



2017 Cornell Survey of Sexual Assault and Related Misconduct: Overview of Survey Results

October 2017

This report provides an overview of the *Survey of Sexual Assault and Related Misconduct*¹ conducted by Cornell University in spring 2017. The report is intended to describe the survey methodology and summarize initial findings. The [survey instrument](#) and [tables](#) showing population estimates of survey responses are provided in separate documents.

Please note that this report includes findings regarding the prevalence of sexual assault and related misconduct, patterns of victimization, and the contexts within which such incidents occur. Additional information about university policy and procedures, reporting options, and resources is available online at the [Office of the Title IX Coordinator](#)'s website and Cornell's [Sexual Harassment and Assault—Response and Education \(SHARE\)](#) website.

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¹ "Sexual assault and related misconduct" includes nonconsensual sexual contact (penetration and/or sexual touching), sexual and gender-based harassment, domestic and dating violence, and stalking.

I. Overview of the Survey

Sexual violence on college campuses is a serious national problem, occurring with unacceptable frequency at Cornell and on campus across the country. As part of ongoing efforts to prevent and effectively respond to sexual violence, Cornell conducted the *Survey of Sexual Assault and Related Misconduct* in spring 2017. The goals of this survey were to:

- Estimate the prevalence of different forms of nonconsensual sexual contact, harassment, stalking, and domestic and dating violence among students at Cornell; and to examine the context within which these forms of violence occur
- Assess student knowledge of Cornell resources, policies and procedures related to sexual assault and related misconduct, including sexual assault, dating and domestic violence, stalking, and sexual and gender-based harassment; and the obstacles that may prevent the use of available resources
- Explore factors related to students' decisions to intervene or not as bystanders to various scenarios of sexual assault and related misconduct risk

New York State Education Law Article 129-B requires that Cornell conduct a survey of campus sexual violence no less than every two years. For its first such survey effort, Cornell participated in the 2015 *Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct* as part of a consortium of 27 colleges and universities organized by the Association of American Universities (AAU). The 2015 survey, which was hosted externally and conducted as a population survey, yielded useful information about the prevalence and context of campus sexual violence. Results from the 2015 survey are available [here](#).

Instrument development. A new survey instrument was created that would be useful for internal planning and prevention purposes while also minimizing the burden of survey participation on students. The 2017 instrument largely repeated questions from the 2015 AAU survey concerning students' experiences with sexual assault and misconduct; but it intentionally asked fewer detailed follow-up questions about those experiences. Questions about campus policies and resources, the context of sexual violence, and bystander intervention were revised to improve clarity and to offer a fuller range of Cornell-specific response options. Survey revisions were informed by feedback from program staff and refined through pilot tests with students. These revisions have produced a shorter and more locally-relevant survey instrument; however, they also restrict our ability to directly compare 2015 and 2017 survey results, particularly with respect to the prevalence of different forms of sexual assault and related misconduct.

Survey content. The survey has eight sections (A-H). All students who responded to the survey were asked questions about Background Information (A), Knowledge of Cornell Resources and Policies (B), Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment (C), Stalking (D), Nonconsensual Sexual Contact (G), and Bystander Experiences (H). Respondents who indicated in section A that they were or had been in some type of partnered relationship at Cornell were

asked questions about Domestic and Dating Violence (E). Respondents who indicated they had experienced one or more incidents of Nonconsensual Sexual Contact in section F were asked follow-up questions about the experience of nonconsensual sexual contact that had impacted or affected them the most (G). The survey instrument is available [here](#).

Sample and incentives. A stratified, random sample of 6,000 students enrolled at our Ithaca, Weill Cornell Medicine, and Cornell Tech campuses in the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters received email invitations to participate in the survey. Every student who participated in the survey was offered a \$5 Amazon gift card.

Survey procedures. Cornell contracted with an independent consultant to program and administer the survey. The *Cornell Survey of Sexual Assault and Related Misconduct* was launched on April 12 and closed on May 3, 2017. Students in the randomly drawn sample received an email invitation and a maximum of three email reminders. After the survey closed, personal identifiers (i.e., netIDs) were stripped from the survey data file.

Response rates. A total of 2,238 students completed² the survey for an overall response rate of 37%. This is almost double the 19% response rate achieved on the 2015 AAU survey.

Table 1. Survey response rates

Cornell survey sample by enrollment type	Women			Men			Combined		
	Invited	Responded	Response rate	Invited	Responded	Response rate	Invited	Responded	Response rate
Graduate or professional	1,016	426	41.9	1,155	415	35.9	2,171	841	38.7
Undergraduate	1,972	866	43.9	1,857	531	28.6	3,829	1,397	36.5
Total	2,988	1,292	43.2	3,012	946	31.4	6,000	2,238	37.3

As shown in Table 1, undergraduate women had the highest response rate (44%) while undergraduate men had the lowest (29%). [See Tables A1 and A2 in the Survey Tables document for more information about the characteristics of the Cornell survey population and respondents.]

Weighting procedure. Not all Cornell students were invited to participate in the survey and not all those who were invited chose to participate. A base weight was calculated to adjust for patterns of survey non-response. The percentages shown in the tables of survey results are *weighted estimates* of the Cornell student population.

II. Summary of Initial Results

The rest of this report offers an overview of survey results. Where possible, comparisons to associated results from the 2015 survey are offered. Additional analyses will be

² A survey was counted as “completed” if a respondent answered at least one question in each of the sections concerning experiences with harassment, stalking, and nonconsensual sexual contact. This is the same criterion used to define completion of the 2015 AAU survey.

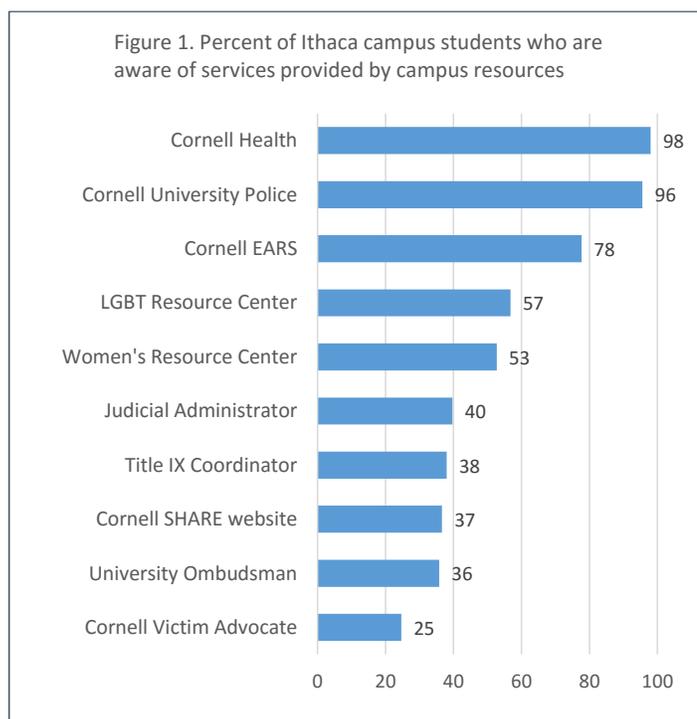
conducted to further examine patterns and correlates of students' experiences of sexual assault and related misconduct, the context in which these experiences occur, and victims' reasons for not talking to campus resources about these experiences. Detailed tables of survey responses, broken out for all students, and by enrollment type (undergraduate or graduate/professional) and gender, are available in a [separate report](#). Tables from that report are referenced in the summaries below.

a. Knowledge of Campus Resources, Policies, and Procedures

Awareness of resources. The survey asked about students' awareness of services and resources offered by Cornell for those affected by sexual assault or related misconduct such as harassment, stalking, or relationship violence. Different lists of resources were provided to students enrolled at Cornell Ithaca campus, Weill Cornell Medicine, and Cornell Tech [see Tables B1, B2 and B3 in Survey Tables report].

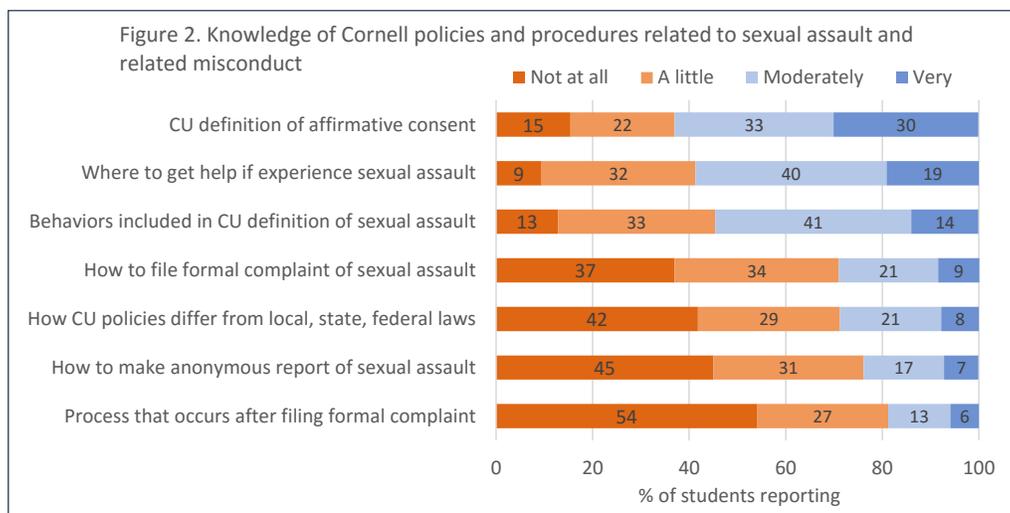
Figure 1 shows responses from Ithaca campus students. The vast majority of Ithaca students are aware of general services related to student health and safety (e.g., health services, and campus or community police). Students are less aware of resources more specifically related to issues of sexual assault and related misconduct (e.g., Victim Advocate, Title IX Coordinator).

For nearly all the services considered in the survey, undergraduate students reported greater awareness than graduate and professional students; awareness of services provided by the University Ombudsman was an exception to this pattern [see Table B1].



Similar resource lists were used in the 2015 survey. Awareness of services more specifically related to issues of sexual assault and related misconduct has increased substantively among Ithaca campus students since 2015. The largest proportional gains in student awareness are associated with services provided by the Title IX coordinator (38% aware in 2017 versus 9% in 2015), Cornell Victim Advocate (25% in 2017 versus 15% in 2015), and LGBT Resource Center (57% in 2017 versus 36% in 2015 [see Table 2.1 in 2015 AAU survey tables]).

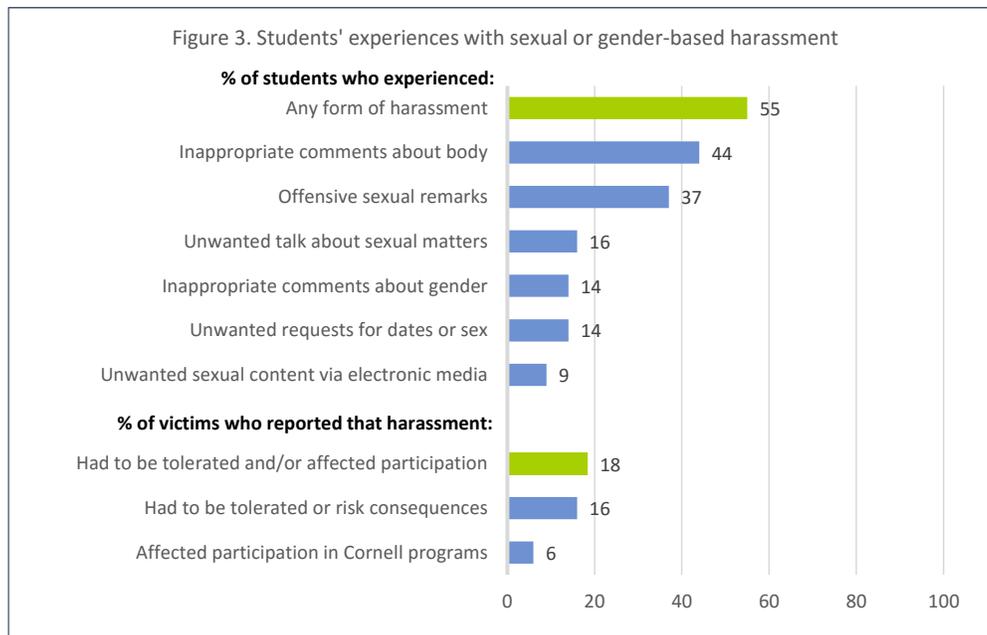
Knowledge of campus policies and procedures. Students were asked how knowledgeable they were about university definitions of sexual assault and affirmative consent, and about university definitions, policies and processes concerning sexual assault or related misconduct [see Table B2 in Survey Tables report].



Most students who responded to the survey reported being “very” or “moderately” knowledgeable about: Cornell’s definition of affirmative consent (63%); where to seek help at Cornell if they or a friend have experienced sexual assault or misconduct (59%); and the behaviors included in Cornell’s definition of sexual assault and related misconduct (55%). Much smaller percentages felt knowledgeable about how to make anonymous reports (24%) or file formal complaints of sexual assault (29%), or of the process that occurs after a student has filed a formal complaint (19%). Undergraduate students, particularly undergraduate men, reported greater knowledge of these policies and procedures than did graduate and professional students.

b. Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment

Students were asked about their experiences of sexual and gender-based harassment at Cornell. Students were first asked if they had experienced any of six different forms of harassing behavior by someone at Cornell, including one new item concerning gender-based harassment. Students who indicated they had experienced one or more forms of harassing behaviors were then asked two follow-up questions about the impact of those experiences: (1) *You felt that you had to tolerate this behavior or risk jeopardizing your academic standing, employment, or participation in Cornell programs or activities;* and (2) *This behavior was so severe or persistent that it interfered with or affected your participation in Cornell programs or activities.* Students who reported experiencing harassment were asked follow-up questions about their harassers, and whether they contacted any programs or told others about these experiences [see Tables C1 to C5 of the Survey Tables report].



More than half (55%) of Cornell respondents said they had experienced one or more specific forms of harassment. The most commonly experienced forms of harassment were: someone making inappropriate comments about their body, appearance, or sexual behavior (44%); and someone making sexual remarks or telling insulting or offensive jokes or stories (37%). These rates of harassment experiences are similar to those reported on the 2015 AAU survey (e.g., 51% of students said they had experienced harassment).

Of those students who had experienced one or more harassing behaviors in the 2017 survey, almost one in five (18%) reported that they felt the behavior had to be tolerated and/or that the harassment was so severe that it interfered with their ability to participate in Cornell programs or activities (i.e., created a hostile environment). These impacts reflect harassment experiences that potentially rise to the level of prohibited conduct.

While concerning rates of harassment were reported among all groups of students, the prevalence of harassment experiences was highest among undergraduate women (71%) and TGQN³ students (72%). Harassment prevalence was also higher among LGBAQN students, students of color, students with disabilities, and those in partnered relationships.

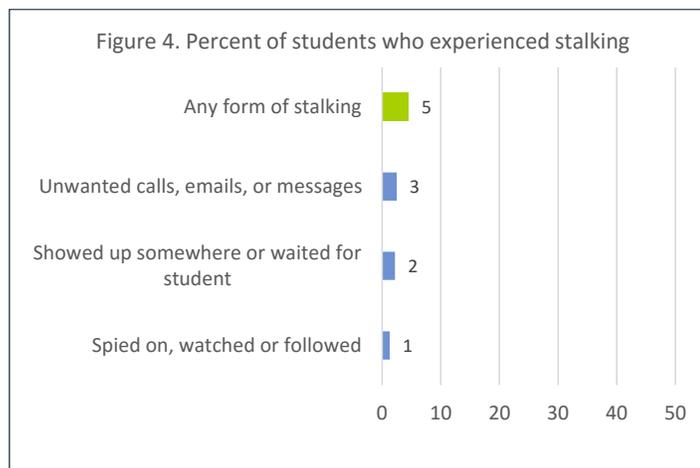
Among students who had experienced harassment, TGQN students and graduate/professional women were most likely to feel they had to tolerate the behavior or that it created a hostile environment for them (54% and 30%, respectively). Asian (U.S.) students, LGBAQN students, students with disabilities, and those in partnered relationships were also more likely to report these impacts from their harassment experiences.

³ TGQN includes the following gender identities: agender, androgyne, demigender, genderqueer or gender fluid, questioning or unsure, transgender man, transgender woman, and other gender identity.

c. Stalking

Students were asked about experiences where *“someone at Cornell behaved in a way that made you afraid for your personal safety or caused you substantial emotional distress.”* Students were shown three specific forms of stalking behaviors; to be considered as stalking, the respondent had to also indicate that the same individual had committed these behaviors, whether singly or in combination, more than once. Students who reported experiencing stalking were asked follow-up questions about their stalkers, and whether they contacted any programs or told others about these experiences [see Tables D1 to D5 of the Survey Tables report].

Five percent of respondents said they had experienced stalking since entering Cornell. Prevalence rates were highest among TGQN students (26%); women, undergraduate and graduate students alike, experienced higher rates of stalking than men. These prevalence rates are comparable to those reported on the 2015 survey. Stalking prevalence was also higher among LGBAQN students, Black (U.S.) students and those with multiple racial identities, students with disabilities, and those in partnered relationships.



d. Domestic and Dating Violence

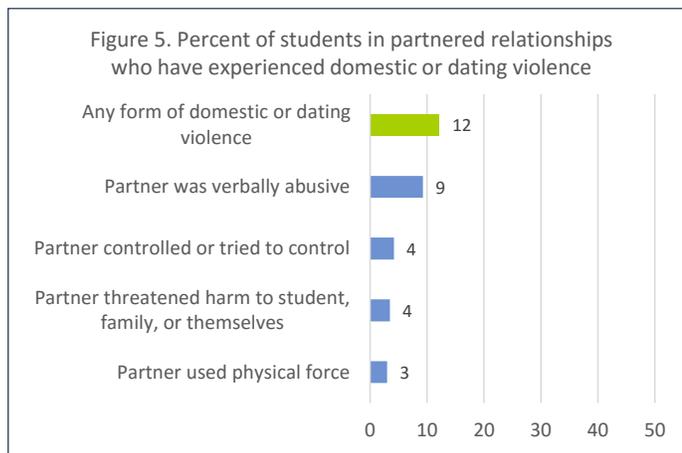
Students who indicated they had been in some type of partnered relationship⁴ while at Cornell were asked about their experiences with violence within these relationships. Students were asked if they had experienced any of four forms of relationship violence, including one new item concerning verbal abuse: *... has a partner behaved in a verbally abusive way toward you? Examples could be when someone: demeaned or humiliated you; constantly criticized you; belittled or insulted your family or friends.* Students who had experienced domestic or dating violence were asked if they had contacted any programs or talked to others about these experiences [see Tables E1 to E5 in the Survey Tables report].

As shown in Figure 5 (next page), among students who had been in a partnered relationship while at Cornell, 12% reported that a partner had committed some form of violence against them. This is a higher rate of domestic/dating violence (any form of violence) than was reported on the 2015 survey (8%). However, this increase reflects the inclusion of verbal abuse

⁴ The survey asked *“Since you have been a student at Cornell, have you been in any partnered relationships? Partnered relationships include: casual relationship or hook-up; steady or serious relationship; and marriage, civil union, domestic partnership or cohabitation.”* Students who answered “yes” to this question were shown questions about domestic and dating violence.

as a form of domestic/dating violence in the 2017 survey. Verbal abuse was the most commonly experienced form of relationship violence reported in 2017, with 9% of students, overall, saying that a partner had been verbally abusive to them.

TGQN students reported the highest rate of domestic/dating violence (35%), followed by undergraduate women (17%). Domestic and dating violence was also more prevalent among students with disabilities.



e. Nonconsensual Sexual Contact

Students were asked about their direct experiences with nonconsensual sexual contact while at Cornell. This contact was defined as including: *penetration* (vaginal, or anal penetration, or oral contact; including *attempted* acts involving physical force) and *sexual touching* (kissing; touching someone’s breast, chest, crotch, groin, or buttocks; grabbing, groping or rubbing against the other in a sexual way). The survey asked separately about incidents involving different tactics: the use of *physical force* or threats of physical force; *incapacitation* due to drugs or alcohol; the use of *coercion* (i.e., threats of non-physical harm or promises of rewards); and the *absence of affirmative consent* (i.e., contact that occurred without the student’s knowing, voluntary and ongoing agreement).

Estimating prevalence of nonconsensual sexual contact. Considerable caution must be used when comparing prevalence rates of nonconsensual sexual contact reported in 2015 and 2017. The 2017 survey largely replicated 2015 AAU survey questions concerning students’ experiences with nonconsensual sexual contact, but purposefully did not ask as many follow-up questions to discern if multiple tactics were employed within the same incident or as part of separate incidents of nonconsensual contact. Differences in prevalence estimates of nonconsensual sexual contact in 2017 and 2015 will reflect, to some degree, differences in survey design and coding.⁵ Tables F1 to F5 in the Survey Tables document show survey results for the prevalence of different forms of nonconsensual sexual contact.

Nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or incapacitation. Many discussions concerning the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses have defined such violence as

⁵ In the 2015 AAU survey, when multiple behaviors (penetration and touching) or multiple tactics (force, incapacitation, coercion, absence of affirmative consent) occurred in the same incident of nonconsensual sexual contact, a “deduplication procedure” was used to count the incidence only once, based on a hierarchy of behaviors and tactics. This deduplication cannot be replicated in the 2017 survey.

including experiences of nonconsensual penetration *and/or* sexual touching, and involving physical force *or* incapacitation.

Using that definition, 11% of Cornell students experienced nonconsensual sexual contact as a result of physical force, threats of physical force or incapacitation since attending Cornell. Six percent of students experienced nonconsensual sexual contact by force or incapacitation during the 2016-2017 academic year.

While bearing in mind the earlier cautions concerning comparisons of prevalence estimates, there appears to be little

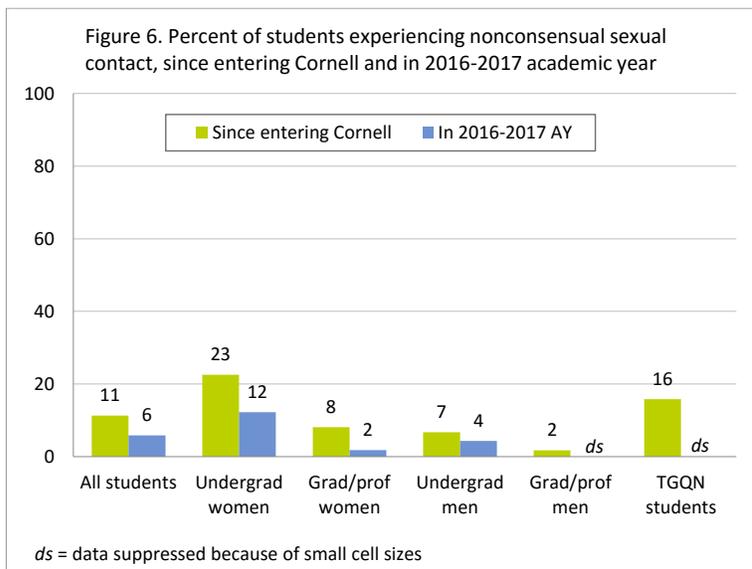
difference in the prevalence of nonconsensual sexual contact involving force or incapacitation as reported on the 2015 and 2017 surveys (e.g., overall prevalence estimate in 2015 was 11%).

Prevalence rates differ significantly by gender and enrollment status. In 2017, 23% of undergraduate women and 16% of students who identify as TGQN reported experiencing nonconsensual contact by physical force or incapacitation since entering Cornell; this compares with 2% among graduate/professional men. Likewise, undergraduate women were three times as likely as undergraduate men, and six times as likely as graduate/professional women, to have experienced nonconsensual sexual contact by force or incapacitation during the 2016-2017 academic year.

Prevalence rates of nonconsensual sexual contact involving physical force or incapacitation are also much higher among LGBAQN students, students with disabilities, and those who are or have been in partnered relationships. Prevalence rates also differ by race and citizenship; these patterns of victimization vary by gender and enrollment type.

f. Characteristics of Nonconsensual Sexual Contact Incidents

Students who had experienced nonconsensual sexual contact were asked follow-up questions concerning the characteristics of the perpetrator(s), involvement of alcohol or other drugs in the incident, location in which the incident occurred, and whether the student contacted any programs or told others about the experience. Students were instructed, *“While all such experiences are of great concern, if you have had more than one experience of nonconsensual or unwanted sexual contact since being at Cornell, please answer the following questions about the experience that has impacted or affected you the most.”* [See Tables G1 to G7 in Survey Tables]



Characteristics of perpetrators. Women who experienced nonconsensual sexual contact almost exclusively identified their perpetrator(s) as being men. Two-thirds (68%) of undergraduate men and half (50%) of graduate/professional men identified their perpetrator(s) as women. The majority of students (87%) described the offender as a Cornell student. Graduate/professional students were more likely than undergraduate students to say the offender was *not* affiliated with Cornell (e.g., 18% of graduate/professional women did so versus 6% of undergraduate women). When asked about the relationship of the offender to themselves, students most commonly reported the offender was someone known to them, either as a friend or acquaintance (38%), someone they had just met at a party or social event (32%), or a current intimate partner (24%).

Involvement of alcohol or other drugs. Alcohol was involved in the majority of incidents. Two-thirds or more of students said the perpetrator (71%) and/or victim (67%) had consumed alcohol prior to the incident. There was little involvement of other recreational drugs. Close to one-third of students (31%) said they were conscious but incapacitated by alcohol or other drugs for all or parts of the incident, while 7% said they were passed out or unconscious for all or parts of it. The involvement of alcohol and other drugs was more common among incidents experienced by undergraduate students.

Location of incident. The locations in which nonconsensual sexual contact incidents occurred differed for undergraduate and graduate/professional students. Among undergraduate women and men, the most common locations for nonconsensual sexual contact was a fraternity chapter house (24% of women and 15% of men), residence hall (20% of women and 18% of men), or off-campus house or apartment unofficially affiliated with a student club other than a Greek organization (13% of women and 21% of men). For undergraduate women, fraternity annexes and other off-campus houses, apartments or private residences were also commonly reported locations (13% each). Graduate and professional students most often identified an off-campus house, apartment or private residence (27%) as the location of their nonconsensual sexual contact incident; for graduate/professional women, a restaurant, bar or club (26%) also figured as a common location.

Contacted a program or resource or talked to others. Most students talked to someone about their experience, although more women (78% of undergraduate women and 82% of graduate/professional women) than men (66% of undergraduate men and 62% of graduate/professional men) did so. Overall, students were most likely to talk to a friend (71%), followed by a spouse or romantic partner (19%).

In contrast, just one-fifth (19%) of students contacted a Cornell- or community-based resource to talk about their nonconsensual sexual contact experience. The most commonly cited reasons for *not* contacting a program or resource were: the student “did not think it was serious enough” (56%); talking about it would not make the student feel better (32%); the student “had other things I needed to focus on” (30%); “wanted to forget it happened” (27%); and “felt I was partly responsible for what happened” (20%).

g. Bystander Intervention

Students were asked if they had witnessed various scenarios of sexual assault or misconduct on campus, how they intervened in the situation, and the reason for their intervention decision.

Scenario: Someone being sexually harassed. Twelve percent of students who responded to the survey had witnessed a student being sexually harassed, with undergraduates (16%) reporting this more often than graduate/professional students (6%). Of those students who had encountered this scenario, two-thirds (67%) intervened in some way. Among those who did not intervene, the most commonly cited reasons for non-intervention were that they “weren’t sure what to do” (60%) or “it did not seem serious” (47%).

Scenario: Someone planning to use incapacitation for nonconsensual sex. Eight percent of students said they had heard someone say they planned to get someone drunk in order to have sex with them later. Undergraduate students (11%) were much more likely to have experienced this scenario than graduate/professional students (2%). About two-fifths (43%) of bystanders intervened in the situation, most of whom (70%) took some direct action. The most common reasons given for not intervening were that the situation did not seem serious (47%), the bystander wasn’t sure what to do (40%), and the bystander didn’t think it was any of their business (34%).

Scenario: Someone attempting to take advantage of incapacitated person. Twelve percent of students said they had seen someone trying to take a clearly intoxicated person somewhere to take advantage of them sexually. Undergraduate students (18%) were much more likely to have witnessed this scenario than graduate/professional students (3%). Almost two-thirds of bystanders intervened in some way (64%), most of whom opted to disrupt the situation (57%). Among those who did not intervene, the most common reason given was that they weren’t sure what to do (54%).

III. Summary and Next Steps

Students’ awareness of services and resources, and particularly those that are related to issues of sexual assault and related misconduct (i.e., Title IX Coordinator, Cornell Victim Advocate, and LGBT Resource Center) has increased markedly compared to results obtained from the 2015 survey. The majority of students know Cornell’s definitions of affirmative consent, and sexual assault and related misconduct, and know where to get help should they experience sexual violence; they are less knowledgeable about making anonymous or formal complaints. As was also seen in 2015, undergraduate students report greater knowledge about these policies and procedures than do graduate and professional students.

Based on the survey results, it is estimated that more than half of students have experienced some form of sexual or gender-based harassment at Cornell; of those who have, close to one in five either felt these harassing behaviors had to be tolerated or that they created a

hostile environment. Five percent of students have experienced stalking since entering Cornell, and 12% of those in partnered relationships have experienced domestic or dating violence. Further, it is estimated that 11% of students have experienced nonconsensual sexual contact (defined as penetration or sexual touching, involving physical force or incapacitation) since entering Cornell; and 6% experienced this during the 2016-2017 academic year. The rates of experiencing sexual assault and related misconduct are highest among women, particularly undergraduates, and TGQN students. LGBAQN students and those with disabilities also experience higher rates of victimization. These prevalence rates and patterns are generally consistent with those observed in the 2015 survey.

The majority of nonconsensual sexual incidents have campus connections. Students who experienced some form of nonconsensual sexual contact most commonly identified the offender as another Cornell student who was known to them in some capacity. Alcohol consumption, on the part of the offender and/or the perpetrator, was involved in a majority of the incidents. Among undergraduate students, these incidents most often occurred in residence halls or housing associated with some type of student organization (i.e., fraternity or other student club). Nonconsensual sexual contact incidents experienced by graduate and professional students most often occurred in an off-campus private residence or in a restaurant or bar. The majority of students who experience some form of sexual assault or related misconduct *do not* contact a program or resource to talk about their experience. Most do talk to someone else about the experience: mostly commonly, a friend.

Finally, results from the bystander scenarios suggest that most students who have witnessed sexual harassment and nonconsensual sexual contact involving incapacitation were willing to intervene in the situation in some way; and that providing education about how to intervene might encourage more students to do so.

The current report and accompanying tables provide a broad overview of survey results. Future analyses will provide a more nuanced examination of the correlates of victimization, students' decisions not to contact programs or resources, and the context within which incidents of nonconsensual sexual contact occur.