents "strongly agreed" that sexual assault cases were taken seriously, and 37.2% "agreed." Finally, only 25.7% "strongly agreed" and 38.9% "agreed" that campus government takes sexual assault cases seriously.

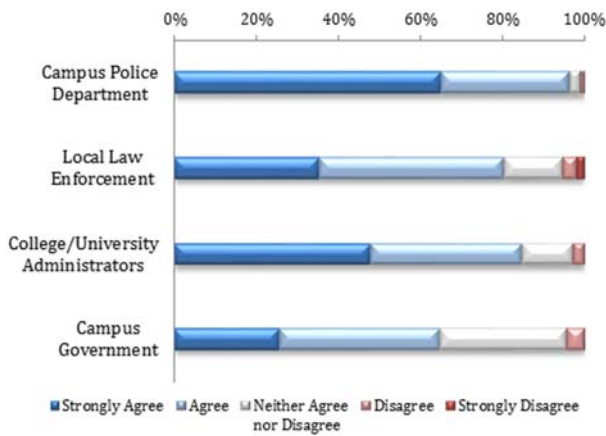


Figure 4: Perceptions of How Organizations View the Seriousness of Sexual Assault

### Factors in Case Clearance

Case clearance by law enforcement involves having sufficient evidence to close a case. Examples of this include: issuing a warrant, making an arrest, and turning the case over for prosecution. There are several factors that may influence the clearance rate for sexual assault cases, including the degree of victim cooperation with law enforcement officials, criminal history details, the relationship between the suspect and the victim, and whether drugs or alcohol were involved in the assault. Figure 5 shows how respondents believed that these factors influenced the clearance of sexual assault cases based on their experiences.

By far the most important factor in the clearance of sexual assault cases, as reported by campus police, was the degree of victim cooperation with law enforcement. None of the respondents noted that this had no effect on case clearance rates, while 72.5% noted that it was “extremely important.” Respondents also reported that the availability of witness statements and testimony, as well as DNA test results were influential in the clearance of sexual assault cases. Witness statements and testimony were deemed to be either “important” or “extremely important” by more than 75% of respondents. DNA test results were thought to be either “important” or “extremely important” by more than 78% of respondents.

Victim reporting consistency, suspect’s criminal history, the severity of victim injuries, victim-suspect relationship, and victim drug or alcohol use all had some measurable effect on officers’ experiences with case clearance, with at least 50% of respondents noting that each of these was at least “moderately important.” Victim blameworthiness had the least influence on case clearance, with 71.3% of respondents noting that it was either “unimportant” or “not important at all.” This was closely followed by the victim’s criminal history, which 69.3% of respondents thought was either “unimportant” or “not important at all.”

### Response to Campus Sexual Assaults

The majority of respondents’ departments (77.9%) allowed victims to make anonymous reports of sexual assault incidents, while 8% of respondents’ departments did not, and 14.2% of respondents were unsure if their department allowed anonymous reporting.

### Perceptions on Effectiveness of Response

Respondents were generally optimistic regarding their campus’s response to sexual assaults. Figure 6 shows how respondents perceived the effectiveness of response, both generally at colleges/universities in Texas and on their own campus. For colleges and universities in general, more than 45% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that sexual assaults were responded to effectively, followed by about 36% who “neither agreed nor disagreed.” Only one respondent “strongly disagreed” with the statement that their campus responded effectively to sexual assault incidents. Most respondents either “agreed” (47.8%) or “strongly agreed” (21.2%) that their campus was effectively responding to sexual assault incidents.

Respondents did not have particularly decisive feelings regarding whether or not the administrators at their college or university took a proactive approach to addressing sexual assault. Most respondents (32.7%), however, “agreed” that their campus’ administration took a proactive approach, followed by 28.3% who “neither agreed nor disagreed” with this statement. Overall, 71.6% of respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their cam-

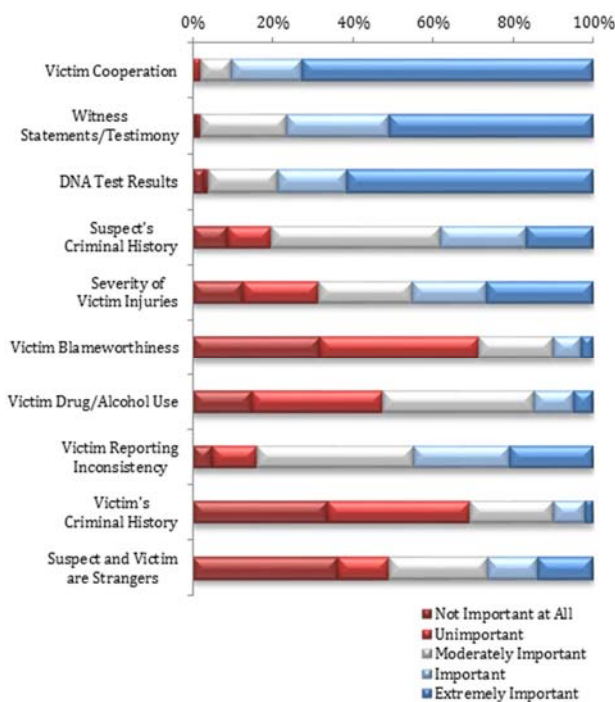


Figure 5: Influence of Certain Factors on Case Clearance



pus' response to sexual assault could be improved. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of respondents (87.5%) noted that they would like to be involved in improving their campus' response to sexual assault.

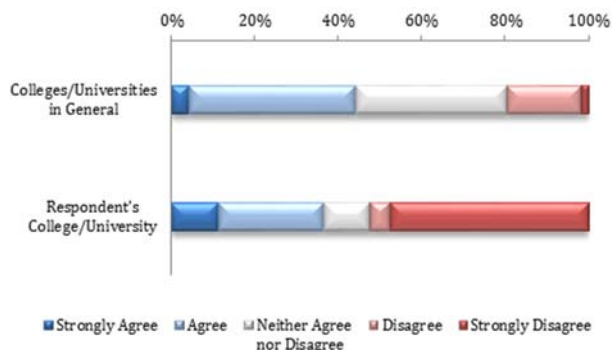


Figure 6: Perceptions of Effective Response to Sexual Assault

### Availability of Off- and On-Campus Resources

According to respondents, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE) were available to respond to sexual assault cases for the majority of departments (69.9%). Most respondents' departments (83.6%) provided transportation for medical care when needed after an assault.

A majority of respondents (68.1%) noted that their campus had a designated department that provided victim services (not a mental health counseling center). Many respondents (34.5%) did not know whether their college or university had a student organization dedicated to preventing sexual assault, while 18.6% stated that there was such an organization on campus.

### Local Agency Collaboration

Less than half of the respondents reported that their departments were participating in efforts to improve response to sexual assault in their communities or campus (see Figure 7). More than one-third reported that their department was involved in a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART), but 52.2% were not, and the remaining 12.4% were not sure. Relatively few respondents noted that they or their department were currently involved with collaborative efforts to improve response to sexual assault. About one-third of respondents (34.8%) reported that their departments were involved with an on-campus group focused on improving response to sexual assaults, and even fewer (29.2%) reported that their departments were involved with an off-campus organization that focused on improving response to sexual assault cases.

More respondents' departments took part in sexual assault prevention programming, with the majority of respondents (60.7%) noting involvement with prevention efforts on their campus, while 25% of respondents' departments were not involved and 14.3% were unsure whether their departments participated in prevention programming.

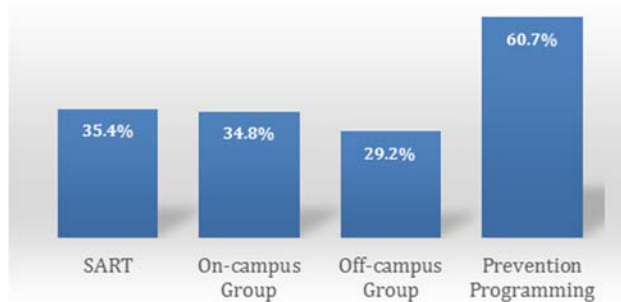


Figure 7: Agency Collaboration to Improve Response

Campus police agencies may partner with other local entities, formally or informally, in order to ensure that victims have access to comprehensive services. Figure 8 shows the percentages of respondents who noted that their agency had either formal or informal agreements with other local criminal justice, healthcare, and/or victim advocacy groups. Informal collaboration was significantly more common than formalized collaboration. A vast majority of respondents (96.4%) noted that their agency collaborated with other entities on sexual assault cases, however only 60.7% of these agreements were formalized.

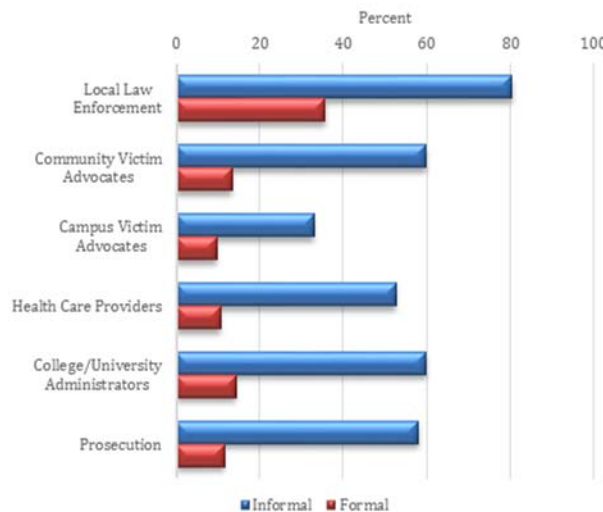


Figure 8: Informal and Formal Collaboration

The most common type of informal collaboration was between the campus police agency and local law enforcement, with 80.4% of respondents noting that their agency participated in such an arrangement. Informal collaboration was also commonly reported between campus police agencies and community victim advocates (59.8%), college or university administration (59.8%), and prosecution (58.0%). Slightly more than half of respondents (52.7%) noted that their agency collaborated with healthcare providers, and one-third reported informal collaboration with campus victim advocates. A few respondents identified

other agency collaborations, including crisis intervention groups, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners, and family support services.

Formalized collaborative agreements between campus police agencies and local service providers were significantly less common than informal inter-agency collaboration. The most common type of formal collaboration, however, was with local law enforcement (35.7%). This was followed by formalized agreements with college or university administration (14.3%), community victim advocates (13.4%), and prosecution (11.6%). There were similar levels of formalized collaboration between campus victim advocates (9.8%) and healthcare providers (10.7%).

### Police Contact with Victims and Suspects

Most of the campus police officers surveyed (88.9%) noted that their department stayed in contact with victims regarding the status of their case. Departments were less likely to stay in contact with suspects, however, with only 40.7% of respondents noting that they remained in contact with suspects regarding the status of their case.

### Victim and Suspect Rights

The majority of the respondents noted their departments provided sexual assault victims and suspects with information regarding their legal rights. Victims were more likely to receive this information than suspects, however, with 95.4% of respondents noting that they provided this information to victims compared to 59.3% doing so for suspects.

Figure 9 demonstrates the various ways in which victims and/or suspects were informed about their rights. The most common way in which victims were provided with their legal rights was with a paper or booklet handed to them by the officer. Over three-quarters of respondents (76.1%) noted that they verbally provided victims with information regarding their rights. Providing victims with a link to a website (37.6%) was less common, as was other means of communicating such information (8.3%).

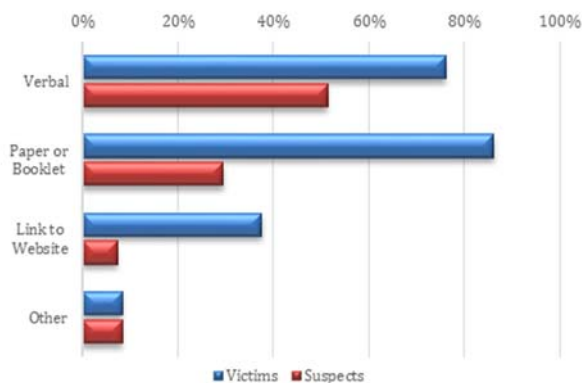


Figure 9: Methods of Providing Victim/Suspect Information about Legal Rights

Respondents noted that they were most likely to verbally inform suspects of their rights (51.4%), while less than one-third of respondents (29.4%) provided this information to suspects in writing or via a booklet. Providing links to a website was less common, with only 7.3% of respondents noting the use of this method, and 8.3% reported using another form of communication.

### Campus Policies and Procedures

Many of the officers surveyed noted that their department provides sexual assault victims and suspects with information regarding campus policies and procedures. Victims were more likely than suspects to receive such information. While almost 60% of respondents reported that their department provides victims with information regarding campus policies and procedures, only about 44% of respondents indicated that they provided this information to suspects.

Figure 10 shows the methods of disseminating information about campus policies and procedures. The most common method of providing campus policy and procedure information was verbally for both victims (55.0%) and suspects (38.2%). Nearly 30% reported providing paper copies of campus policies and procedures to victims, compared to about 21% reporting providing this to suspects. Respondents also were more like to report providing victims with a link to a website containing this information (reported by 18.3%) as compared to providing this information to suspects (reported by 8.2%).

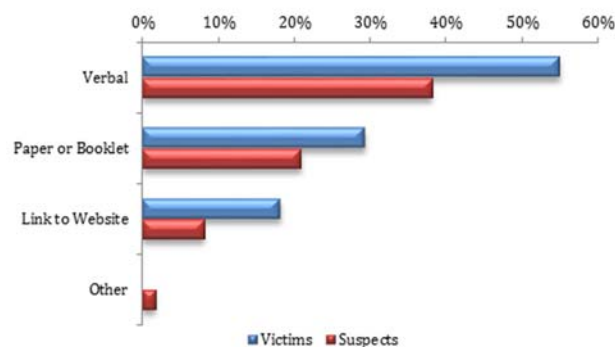


Figure 10: Methods of Providing Victims/Suspects with Campus Policies and Procedure Information

### Victim Resources

The vast majority of respondents also noted that their department provided victims with information regarding counseling centers (94.4%), student health services (89.5%), community advocacy centers (84.6%), student services (84.3%), and SANEs (81.9%). Transportation to medical care facilities, when necessary, was provided by 83.6% of departments (see Figure 11).

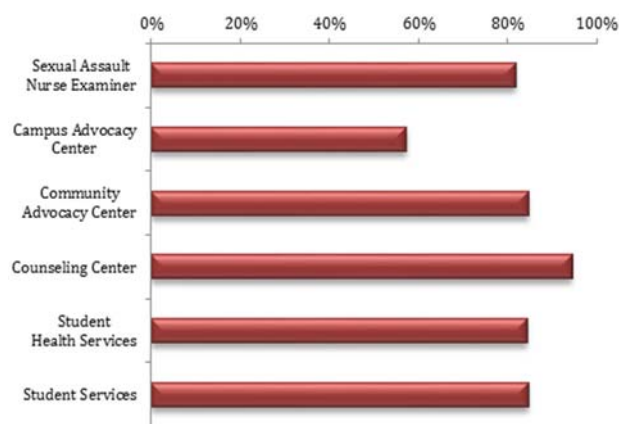


Figure 11: Victim Resource Information

## Conclusions

Given the high rates of sexual assault on colleges and universities and the problems campuses have had in recent years responding to victims, it is important for all campuses to consider how policies and procedures can be improved to more effectively respond to incidents of sexual assault and to victims. Campus law enforcement officers are central to this process, and it is important that these officers are trained on college sexual assault, involved with institutional and community discussions on improving response, and that victim service providers and campus administrators understand more about their law enforcement's response and procedures.

Campus law enforcement officers are assets to our institutions and play a key role in responding to cases of sexual assault. Improving response to college sexual assault will need to include multidisciplinary collaboration amongst campus authorities and community agencies, including campus law enforcement officers. It is especially important to note that the overwhelming majority of officers in this study expressed interest in being involved in a process to improve campus response to sexual assault. Findings from this study can be utilized to initiate conversations about the role of campus law enforcement officers and departments, opportunities for additional collaboration, and expanding efforts to provide resources and information on campus policies to victims.

## References

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- Schwartz, M. D., & DeKeseredy, W. S. (1997). *Sexual assault on the college campus: The role of male peer support*. Thousand Oaks, C.A.: Sage.

## Resources

### Equal Access to Education: Forty Years of Title IX

<http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/edu/documents/titleixreport.pdf>

### Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA)

<http://www.taasa.org/> (512) 474-7190

### Clery Center

<http://clerycenter.org/>

### "Sexual Assault on Campus: What Colleges and Universities Are Doing About It" (Report from the National Institute for Justice)

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/205521.pdf>

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