

Nationwide Progress on Campus Climate Surveys: A Snapshot (Spring, 2016)

Because colleges and universities are all unique and rates of sexual assault vary across campuses, it is **crucial for schools to find ways to conduct climate surveys and use the results to improve** intervention, prevention, and victim services. Campus sexual assault climate surveys can be essential tools for reducing sexual assault and keeping students safe during their undergraduate and graduate schooling.

After the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault on Campus released a [toolkit](#) for developing and conducting climate surveys on campus sexual assault, there were unprecedented efforts to use surveys to measure the prevalence of sexual assault on campus, test students' attitudes and awareness about the issue, and provide invaluable information for crafting solutions. This document provides a sample of climate survey initiatives with a focus on efforts to improve climate surveys and support schools as they conduct them.

Resources for Campuses

A growing number of resources provide helpful information to schools interested in conducting climate surveys.

- The U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) recently released the [Campus Climate Survey Validation Study](#) (CCSVS), which revised and pilot tested the [Not Alone toolkit survey](#).^{1,2} BJS also provided a [revised, modular survey instrument](#) that schools can use.³ The CCSVS report:
 - Presents the results of a nine-school pilot test that was conducted to develop a campus climate survey that collects school-level data on sexual victimization of undergraduate students.
 - Describes the development of the survey instrument and procedures for data collection, nonresponse bias analysis, weighting, and validity assessments.
 - Presents estimates for each school on the prevalence and incidence of sexual assault, rape, and sexual battery during the 2014–15 academic year, as well as characteristics of the victims and incidents.
 - Describes information about perpetrators and the tactics they use.
 - Provides estimates of the prevalence of sexual assault since entering college and during the student's lifetime.
 - Examines the relationship between measures of campus climate and rates of sexual victimization.
- [ChangingOurCampus.org](#) provides a summary of [lessons learned from the CCSVS](#) on how to conduct a campus climate survey.^{4,5}
- Rutgers University and their Center on Violence Against Women and Children, as part of their research project for the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, has prepared a guide entitled "[Understanding and Responding to Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide to Climate Assessment for Colleges and Universities](#)."⁶ The guide includes a copy of their survey, tips for fostering relationships on campus related to implementing climate surveys, and plans for conducting a resource audit.
- The [Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative](#) (ARC3) has a website that includes information on their work related to helping campuses understand and conduct sexual violence climate surveys.⁷ Their survey instrument was developed by a collaboration of researchers with extensive experience in measuring sexual and domestic violence, and has been used on a number of campuses.
- The Prevention Innovations Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, as part of their university's many years of experience with campus surveys on sexual assault, developed a [guide for campus administrators, faculty, and staff](#) to aid discussions about using and communicating climate survey data.⁸

- The Association of American Universities developed and tested a [campus climate survey](#) that found results consistent with other research about the prevalence of sexual assault on campus.⁹ The survey was designed to assess the incidence, prevalence and characteristics of incidents of sexual assault and misconduct. It also examined the overall climate of campuses with respect to sexual assault.
- The Washington Post conducted a poll in partnership with the Kaiser Family Foundation. Their [findings](#) are also consistent with prior research on campus sexual assault.¹⁰ They asked [questions](#) about exposure to prevention messages, perceptions about sexual assault on campus, and behaviorally specific items about victimization experiences.¹¹
- A discussion of the potential utility of campus surveys on sexual assault appeared in the July 2014 issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*.¹²
- The [Office on Violence Against Women](#) funds colleges and universities to respond to sexual and domestic violence.¹³ Roughly one-third of the grantees are conducting climate surveys this year, either individually or in local consortium groups that pool resources. Grantees are using the notalone.gov survey or developing their own versions tailored to the needs of their individual campuses.
- The [Office on Women’s Health](#) also funds colleges and universities to address sexual assault.¹⁴ Most recently, their [College Sexual Assault Policy and Prevention Initiative](#) is awarding grants to implement policies and practices – including climate surveys – to prevent sexual assault at post-secondary schools.¹⁵

School-Specific Climate Survey Initiatives

A number of individual colleges and universities have or are conducting campus surveys related to sexual violence. Some have been doing this for years while others are adapting the Not Alone toolkit survey. Below are a few highlights, though the list is by no means exhaustive.

- The [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) conducted its own survey in the fall of 2014 and made both the survey instrument and the results publicly available.¹⁶
- The [University of Michigan](#) conducted a campus sexual assault survey in spring 2015 and released findings publicly.¹⁷
- Researchers at many other campuses continue to collect climate survey data including the [University of Oregon](#);¹⁸ the [University of New Hampshire](#);¹⁹ [Johns Hopkins University](#);²⁰ the [University of Chicago](#);²¹ the [University of California](#) system in collaboration with Rankin and Associates, Consultants;²² the [University of Kentucky](#);²³ [Indiana University](#);²⁴ the [University of Montana](#);²⁵ and [Barnard College](#).²⁶

Emerging Issues

- **Confidentiality.**

Some researchers have raised concerns that institutions may consider disclosures by students made on research surveys to fall under their Title IX reporting obligations. Collecting anonymous data via research is not typically a disclosure that requires a report. For federal guidance on this issue, the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights provides an [FAQ with information about confidentiality](#), or contact them about this or other Title IX questions at: ocr@ed.gov or 800-421-3481.²⁷

In addition, researchers at Prevention Innovations Research Center at the University of New Hampshire have prepared a white paper, “[Institutional Title IX Requirements for Researchers Conducting Human Subjects Research on Sexual Violence and other Forms of Interpersonal Violence](#),” which may be of interest.²⁸ The paper outlines a rationale to exempt researchers from Title IX reporting requirements.

Protecting confidentiality is also important in securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for schools to conduct a campus climate survey. The Prevention Innovations [white paper](#) also provides tips for schools to navigate the IRB process.²⁹

The [CCSVS](#) found that confidentiality is an important consideration when offering incentives to increase response rates to climate surveys.³⁰ Designing a web-based system that can securely link individual incentive awards to survey respondents without compromising participant anonymity is challenging and must be approached carefully. Such a confidential or anonymous system also helps students feel more comfortable disclosing sensitive information.

- **Survivor concerns about research questions.**

Recent news articles have highlighted concerns by some students about being asked questions about sexual assault and other victimization experiences.³¹ However, decades of research have documented why it is important to ask behaviorally specific questions about victimization in order to obtain more accurate estimates of the problem.³²

Relatively few (5%-10%) survey participants report any emotional distress or negative emotions, and those that do report emotional distress note that these feelings are transitory. Negative emotions rarely show up in follow-up surveys. This holds true with both high school and college samples, with men and women, and with participants who are and are not victims. The findings are consistent with broader reviews about the impact of asking questions about trauma.³³ Thus, the overall evidence from the research is clear that asking students, even those with a victimization history, questions about sexual assault presents very minimal risk and is often perceived as beneficial.

As noted in the Not Alone toolkit, there are many important safeguards for participants that can help minimize even minimal risk of distress, including having a clear informed consent process for the research that provides participants with information about the nature of what they will be asked.³⁴ Climate surveys should also provide participants with links to local and national support services.

- **Need for goal clarity.**

Campus surveys related to sexual assault, dating and domestic violence and stalking can have many purposes, with different approaches necessary depending on the ultimate goal. Should they be used as needs assessments for schools to better understand the experiences of students and tailor response and prevention efforts accordingly? Or to assess the impact of efforts schools are making? As enforcement tools to hold schools accountable? To compare institutions? To make regional or national estimates?

The social science methods on which climate surveys are based have both strengths and limitations that require different approaches depending on the goal. These approaches may also differ based on the type of school – community college, large public university, small private college, etc. As schools move forward with climate surveys focused on sexual violence it is important to discuss and reach agreement on what purpose they will serve.

Ready to Take the Next Step?

- Fortunately, **many climate survey instruments are free and openly available for schools to use.** The CCSVS report and other resources described in this document provide well-studied tools and information for schools to use in conducting climate surveys.
- Conducting a quality, reliable campus climate survey and **obtaining trustworthy data is complex – but attainable.** It requires time and resources, a point that was clearly made in the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault [documents](#) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics [CCSVS report](#).^{35,36} Be prepared to consult with researchers, partner with other schools, and reach out to experts.
- **Federal agencies are exploring ways to provide more technical assistance** to schools that want to implement campus climate surveys and the Department of Justice plans to offer webinars on the CCSVS report. Visit the [Office on Violence Against Women's website](#) for updates and funding opportunities.³⁷

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- ¹ www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ccsvsfr.pdf
- ² www.notalone.gov/assets/ovw-climate-survey.pdf
- ³ www.notalone.gov/assets/RevisedInstrumentModules_1_21_16_cleanCombined_psg.pdf
- ⁴ changingourcampus.org
- ⁵ changingourcampus.org/application/files/9014/5392/6589/Lessons_from_CCSVS_FINAL_4.pdf
- ⁶ socialwork.rutgers.edu/centersandprograms/vawc/researchevaluation/CampusClimateProject.aspx
- ⁷ campusclimate.gsu.edu
- ⁸ cola.unh.edu/sites/cola.unh.edu/files/departments/Prevention%20Innovations/Climate_Survey_Guideance_FINAL_10_24_14_.pdf
- ⁹ www.aau.edu/Climate-Survey.aspx?id=16525
- ¹⁰ www.washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2015/06/12/1-in-5-women-say-they-were-violated
- ¹¹ apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/national/washington-post-kaiser-family-foundation-survey-of-college-students-on-sexual-assault/1726
- ¹² Cantalupo, N.C. (2014). Institution-Specific Victimization Surveys Addressing Legal and Practical Disincentives to Gender-Based Violence Reporting on College Campuses. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, 15, 227-241.
- ¹³ www.justice.gov/ovw
- ¹⁴ womenshealth.gov/about-us
- ¹⁵ womenshealth.gov/about-us/funding-opportunities/index.html
- ¹⁶ web.mit.edu/surveys/casatips
- ¹⁷ publicaffairs.vpcomm.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2015/04/Complete-survey-results.pdf
- ¹⁸ dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/campus
- ¹⁹ cola.unh.edu/justiceworks/project-unwanted-sexual-experiences
- ²⁰ sexualassault.jhu.edu/_template_assets/documents/Its%20On%20Us%20Sexual%20Violence%20Climate%20Survey.pdf
- ²¹ csl.uchicago.edu/get-involved/climate-survey-project/spring-2015-climate-survey-materials
- ²² campusclimate.ucop.edu/results/index.html
- ²³ www.uky.edu/CATSseesafety/
- ²⁴ news.indiana.edu/releases/iub/iu-in-the-news/dnb-11-10-2014.shtml
- ²⁵ www.umd.edu/safe-campus-survey
- ²⁶ barnard.edu/sites/default/files/campus_climate_survey_report_final.pdf
- ²⁷ www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/qa-201404-title-ix.pdf
- ²⁸ cola.unh.edu/sites/cola.unh.edu/files/departments/Prevention%20Innovations%20Research%20Center/pdf/Prevention_Innovations_Research_Center_Title_IX_Human_Subject_Research_White_Paper_Nov_5_2015docx.pdf
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ccsvsfr.pdf
- ³¹ See www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/05/27/language-sexual-assault-surveys-criticized-students-triggering
- ³² Koss, M.P., Abbey, A., Campbell, R., Cook, S., Norris, J., Testa, C., Ullman, S., West, C., & White, J. (2007). Revising the SES: A collaborative process to improve assessment of sexual aggression and victimization. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31, 357-370.
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- ³⁵ www.notalone.gov/assets/ovw-climate-survey.pdf
- ³⁶ www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ccsvsfr.pdf
- ³⁷ www.justice.gov/ovw