

Sexual assault figures released

*The study surveyed
150,072 students at 27
colleges, including the
University of Oregon*

BY DIANE DIETZ
The Register-Guard

Results from a massive survey on campus rape and sexual misconduct undertaken at the University of Oregon and 26 other universities last spring confirmed that at least 1 in 5 women reported being assaulted during their university years.

That's consistent with a series of previous surveys conducted by researchers who specialize in the study of sexual assault, such as those conducted this year and last by UO professor Jennifer Freyd.

Robin Holmes, UO vice president for student life, said, "The data itself is not surprising; but it's still sobering.

"Turning the tide on this is critical," Holmes said. "Students must be aware of the services available to them, have confidence they'll be supported, and be assured that incidents will be investigated swiftly and fairly."

The 288-page survey organized by the elite Association of American Universities includes data from such private schools as Harvard and Yale, as well as public schools such as the University of Arizona and the UO.

Surveyors drew 150,072 online participants from the 27 student bodies nationally,

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including 3,059 from the UO. In most categories, the UO did not differ dramatically from the statistics recorded at other campuses.

One disparate statistic, however, suggests that UO students may have less faith in their institution than their counterparts at other universities. Fewer UO students said they believed officials would take a report of sexual assault seriously or conduct a fair investigation after such a report, the statistics show.

At the UO, 35.3 percent of female undergraduates said they would expect the UO to conduct a fair investigation, compared with 45.7 nationally.

Male undergraduates at the UO are a little more optimistic, with 44.4 percent expecting a fair investigation, compared with 53.2 percent nationally.

"We're working very diligently to make students know we do take these very seriously," Holmes said.

One surprising result nationally showed that, contrary to some criticism, university women often understate or under-report the sexual assaults against them. Most female undergraduates said after an assault they didn't call police, school officials or health providers.

Sixty percent of those who experienced nonconsensual sexual penetration by force said they did not consider the incident "serious enough" to report.

The second most common reason for not reporting is they felt embarrassed or ashamed, or felt it would be too emotionally difficult to make a report.

The wrong message

Holmes said young women who don't interpret "penetration with force" as rape likely have received cultural messages

NATIONAL, LOCAL FINDINGS

The Association of American Universities study shows that UO students experience a high rate of sexual assault, but students at other schools nationally fare similarly.

Why victims of penetration by force said they didn't report it to their school or police:

- ◆ "I did not think it was serious enough to report": 59.5 percent UO; 58.6 percent nationally
- ◆ Felt embarrassed or ashamed, or that it would be too emotionally difficult to report: 22.2 percent UO; 35.9 percent nationally
- ◆ "I feared it would not be kept confidential": 22.5 percent UO; 19.8 percent nationally
- ◆ Felt campus officials would take the report "very or extremely seriously": 53.7 percent UO; 57.1 percent nationally
- ◆ Have you witnessed a drunk person heading for a sexual encounter? 45 percent UO; 44.4 percent nationally
- ◆ Did you intervene directly? Sample too small at UO; 8.8 percent nationally

— AAU study

that are "quite negative" about the worth and respect they are due as females. They often believe themselves responsible for sexual assault, she said.

"Young people, specifically females, end up thinking it's their fault or 'this could not be rape,' when in fact it is.

"It's sobering — it really, really is — to understand the mind of a young person, the messages that they have swallowed hook, line and sinker," Holmes said. "(It) is very, very sad.

"We have to do something about that."

Freyd, a psychologist, said often it's confusing for students when the assailant is somebody they know — as is the case in the vast majority of campus assaults. Society discounts the seriousness of the act, and the victim of assault or rape does, too, she said.

"It's very hard for people to accept that they were harmed by somebody they knew and that that constitutes something severe enough to report," she said.

The university gives an educational "sexual wellness" presentation to incoming students that is titled "It Can't Be Rape." The intended message is that, often, it *is* rape.

"We want to be very explicit about what it is, because a lot of students don't know," Holmes said.

At the UO, the general prevalence of sexual assault is in line with the national rate.

Twenty-four percent of undergraduate women reported they experienced nonconsensual sexual contact through force — or in situations when they were incapacitated and unable to consent. About 10.6 percent suffered nonconsensual sexual penetration.

Nationally, the numbers are 23 percent for forceful contact and 10.8 percent for penetration.

The universities paid \$80,000 each to participate in the survey, for a total cost of \$2.5 million nationally. Freyd said the survey is frustrating for researchers in the field who want to advance the science.

"A lot of energy has gotten lost over arguing about, Is it true? Is it right? And so on," she said.

On the other hand, she said, "If this is the one (survey) that convinces people and we can move toward fixing problems and understanding them, instead of

arguing about whether we have a problem, then it would be money well spent."

A lot to digest

The report provides a mountain of data that university officials will be absorbing for months.

The questions cover sexual harassment, stalking and intimate partner violence. The numbers break down to fine detail about victims and assailants and the location and context of the incidents.

A striking finding, said David Cantor, a lead survey investigator and a University of Maryland research professor, is that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer students are at the highest risk. Disabled students also experience higher rates of assault, the data show.

"There are people out there who are going to take advantage of individuals, and as a community we just have to have a very strong voice," Holmes said. "We're not going to allow that to happen."

The Association of American Universities began "thinking about" its survey in November 2014 on the heels of the introduction of a bill called the Campus Accountability and Safety Act by U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo.

The bill, if passed, would require universities receiving public funding to administer a nationally standardized sexual assault survey, which the AAU trade group opposes.

The association began to implement its survey in April, about one month after the UO's high-profile sexual assault incident involving three basketball players and a female freshman.

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