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Investigating Students' Experiences with Sexual Victimization and Their Perceptions of the Overall Campus Climate at a Rural Institution

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Abstract. This study examined sexual assault of both females and males attending a mid-sized rural southern college campus with fewer than 12,000 students. The online survey ($N = 659$) included questions to measure attempted and/or completed rape, sexual coercion, and sexual contact. We investigated whether perceptions of the overall campus climate differed between student survivors and student non-victims. Findings indicated that sexual victimization occurred at this university, and that this social problem is not limited to large urban schools.

Keywords: rape, sexual coercion, sexual contact

The public has viewed college campuses as safe havens for students (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2010); however, sexual assaults on college campuses have grown into an area of national concern as the news media has revealed cases that indicate the campus environment is not as safe as once thought (Danis, 2006; Hunter, 2005; Wilcox, Jordan, & Prichard, 2007). Findings presented by the Bureau of Justice Statistics support the conclusion that women ages 18-24 have higher rates of sexual victimization than any other age group and that the victimization often went unreported to police (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). The White House (2014) has called directly with the "It's on Us" campaign for universities to step-up their efforts to combat this problem through prevention and intervention programs.

Although there has been much attention paid to sexual assault on college campuses in academic research generally, research that specifically focuses on sexual assault within rural universities remains lacking (Vanderwoerd, 2009). The lack of information is not surprising given that sexual violence in rural areas also remains understudied in general (Annan, 2006) despite research that has found that survivors of interpersonal crime often face unique barriers in a rural setting (Logan, Evans, Stevenson, & Jordan, 2005; Logan, Walker, Ratliff, & Leukefeld, 2003). Thus, this study sought to enhance the general literature on sexual assault within a university community as well as specifically contribute to the sparse research on the prevalence of sexual assault within a *rural* institution. For rural, we are using the U.S. Census Bureau definition (2016) of the term that includes an area which includes all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area comprised of 50,000 or more people. Aside from these objectives, this study also investigated whether students not sexually victimized differed in their opinions regarding the overall campus climate from students who *had* experienced a sexual victimization. In order to establish the need for this study, the following literature review provides a brief overview of the prevalence of sexual assault in higher education, including various manifestations of violence, and concludes by reviewing information about rural institutions specifically.

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Literature Review

The Prevalence of Sexual Assault on College Campuses

Kirkpatrick and Kanin (1957) were the first to investigate the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses back in the 1950's. In that study, Kirkpatrick and Kanin administered a self-report survey to 291 female college students about their experiences with sexually aggressive behaviors. Their results called early attention to the problem as they found that more than half (55.7%) surveyed experienced offensive attempts at sexual or erotic intimacy and 21% had an occurrence of attempted/forced sexual intercourse. They also found that 6% of the women experienced aggressive forceful attempts in which the perpetrator utilized physical pain or threats in attempts to gain compliance.

Despite the results from this new line of research, it was not until decades later that college sexual assault research increased. One pivotal step forward in this movement was Koss and Oros' (1982) development of the first modern measure of sexual assault on college campuses [i.e., the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES)], which measured rape as well as different types of sexual victimization. Utilizing a revised SES, Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) conducted the first national study of college student sexual victimization. The scholars were not only interested in rape, but also included questions that measured other forms of unwanted sexual contact and sexual coercion (Koss et al., 1987). Ultimately, they found that 53.7% of college women had experienced some form of sexual coercion in their lifetime since the age of 14. In addition, 46.3% reported a sexual victimization that occurred within the last year. Finally, 6.5% of women reported experiencing a completed rape and 10.1% an attempted rape during the previous year (Koss et al., 1987).

Since the introduction of the SES, others have utilized modified versions to continue investigating sexual assault on college campuses with most studies returning prevalence rates between 10% to approximately 30%. For example, in a prospective study conducted by Gidycz and Hanson (1995), 10% of women at a large Midwestern university experienced rape or an attempted rape at the six-month follow-up. In another study, Schwartz and Pitts (1995) found that 19.3% of women surveyed experienced a rape in their lifetime with 10.5% reporting a rape after starting their studies at the university. Similarly, 28.1% of women surveyed in a study conducted by Hickman and Muehlenhard (1997) reported a rape occurring in their lifetime. Finally, a group of scholars surveyed students at two large universities as part of a prevention program evaluation and found that 30% of women in the control group reported victimization in contrast to 12% in the intervention group (Marx, Calhoun, Wilson, & Meyerson, 2001). Recent research continues to mirror these results and indicate the prevalence of the problem. For instance, in a study conducted at Miami University, scholars found that 21.9% of surveyed women experienced a rape since the age of 18 (Crawford, Wright, & Birchmeier, 2008).

In one of the most comprehensive studies on unwanted sexual experiences, Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (1999) expanded on the research of Koss and others in their investigation entitled "The National College Women's Sexual Victimization Study" (NCWSV) study. The study was particularly important for the scholars in the field because Fisher and her colleagues addressed several methodological challenges identified in previous investigations employing the SES. Indeed, one significant change was that the NCWSV incorporated follow-up questions when

soliciting information from respondents. Thus, after participants answered each general question regarding an unwanted sexual experience, they were prompted to provide additional detail regarding each incident such as who the perpetrator was, the type of contact that occurred, and if the incident was attempted or completed. This additional detail allowed scholars to classify each incident based on the details and the legal definition of a completed rape. Ultimately, their study netted a total sample of 4,446 college women who provided information regarding unwanted sexual experiences that occurred in the fall of 1996. From this sample, Fisher and colleagues found that approximately one in four respondents had experienced an event that met the legal definition of rape and 15.5% of respondents had experienced another sexual victimization other than rape (Fisher et al., 1999).

Several other large-scale studies have investigated the prevalence of sexual violence within secondary education [i.e., National Crime and Victimization Survey (NCVS), the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), and the Campus Sexual Assault Study (CSA)]. Due to variations in methodology, each study found slightly different prevalence results. Indeed, the NCVS (Sinozich & Langton, 2014) victimization rate from 2007– 2013 was 4.7 per 1,000 females who were 18 to 24. Similarly, the NISVS reported that 2% of all women experienced unwanted sexual contact within the past 12 months (Black et al., 2011). Finally, the CSA found that 14% of sampled females, who were between 18 to 25 years old, had experienced a completed sexual assault since they began college (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009).

The Context of Sexual Assault

Years of research indicates that sexual assault on college campuses involves many similar circumstances despite the location of the institution (i.e., rural vs. suburban vs. urban). For instance, survivors of sexual assault on college campuses usually know their assailants (Fisher et al., 1999; Koss et al., 1987; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Moreover, survivors are not likely to report incidents to the police (Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007; Koss et al., 1987; Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Sloan, Fisher & Cullen, 1997) but rather are more likely to confide in a friend (Fisher et al., 2003). One factor contributing to the underreporting is that many victimized college women may not identify their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual victimizations or rape (Bondurant, 2001; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003; Koss, 1988). Unfortunately, another finding found across several studies on college campuses is that individuals experience reoccurring victimizations (Daigle, Fisher, & Cullen, 2008; Fisher et al., 2010).

Drugs and alcohol are notorious for their role as date rape drugs and research continues to highlight their utilization in victimizations. Indeed, several studies support the relationship between victim alcohol consumption (Combs-Lane & Smith, 2002; Schwartz & Pitts, 1995; Siegel & Williams, 2003; Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999) as well as drug use (Cass, 2007; Fisher & Wilkes, 2003; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2002) and sexual victimization. This relationship exists not only in the experiencing of sexual violence, but also in the perpetration of abuse as perpetrators utilize drugs to incapacitate survivors and commit sexual acts while the victim is unconscious and/or without their consent (Krebs et al., 2009; Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, & Kilpatrick, 2010).

Sexual assaults affect the entire lives of survivors. Specifically, for college students who experience sexual assault, it can affect their perceptions of safety on campus as well as their feeling

of safety at home, in public, or in their personal relationships (Culbertson, Vik, & Kooiman, 2001). Research indicates survivors of sexual assault are at an increased risk of withdrawing from school (Harned, 2001). Additionally, experiencing sexual violence impacts survivors' mental health as they are more likely to experience posttraumatic stress disorder (Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2011; Harned, 2001; Zinzow et al., 2010) as well as suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide (Brener, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999; Bryan, McNaugton-Cassill, Osman, & Hernandez, 2013; Stephenson, Pena-Schaff, & Quirk, 2006). The experience may also lead survivors to self-medicate through dangerous alcohol consumption (Brener et al., 1999; Littleton, Grills-Taquechel, Buck, Rosman, & Dodd, 2013), drug use (Brener et al., 1999) or the nonmedical use of prescription drugs (McCauley et al., 2011) to help them cope.

Interpersonal Crime within Rural Communities and Universities

Studies indicate that sexual assault is a problem on college campuses regardless of location, but most research continues to focus on urban populations (Annan, 2006) which may be a reflection of the belief that rural campuses are impervious to sexual assault (Frank, 2003) or due to methodological constraints in researching rural populations (e.g., a greater dispersion of subjects, limited funding). This misconception may stem from official statistics (FBI, 2015) that shows higher crime rates for urban areas compared to rural locations. Unfortunately, the idea of rural locations being *safer* is not upheld in other research that indicates there is more crime in these areas than what is reported through law enforcement sources (Barnett & Mencken, 2002; Donnermeyer, Jobes, & Barclay, 2006; Jobes, Barclay, Weinand, & Donnermeyer, 2004; Lee, Maume, & Ousey, 2003; Osgood & Chambers 2000, 2003; Spano & Nagy, 2005).

Evidence suggests attending a rural college may increase an individual's risk for sexual assault (Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004) as rates of sexual assault in rural areas are higher than those found in cities (DeKeseredy & Rennison 2013; Rennison, DeKeseredy, & Dragiewicz, 2012). A higher percentage of rural women also experience intimate partner violence (IPV) than urban and suburban women (Rennison, DeKeseredy, & Dragiewicz, 2013) and rural women report significantly higher lifetime IPV rates over a lifetime (Breiding, Ziembroski, & Black, 2009). In addition, women in rural areas are more likely to experience sexual assault by intimate partners than those in urban communities (Rennison et al., 2012).

In terms of college victimization specifically within a rural environment, the literature is very limited. However, one noteworthy study that included surveyed college-aged adolescents in rural Maryland found approximately 10% of the sample experienced forced sexual intercourse and 30% experienced forced touching and kissing (Gray, Lesser, Rebach, Hooks, & Bounds, 1988). Similar to information noted earlier, approximately 90% of the respondents knew the perpetrator and the vast majority did not report the abuse to police (Gray et al., 1988). Recent studies continue to document the size and scope of the problem. For example, Vanderwoerd (2009) randomly surveyed students at three rural college campuses about sexual violence in the fall of 2003 and the spring of 2006. Vanderwoerd found that 30.6% of all respondents' experienced sexual coercion with 43.6% of women and 13.8% of men reporting experiencing sexual victimization. These findings further underscore the point that rural campuses are not immune from sexual assault and provide no more safety than urban campuses.

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Edwards (2014) found that interpersonal violence, generally, was worse in rural locations compared to urban areas due to various factors that affect these communities such as the lack of employment opportunities, greater substance use, and largely held beliefs emphasizing self-sufficiency over government intervention. Other studies focused on rural survivors of crime have also noted the importance of religion within these environments and the frequency by which survivors often turn to these leaders for aid during the aftermath of violence (Fortune, 2001). Yet, research also indicates that the response from religious leaders to survivors of violence varies and can either aggravate (e.g., through abandoning, blaming, shaming survivors) or mitigate (e.g., through supporting survivors) the impact of victimization which has clear implications for help-seeking activities (Fortune, 2001). Even in cases where survivors do seek help following violence, despite these sociocultural factors, rural victims often face additional barriers compared to those in other locations.

Rural survivors typically encounter four barriers to obtaining help in dealing with the aftermath of violence, and these challenges stem from availability, accessibility, affordability, and acceptability (Logan et al., 2005). As Logan and colleagues note, victim service organizations (VSO) may simply be limited or unavailable to survivors given that individuals may reside in remote areas with few means to travel to these organizations. Even in cases where VSO were available and accessible, studies on rural survivors have found that the financial costs associated with these help-seeking activities acted as a deterrent (Logan et al., 2005). Finally, in contrast to larger urban environments, rural survivors expressed a palpable fear of the telling and retelling of their stories to various people within the community (Logan et al., 2005). This fear was not isolated to disclosing to family members, but also applied to talking with medical personnel, law enforcement, and legal personnel (Clevenger, 2015; Goodman & Smyth, 2011; Logan et al., 2005).

Indeed, one fear expressed by rural survivors through previous research is that the close-knit environment that characterizes many rural locations may lead to *politicking* in the courtroom to the benefit of well-connected perpetrators (Logan et al., 2005). In other words, rural survivors expressed hesitation and resistance in pursuing any formal help simply because they felt the perpetrator, through community connections, would not be held accountable (Logan et al., 2005). Aside from these barriers, evidence suggests the pressures and stresses associated with caring for survivors takes a toll on social workers themselves. For example, Choi (2011) found that secondary traumatic stress was a reality faced by social workers assisting survivors of family violence that could be mitigated through the fostering of a supportive work environment. Considering that research continues to indicate that interpersonal crime is not just a *big city* problem and – perhaps more alarmingly – that it occurs at a greater frequency in rural locations, this line of study is especially timely given the increased attention on sexual assault within institutions of higher education. By learning about these incidents, and the frequency by which these are happening, this study can assist in the raising of awareness as well as informing prevention and intervention programs aimed at combatting the problem.

Gaps Remaining and Research Questions

Recent news stories continue to highlight the problem of sexual assault within higher education institutions. Although there has been substantial research into this problem, dating as far back as the 1950s (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957), relatively few studies have focused solely on rural universities. Recognizing this gap, this study entailed surveying approximately 11,000

undergraduate students at a rural institution located in the South. The primary objective of the study was to determine the prevalence of sexual assault within this population and to identify factors that affected the risk of experiencing victimization. We expected to find that the prevalence and dynamics of sexual assault within this rural institution would mirror findings uncovered through research conducted at urban schools. An additional objective of this study was to determine whether there was a difference in how students perceived the overall campus climate depending on if they had experienced a sexual victimization or not as other studies have found (e.g., Culbertson et al., 2001). We expected to find that survivors of sexual assault would feel less safe at the university and indicate a greater desire for improvement in the university's response to abuse. These questions are important to address as some have suggested rural institutions are viewed as impervious to sexual victimization (Frank, 2003), which can be detrimental to survivors of assault in terms of available resources and willingness to come forward. These questions are also important to address, because they can inform ongoing prevention and intervention efforts.

Method

Population and Survey Instrument

This study took place at a mid-size rural institution located in the South. Before launching the study, we secured IRB approval through an expedited review at the primary author's institution. At the time of the survey's deployment, the university comprised of a total student body of 11,118 students (undergraduate and graduate). In both the undergraduate and graduate student populations, males and females were almost equally represented with men slightly outnumbering women at the undergraduate level and vice-versa at the graduate level. In terms of race/ethnicity, most students identified as Caucasian (81.5%), but historically underrepresented groups comprised nearly 19% of the student body.

The survey instrument utilized in this study included questions from the tool used by Fisher et al. (1999). The questions were modified to be gender-neutral in order to be applicable to both females and males. We selected this tool because of the expansive understanding of sexual victimization (e.g., rape, sexual assault, sexual coercion) and the series of follow-up questions regarding each incident allowed us to gather contextual information about these assaults. We also incorporated questions recommended by the White House (2014) to assess the overall campus climate.

In order to maximize our reach to students, this study began by filing a Freedom of Information Act request for any student email not blocked by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. The aforementioned action resulted in the receipt of 11,000 student emails, which was nearly the entire student population at the institution. After receiving these emails, the survey launched September 8, 2014, to everyone on the email distribution list and remained open until September 26, 2014. In order to provide students privacy and anonymity, we utilized the online survey platform Qualtrics to conduct the study and disabled all forms of identification tracking (e.g., an anonymous email link, IP address tracking was disabled). We also utilized Qualtrics because it enabled us to setup contingency questions that would only appear if certain answers were marked. Thus, the survey could take respondents as little as five minutes (with no contingencies) to complete or as long as 30 minutes (all contingencies). After one general reminder

email, the survey closed with 659 responses (6% response rate), which was lower than expected but likely related to the survey length.

Analytical Strategy

In order to assess the prevalence of sexual victimization at the institution, we first organized the data into logical groupings based on the type of incident that occurred (as done by Fisher and colleagues in their 1999 study), which included (a) attempted/completed rapes, (b) attempted/completed sexual coercion, and (c) attempted/completed sexual contact. The reference period utilized in this study was slightly more than one calendar year (August 2013-September 2014).

Table 1
Rape and Sexual Assaults Reported by Respondents

Variables	%	n	N
Completed Rape[+]	7.0	35	498
Forced Sexual Intercourse	6.6	35	529
Forced Oral Sex	4.0	21	520
Forced Anal Sex	2.3	12	511
Forced Penetration by an Object	1.7	9	515
Attempted Rape	12.0	61	509
Attempted and/or Completed Sexual Coercion[+]	18.7	87	466
Threats of Non-Physical Punishment	4.1	20	486
Making Promises of Rewards	4.4	21	481
Overwhelming with Continual Pestering	16.8	80	476
Attempted and/or Completed Sexual Contact[+]	23.8	116	487
Completed Unwanted Sexual Touching	21.8	109	500
Attempted Unwanted Sexual Touching	11.0	54	490

Note: Fluctuation in *N* is due to missing data.
[+]Aggregated measure

After organizing these data, we conducted descriptive analyses to determine the prevalence of each type of assault. We then conducted a series of bivariate tests to identify risk factors that affected

the likelihood of experiencing a sexual assault overall. Finally, in order to determine whether victimized students had a different perception of the overall campus climate compared to non-victimized students, we conducted a series of *t*-tests.

Results

Sexual Abuse Measures

Attempted and/or completed rape. Questions included in the attempted and/or completed rape group asked respondents, *since school began in the Fall of 2013, has anyone made you have (type of rape) by using force or threatening to harm you or someone close to you?*" The types of rape included *forced sexual intercourse*, *forced oral sex*, *forced anal sex*, and *forced penetration by an object.* Additionally, respondents were asked whether any of the types of assaults were *attempted, but not succeeded.* In order to investigate whether respondents had experienced multiple forms of rape, we added these measures together. Ultimately, results indicated that 93% of respondents did not experience a rape during the reference period, 3.6% experienced one form of rape, 2% experienced two forms of rape, and less than one percent (0.8%) experienced three and four forms of rape (see Table 1).

Attempted and/or completed sexual coercion. Questions included in the *attempted and/or completed sexual coercion* group asked respondents, *since school began in the Fall of 2013, has anyone made or tried to make you have sexual intercourse or sexual contact when you did not want to by (type of sexual coercion)?*" The types of sexual coercion included *making threats of non-physical punishment*" (e.g., retaliation at work by supervisor) and *making promises of rewards* (e.g., reward at work by supervisor). Additionally, respondents were asked whether *since school began in the Fall of 2013, has anyone made or tried to make you have sexual intercourse or sexual contact when you did not want to by simply overwhelming you with continual pestering and verbal pressure?* After aggregating these various measures we found slightly more than 81% of the respondents did not experience sexual coercion during the reference period, almost 14% experienced one form, slightly more than 3% experienced two forms, and more than one percent (1.5%) experienced all three forms of sexual coercion (see Table 1).

Attempted and/or completed sexual contact. Questions included in the *attempted and/or completed sexual contact* group asked respondents whether they "*experienced any unwanted or uninvited touching of a sexual nature since school began in the Fall of 2013? This includes forced grabbing and fondling, kissing, or touching of private parts*" (yes = 21.8%). Additionally, respondents were asked, "*since school began in the Fall of 2013, has anyone attempted or threatened but not succeeded in engaging you in unwanted or uninvited touching of a sexual nature?*" (yes = 11.0%). After adding these measures together, results indicated that a little more than 75% of respondents did not experience an unwanted sexual contact, almost 16% experienced one form of unwanted sexual contact and slightly more than 8% experienced both forms of unwanted sexual contact (see Table 1).

Table 2
Respondent Demographic and Background Characteristics

Variables	%	*n*	*N*
Gender			**389**
Female	60.2	234	
Male	39.3	153	
Transgender	0.5	2	
Race			**387**
African-American	2.1	8	
Asian, Pacific Islander	2.3	9	
Caucasian	91.7	355	
Native American	0.5	2	
Mixed Race	1.3	5	
Other (Not Identified on Survey)	2.1	8	
Sexual Orientation			**387**
Bisexual	4.7	18	
Heterosexual	92.0	356	
Homosexual, Lesbian, or Gay	2.3	9	
Other (Not Identified on Survey)	1.0	4	
Alcohol Use			**390**
Never	34.6	135	
Once Since School Began	6.4	25	
Less Than Once a Month	14.9	58	
Once a Month	15.6	61	
More Than Twice a Week	6.2	24	
Once or Twice a Week	19.2	75	
Daily or Almost Daily	3.1	12	
Marijuana Use			**385**
Never	83.1	320	
Once Since School Began	6.0	23	
Less Than Once a Month	2.6	10	
Once a Month	2.3	9	
More Than Twice a Week	0.3	1	
Once or Twice a Week	2.9	11	
Daily or Almost Daily	2.9	11	

Sexual victimization overall across all measures. After all the relevant variables were organized, we added these various groups together to determine the overall incident count during the reference period. Results indicated that slightly more than 71% of respondents did not experience any form of sexual abuse during the reference period, 9.6% experienced one form, 7.1% experienced two forms, 5.3% experienced three forms, 3.7% experienced four forms, 1.4% experienced five forms, and slightly less than one percent experienced more than five forms of sexual abuse.

Respondent Demographic and Background Characteristics

See Table 2 for respondent demographics including gender, race, sexual orientation, alcohol use, and marijuana use. This analysis included a measure that accounted for respondents' alcohol and marijuana use given previous research has supported a relationship between alcohol consumption (Combs-Lane & Smith, 2002; Schwartz & Pitts, 1995; Siegel & Williams, 2003; Ullman et al., 1999) as well as drug use (Cass, 2007; Fisher & Wilkes, 2003; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2002) and experiencing sexual victimization. For group comparisons, race was recoded into *Caucasian* and *non-Caucasian*; sexual orientation into *heterosexual* and *non-heterosexual*; alcohol use and marijuana use were recoded into *never*, *once a month or less*, and *at least weekly*.

Campus Climate

Previous research indicated survivors of sexual victimization differ in their perception of safety at home, in public, and in their personal relationships (Culbertson et al., 2001) from non-survivors. In order to revisit this finding, the 14-item campus climate questionnaire (White House, 2014) captured respondents' level of agreement according to a Likert scale (1-*strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree*) (see Table 4).

Bivariate Analyses

In order to investigate the relationship between the respondents' backgrounds and experiencing a sexual victimization, we conducted several chi-square analyses using the raw frequencies and nearly all reached statistical significance. Not surprisingly, cross tabulations indicate a greater proportion of females were sexually victimized compared to males. Additionally, a greater proportion of respondents who identified as non-heterosexuals were sexually victimized compared to heterosexual respondents. Finally, cross tabulations indicate a greater proportion of respondents who utilized alcohol and marijuana were sexually victimized compared to those who abstained from using these substances (see Table 3).

Table 3

Bivariate Analyses of Respondents' Characteristics and Experiencing Sexual Victimization

Variables	Never %	Monthly %	Weekly %	χ^2	N
Marijuana Use	22.6	60.0	50.0	29.05***	352
Alcohol Use	18.3	30.3	41.8	14.95***	356

Gender	Male %		Female %		
	17.4		37.1	16.20***	357

Race	Caucasian %		Non-Caucasian %		
	30.4		14.8	2.92	353

Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual %		Non-heterosexual %		
	27.6		48.3	5.49*	355

Notes: "Monthly" indicates use that is "once a month or less." "Weekly" indicates uses that is "at least weekly." *p < .05; **p < .01, ***p < .001

After investigating the relationship between respondents' backgrounds and experiencing a sexual victimization, we conducted several *t*-tests to assess whether survivors of sexual assault had a different perception of the overall campus climate compared to non-victimized students. Several *t*-tests reached statistical significance thereby indicating survivors of sexual victimization *did* differ in their perception of the overall campus climate compared to non-victimized students. Survivors indicated feeling less valued in the classroom and feeling less safe on campus. They also were less likely to believe administrators were genuinely concerned about their welfare, that their college would handle a crisis well, that their college would handle incidents in a fair and responsible manner, and that their college did enough to protect students' safety (see Table 4).

Discussion

Recent news stories underscore the point that sexual violence continues to plague college campuses. Evidence suggests that females between the ages of 18 and 24 are particularly vulnerable; however, men are not immune to these events (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Although there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on this topic, studies exclusively focusing on rural universities remain lacking (Vanderwoerd, 2009). Recognizing this gap in the literature, this study sought to investigate the prevalence of sexual violence at a mid-size rural institution located in the South.

Table 4
T-Tests Comparing Perception of Campus Climate between Survivors and Non-Victims

Question	Non-Victims Mean Score	Survivors Mean Score	t	N
I feel valued in the classroom.	4.09	3.74	3.07**	367
Faculty, staff, and administrators respect what students think.	3.78	3.47	2.46*	367
Faculty are concerned about my welfare.	3.90	3.79	0.92	365
Administrators are genuinely concerned about my welfare.	3.64	3.33	2.47*	367
I feel close to people on this campus.	3.66	3.55	0.84	365
I feel like I am part of this university.	3.87	3.74	1.09	366
I am happy to be at this university.	4.16	4.00	1.47	362
The faculty, staff, and administrators treat students fairly.	3.78	3.58	1.66	365
I feel safe on this campus.	4.18	3.83	3.79***	360
College officials should do more to protect students from harm.	3.37	3.58	-1.95	363
If a crisis happened, my college would handle it well.	3.37	3.14	2.03*	364
College officials handle incidents in a fair and responsible manner.	3.40	3.20	2.08*	361
My college does enough to protect the safety of students.	3.42	3.11	2.79**	362
There is a good support system on campus.	3.45	3.36	0.8	362

Notes: Higher scores indicate greater agreement based on the scale of (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Unsure; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree. *p < .05; **p < .01, ***p < .001

Ultimately, findings from this study support previous research on sexual assault at rural institutions (e.g., Gray et al., 1988; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004) and underscore the point that sexual violence is a problem on both urban *and* rural campuses. Specifically, findings from this study indicate nearly 4 percent of respondents (or 18 students) reported experiencing one forced completed rape in the preceding year, while another 3.4% (or 17 students) experienced multiple forms of completed rapes. Compounding this problem, 12% of respondents (or 61 students) noted they experienced an attempted forced rape in the preceding year. Moreover, approximately 14% of respondents (or 65 students) experienced at least one form of sexual coercion, while nearly 5 percent (or 22 students) experienced multiple forms of this abuse. Finally, almost 16% of respondents (or 76 students) noted experiencing a forced unwanted sexual contact in the preceding year. These are alarming findings given that sexual violence is heavily underreported (Fisher et al., 2003; Kilpatrick et al., 2007; Koss et al., 1987; Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Sloan et al., 1997) – particularly in rural locations where evidence suggests the impact of experiencing interpersonal violence is worse compared to urban locations (Edwards, 2014).

Aside from determining the prevalence of sexual assault at this particular rural institution, findings from this study also identified several risk factors for experiencing a sexual victimization. As many previous studies have found (Black et al., 2011; Brener et al., 1999; Combs-Lane &

Smith, 2002; Fisher et al., 1999; Koss, 1988), females were more likely to experience a sexual assault compared to males; however, men may fail to seek medical or psychological assistance following an assault (Light & Monk-Turner, 2009) which, again, may be compounded due to the sociocultural characteristics largely associated with rural communities (Logan et al., 2005). In addition, respondents who identified as non-heterosexual were more likely to experience a sexual assault compared to heterosexual students, which may be a function of the small pool of non-heterosexual students included in the study ($n = 31$). Therefore, this study necessitates replication before firm conclusions are drawn. Finally, respondents who utilized alcohol and marijuana were more likely to experience a sexual assault compared to students who abstained from using these substances. To be clear, the aforementioned finding should not be interpreted as victim-blaming, but rather further evidence that perpetrators likely target vulnerable individuals as other studies have found (e.g., Cass, 2007; Combs-Lane & Smith, 2002; Fisher & Wilkes, 2003; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2002; Schwartz & Pitts, 1995; Siegel & Williams, 2003; Ullman et al., 1999).

In addition to assessing the prevalence and risk factors for sexual assault at rural institutions, this study focused on determining how survivors perceived the overall campus climate compared to non-victimized students. Perhaps not surprisingly - given the nature of the crimes - survivors (overall) reported feeling less safe at the university and reported a less favorable perception of how well the university would respond to an incident of interpersonal violence that supports previous research by Vanderwoerd (2009). These results are particularly important as universities move towards conducting campus climate surveys regularly especially at rural locations. Given the barriers that rural victims face during help-seeking activities (Logan et al., 2005), it is extremely important that university administrators, faculty, and staff as well as social workers assisting survivors within the surrounding community be readily available to assist survivors of interpersonal violence. In working with survivors, it is also critically important that these groups remain cognizant of the constraints to help seeking as defined in the literature review.

Although this study contributes to an understudied area of the sexual assault literature, it is not without limitations. First, the response rate to this study was low and likely related to the length of our survey instrument. Additionally, given the culture of the university, students may have felt uncomfortable with answering many of these questions. Secondly, due to low cell counts across several questions (e.g., alcohol use, marijuana use, and race); we collapsed the various categories into dichotomous measures. As a result, we likely lost some important contextual differences which future studies should address. Third, given our focus on this specific university and the cross-sectional nature of these data, these data are not a representation of all rural colleges. However, this study should serve as the catalyst for additional research on rural universities.

Implications and Future Research Directions

There are several important implications from this study that stakeholders should heed moving forward as society addresses sexual violence on its college campuses. First, sexual violence includes various types of abuse including rape, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual touching. As indicated by these findings, students are experiencing various forms of sexual violence on campus and future studies should account for these abuses moving forward to avoid underestimating the scope of the problem. In the pursuit to investigate the scope of this problem, particular attention to rural institutions is warranted as the sociocultural characteristics associated with these close-knit communities could present additional challenges to survivors (Logan et al.,

2005). Secondly, certain demographic and background factors affect the risk of experiencing sexual assault. Therefore, it is important to assess these factors in order to inform prevention and intervention efforts on college campuses. For example, in the current study, non-heterosexual students may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing a sexual assault and thus this group requires additional outreach. The aforementioned is not only important for university personnel to remain cognizant of, but also social service personnel in the surrounding community. Third, it is important to pay particular attention to how survivors of crime perceive the overall campus climate. While the opinions of all students are important in an educational setting, it is the perceptions of survivors that should be of the utmost importance as they have experienced first-hand how the university has responded to crime and where the areas of improvement are.

Finally, and most importantly, this study emphasizes the point that sexual violence is not a big city problem limited to urban institutions. Sexual assault, and the robbing of one's agency, can happen anywhere, and social workers are critically important to helping survivors manage the aftermath of crime. Taking into account this study's findings, future research should continue to focus on urban *and* rural institutions in the effort to combat sexual violence. Our hope is that this study serves as a catalyst for additional discussion and research on the social problems affecting students within all educational locations, but particularly in communities where survivors face additional barriers to receiving the vital assistance they need following a violent episode.

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