

Alternatives to Climate Surveys for Understanding Sexual Misconduct on Your Campus

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Why Use Alternative Sources of Data to Study Sexual Misconduct

A well-executed campus climate survey can produce invaluable quantitative data on the prevalence of sexual misconduct among students and on students' perceptions of the campus climate and awareness of survivor services. Self-reported information from a confidential, representative survey is widely recognized as the best source of data on student victimization rates, as the vast majority of sexual assault incidents are not formally reported. However, other data sources can also be useful, particularly for schools that lack the capacity to conduct a climate survey, are early in the planning stages for a climate survey, or have conducted a climate survey but are unsure of how to use the results.

Alternative data sources can serve as a preliminary needs assessment to inform the development of a climate survey. These data sources can also help schools interpret and act upon the results of a climate survey or understand complex issues that are difficult to capture in a survey. This factsheet describes data collection methods that your institution may be able to use either as a starting point or as a supplement to a quantitative climate survey.

In-Depth Individual Interviews

In-depth interviews are well-suited to gathering qualitative information about complex issues or processes, such as survivors' experiences of sexual violence. Interviews with students (e.g., survivors, nonvictims, student leaders, resident advisors), service providers, and campus administrators capture various perspectives in an in-depth manner. Interview topics—which may include survivors' decision-making process regarding disclosure, disclosure experiences, and perceptions of needed services and supports—should be customized for each stakeholder group. To ensure high-quality data, interviews should be led by someone trained in qualitative interviewing techniques (e.g., effective probes, redirecting the respondent). Considering the sensitivity of the topics, interviewers should be trained to recognize and respond to respondents' distress and to follow human subjects protection protocols.

Focus Groups

The use of focus groups, which consist of facilitated group discussion, is a qualitative method that allows researchers to gather data on a more diverse range of students' attitudes and knowledge about campus sexual violence. Focus groups are well-suited to capturing the perspectives of

Benefits of a Mixed-Method Approach

A mixed-method approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of sexual misconduct on campus and guide prevention efforts, policy changes, and improvements to institutional responses.

The [Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation \(SHIFT\)](#), underway at Columbia University and Barnard College, is an example of a mixed-method approach to studying sexual violence. To examine the individual, interpersonal, and structural factors that shape sexual health and violence, SHIFT researchers complemented a quantitative survey with individual interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.

vulnerable or underrepresented student subgroups (e.g., LGBTQ students, marginalized racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, nonresidential students) in a group setting limited to those with shared experiences. Appropriate topics include perceptions of campus climate, trainings and awareness-raising efforts, gaps in outreach to particular groups of students, and service provision on campus. As with individual interviews, an experienced facilitator should conduct the focus groups and be prepared to guide the conversation (e.g., avoiding discussion of personal victimization experiences), solicit responses from all participants, and follow human subjects protection protocols.

Resource Audits

A resource audit entails compiling a comprehensive list of existing campus resources for responding to and preventing sexual violence by conducting online searches and interviewing stakeholders (e.g., staff involved in service provision and students who use those services). Many schools already conduct resource audits to identify gaps in their infrastructure for preventing and responding to sexual violence. For schools that are planning a climate survey, resource audits can help with constructing questions about students' knowledge and use of specific campus resources. This process can also be used to identify existing data collected by service providers on campus, such as aggregated records on service utilization (e.g., the number and characteristics of students served), feedback collected from students who have used a given resource, or student evaluations of particular training programs. If available, these data sources could be obtained and analyzed as part of a school's efforts to strengthen prevention programming and enhance survivor services.

Nontraditional Data Sources

For some schools, useful information on campus sexual misconduct can be gleaned from nontraditional data sources. Some strategies implemented to raise students' awareness of sexual misconduct can also generate useful data. For example, some campuses have constructed participatory installations (such as "hot spot" maps that illustrate the location of sexual assault incidents in an anonymous manner); although these are primarily meant to engage passersby, they can also be a source of new information for schools regarding high-risk settings in need of targeted intervention. Others have hosted listening sessions or sponsored digital storytelling projects that allow survivors to anonymously share their stories. These sources provide schools with information that is useful for understanding students' decisions about whether to report incidents to campus police and their experiences coping with such incidents, which can illuminate additional supports that survivors may need.

Finally, technologies that give students a means to anonymously report their experiences with sexual violence or ask questions to campus authorities can also be valuable sources of data to understand the magnitude and nature of sexual violence at a school. For example, for participating campuses, [Callisto's](#) reporting system produces aggregate reports (based on data entered by students) that details trends in victimization. The [Reach Out](#) app offers a messaging service through which students can send questions anonymously to their campus police.

Conclusion

Campus climate surveys are a cornerstone of assessing sexual misconduct, but these are not the only data collection method your institution can employ. Qualitative methods can shed light on survivors' lived experiences or highlight the perspectives of underrepresented students and other key stakeholders. Nontraditional data sources can be useful to glean additional contextual information in a non-research setting. By triangulating information from multiple data sources through a mixed-method approach, your institution can develop a more nuanced understanding of sexual misconduct on campus.

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