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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

UNDERSTANDING CRIME VICTIMIZATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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FILE

A series of highly publicized incidents--coeds murdered, deadly assaults on professors--has shattered the image of universities as ivory towers somehow immune from the threat and tragic consequences of crime. Despite growing concern voiced by academic officials, the media, the parents of student-victims, and lawmakers, data on campus victimization remain in short supply.

The data that are available, moreover, are drawn largely from "official" sources. In 1990, for example, the U.S. Congress passed the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act, which mandated that all colleges and universities receiving federal funds publish annual statistics on (1) crimes known to the police for the offense categories of murder, forcible and nonforcible sex offenses, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and motor-vehicle theft, and on (2) arrests for violations of liquor, drug, and weapons laws. Although a potentially valuable source of data, these "official" crime statistics reflect only those offenses that are committed on school property and come to the attention of law enforcement and school officials. Furthermore, they provide limited information on who is most at risk for victimization and why. As a result, our understanding of the prevalence and sources of campus crime victimization remains at a beginning stage.

One way to supplement and extend the crime information supplied by officials is to conduct a "victimization survey," in which respondents are asked whether they had been victimized and, if so, the circumstances surrounding the victimization. The federal government currently conducts the National Crime Victimization Survey, which attempts to assess victimization among the general public. No comparable survey, however, exists for college students.

In light of this void in the research, we proposed to undertake a victimization survey that would probe the victimization experiences of college students. In this Research in Brief, we report results on (1) the prevalence of crime victimizations on and off campuses, (2) the factors that increase risk of victimization, (3) the extent to which students report victimizations, (4) characteristics of offenders as reported by student-victims, and (5) the levels of fear of crime on campus.

Study methodology

The results of this study are based primarily on a crime victimization survey, conducted by telephone in the Spring of 1994, of a representative sample of students attending twelve higher educational institutions. Four-year colleges and universities were stratified by size of enrollment (1,000 to 2,499; 2,500 to 9,999; 10,000 to 19,999; 20,000 or more) and location (urban, suburban, or small town/rural), and then the sample of institutions used in our study was randomly selected. The number of students contacted at each college or university was based on the formula for a simple random sample. In all, 3,472 students completed the survey. The response rate was 71%.

The survey was modeled after the National Crime Victimization Survey (Redesign Phase III). In brief, students were asked a series of "screen questions," which asked if they had experienced a particular type of crime victimization "since school began in August (or September) 1993"--the bounding period for the survey. We also added questions aimed at discerning whether students had been harassed, either by telephone or verbally in person.

For each "yes" response, an "incident" report was completed that asked detailed questions about each specific victimization. This instrument included questions about the time and location of the victimization incident, the nature of the incident (what actually happened, what was tried, what was threatened), the characteristics of the offender(s), whether self-protective action taken, whether injuries were incurred, the victim's perceptions of why he or she may have been targeted for the crime, and whether the incident was reported to officials.

Regardless of whether they had been victimized, all respondents were also asked a series of questions relating to their demographics, lifestyle, crime-related attitudes, previous crime experiences, perceived risk of victimization, fear of victimization, and general crime-prevention behavior. This information on the respondents' "individual characteristics" was collected to determine whether victimization varied by these factors.

Based on previous studies, we developed a model of "sources of campus crime victimization," which included not only individual characteristics but also factors relating to the context surrounding students (see Figure 1). "Campus security" information was obtained by surveying university officials about crime prevention planning and programs/services on their campuses. Data on "institutional context" and on "community characteristics" were gathered from secondary sources, such as college guides, U.S. Census data, and FBI crime statistics.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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Ivory towers or crime scenes?

Contrary to recent media reports, our results suggest that college student victimization is relatively rare. This is not to say that college campuses are ivory towers fully devoid of crime or are bereft of serious, albeit infrequent, offenses. Even so, our survey reveals that the majority of students are not victimized and that the largest share of campus crimes do not imperil lives.

We found, for example, that 63% of the students we interviewed had <u>not</u> been the victim of <u>any crime</u> during the period of study. Further, only about 20% of the sample had been the victim of a crime against their person, and the majority of these offenses were theft-related. In fact, scarcely one in twenty students had experienced a personal crime of violence. The percentage of robbery and aggravated assault victims were negligible, but simple assaults and sexual assaults were more common (see Table 1).

In three-fourths of violent victimizations, victims required no medical attention. Most often, these victims missed no days of classes. In 10% of the incidents, however, student victims of violence missed two or more days of classes.

INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

Additionally, when we examined all of the victimization incidents reported by the sample (n = 2,201), we found that only 11% of all incidents involved crimes of personal violence. In contrast, over 60 percent of victimization incidents involved either personal theft crimes or against a "living quarters" (the most common incident involving vandalism). Again, we find little evidence to support recent claims that college campuses have become especially dangerous places (see Table 2).

Based on the results, we can also present a description of the characteristics of victims in our sample:

    o Nine in ten victims in the sample were enrolled as full-time students.

    o Most victims were undergraduates under age 22.

    o The majority of victims were female, while three-fourths were white.

    o Nine in ten victims were unmarried.

    o A majority of victims lived off campus.

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In many cases, the characteristics of victims were not risk factors but rather reflected the general demographic composition of the student body.

Campus victimization in time and space

Although there was a tendency for student victimization to be higher in October and November, we did not find any statistically significant seasonal pattern to student victimization. We did, discern, however, that there was a temporal pattern to student victimization. Violent crimes were more likely to have occurred in the early morning hours, especially between 12 am and 2 am. Also, in general, nine in ten victimizations occurred during the school term as opposed to when school was not in session and students were "on break."

We found some variation in the distribution of the location (on or off campus) of the victimization. The data revealed, for example, that the majority of victimizations occurred on campus, but that this pattern can vary by specific types of crime:

o 62% of personal thefts occurred on campus.

o In contrast, 55% of violent victimizations were off campus. The exception to this pattern is sexual victimization (rape and sexual assault), which occurred more often on campus.

o Victimization of students' living quarters was evenly split by location: about half of the incidents occurred on campus and half off.

o However, living quarters larceny was more likely to occur off campus while attempted and completed burglary and vandalism were more likely to occur on campus.

o Threats against students were more likely to occur off campus while harassment (either verbal or telephone call) was more likely to occur on campus.

The risk of victimization

As outlined in Figure 1, we attempted to explore how a variety of individual and contextual factors increased or decreased a student's risk of victimization. To assess the relative effects of these factors, we conducted a multivariate logit analysis.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, we found that, in general, factors relating to students' lifestyles (e.g., nights on campus, attending entertainment events) did not play a role in increasing the probability of victimization. The only noteworthy exception to this pattern was for off-campus personal theft, where five of the nine lifestyle variables heightened victimization.

Similarly, the four measures of individual-level crime prevention activities were inconsistently related to college student victimization either on or off campus. We did find that two of the crime prevention measures--a risk management index and living quarters security--significantly and negatively related to the overall measure of victimization. However, these and the other crime prevention measures did not have uniform effects across all crime types.

Unlike crime prevention variables, the perceived seriousness of crime was consistently related to the probability of victimization. In general, as the perceived seriousness of crime (whether on or off campus) increased, the probability of victimization decreased.
Only one crime-experience variable was consistently related to the probability of victimization (this was especially true of crimes occurring on campus): Students who had been past victims of a crime on campus were more likely to be at risk of victimization than nonvictims. Other crime-experience variables (i.e., knowing a student-victim or knowing a student-offender) were more likely to be related to on-campus victimization than to off-campus victimization.

Student demographics also were significant predictors of the probability of victimization, particularly for on-campus victimizations:

> o Males had a higher probability of victimization while on campus compared to females, but gender was not related to off-campus victimization.

> o First-year students were at much higher risk of on-campus victimization than more advanced undergraduates.

> o Students who lived on campus had an increased probability of on-campus victimization than students who did not live on campus.

> o Living in a fraternity or a sorority house was significantly related to both on-campus and off-campus victimization.

> o How far from campus a student lives was significantly related to on-campus but not to off-campus victimization.

Finally, we found that three other sets of variables were generally not significantly related to victimization either on or off campus: campus security provided by the college or university, institutional characteristics, and community characteristics.

In summary, our analysis suggested that the main factors that increase the risk of college student victimization are attitudes (not defining crime as serious), individual characteristics (being male, first-year student), and living arrangements. Student lifestyles and the broader institutional and community contexts were not strong risk factors for victimization.

Victim reporting practices

Generally, students failed to report their victimizations to any police authority. For example, we found that regardless of the where the victimization occurred, only about 29% of all victimizations were reported to any police agency (e.g., campus police, city police, county sheriff, or other agency).

Further, students who suffered a victimization off campus were more likely to notify a police agency than students who were victimized on campus (35% to 25%). When asked why they did not report their victimization (regardless of where the victimization occurred), the two most common reasons given by the victims were that the incident either was "too minor" or was "a private matter."

These results have significant implications for the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act which, as note above, requires all colleges and universities to publish their crime statistics categories). While in theory the Act was designed to help create better data on campus crime, unless student-victims can be convinced to report their victimizations, the data generated by the Act must be seriously questioned.

Identifying offenders

When asked to identify the characteristics of offenders, student-victims reported that most offenders were white, strangers, and non-students. However, variations in theses general patterns were evidence. For example, the proportionate involvement of non-strangers and fellow students was higher for assaults, larceny with contact, threats, and harassment.

Gripped with fear?

Independent of the objective chances of being a crime victim, it is possible that the widespread publicity about crime on campus could have generated among students extensive crime prevention activities, feelings of fear, and perceptions that their risk of victimization was high. Although they are not unaffected by crime, it appears that students were not "gripped with fear of crime" in their daily lives on college campuses.

In general, students did not report routinely engaging in crime prevention tactics such as avoidance behaviors, risk management, or target hardening measures. They did use avoidance tactics on campus more at night than during the day. Among the risk-management strategies, students were more likely to carry their keys in a defensive manner and to ask someone to walk them to their destination after dark than they were to engage in other forms of risk-management tactics (e.g., carrying a personal protection device, carrying a firearm, or using a campus-sponsored crime prevention service like campus escort). Only 40% of the students said that they always locked the door of their residence.

We also found that students had relatively low levels of fear of victimization and perceived risk of victimization across categories of offenses and time of the day. Some variation in these findings, however, were discovered. Thus, students tended to be more fearful of victimization at night than during the daytime, and, compared to nonvictims, victims tended to be more fearful and to perceive more risk of victimization. There was also variation in fear and risk perceptions by demographic characteristics. For example, fear and/or perceived risk of crime tended to be higher among younger, female, and African-American students.

Future directions for research

Future campus crime research may want to further examine some of the methodological and substantive issues that arose from our study. First, future work may want to consider examining student victimization with a larger stratified sample of schools (again, stratifying on size of student enrollment and location of school). Our study examined only twelve schools. An increased sample of schools would allow the use of more contextual variables (e.g., institutional-level and community-level factors) in a multi-level model.

Researchers may also want to look more closely at the reporting behavior of college students because they seem unwilling to report their victimizations to any police authority. This appears to be especially true of students unwilling to report their on-campus victimizations to campus police or security authorities.

While the present study examined fear and perceived risk in very broad based terms, we did not explore the spatial distribution of fear of victimization ("hot spots" of fear) or perceived risk. Is there a relationship, for example, between the ecological characteristics of college campuses and

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fear of victimization or perceived risk? Does this vary by time spent in certain areas of campus? Is there a relationship between hot spots of fear and hot spots of crime on campus?

Finally, future research may wish to examine more closely the availability of campus-sponsored crime prevention programs and services, and their use by college students. We found, for example, that while many of the schools in our sample have a variety of crime prevention programs and services, a significant proportion of the students in our sample did not use these services, attend the crime prevention programs, or routinely exhibit crime prevention behavior. This issue might be examined more fully by asking students why they fail to use crime prevention programs or services available to them on campus. Additionally, we would benefit from learning more about why students fail to practice crime prevention behaviors.

As campus crime and student victimization continue to remain in the spotlight of media coverage these issues remain ripe for further investigation. The present study is but a starting point for research to understand more fully the extent and nature of campus crime and related issues which confront campus administrators, students and their parents, and state and federal legislatures. While we have provided some preliminary answers to important questions, much remains to be done. Hopefully, as we move toward the next century, social scientists will focus their attention on campus crime with greater vigor and develop answers to the problems confronting students and administrators in higher education, and victims and their families.

Table 1. Number and Percent of Sample
Who Were Victims

Sector and Type of Victimization	Victim % (n)	Non-Victim % (n)
All Crimes	37.0 (1283)	63.0 (2189)
Personal Crimes Sector	19.7 (683)	80.3 (2789)
Crimes of Violence	5.4 (186)	94.6 (3286)
Sexual Victimization	2.3 (79)	97.7 (3393)
Robbery	0.3 (10)	99.7 (3462)
Aggravated Assault	0.7 (26)	99.3 (3446)
Simple Assault	2.4 (84)	97.6 (3388)
Crimes of Theft	15.8 (549)	84.2 (2923)
Personal Larceny With Contact	1.1 (39)	98.9 (3433)
Personal Larceny Without Contact	14.2 (492)	85.8 (2980)
Motor Vehicle Theft	0.1 (3)	99.9 (3469)
Motor Vehicle Burglary	2.3 (79)	97.7 (3393)

Table 1. Number and Percent of Sample Who Were Victims...Continued

Sector and Type of Victimization	Victim n (%)	Non-Victim n (%)
Living Quarters Sector	16.0 (554)	84.0 (2918)
Attempted Burglary	0.7 (26)	99.3 (3446)
Completed Burglary	5.3 (184)	94.7 (3288)
Living Quarters Larceny	1.3 (44)	98.7 (3428)
All Vandalism	10.5 (364)	89.5 (3108)
Threats Sector		
All Threats	3.2 (112)	96.8 (3360)
Harassment Sector	10.1 (351)	89.9 (3121)
Verbal	6.2 (215)	93.8 (3257)
Telephone Call	4.2 (146)	95.8 (3326)
Unknown Sector		
Unknown Crime	3.0 (103)	97.0 (3369)

Figure 1. Sources of Campus Crime Victimization
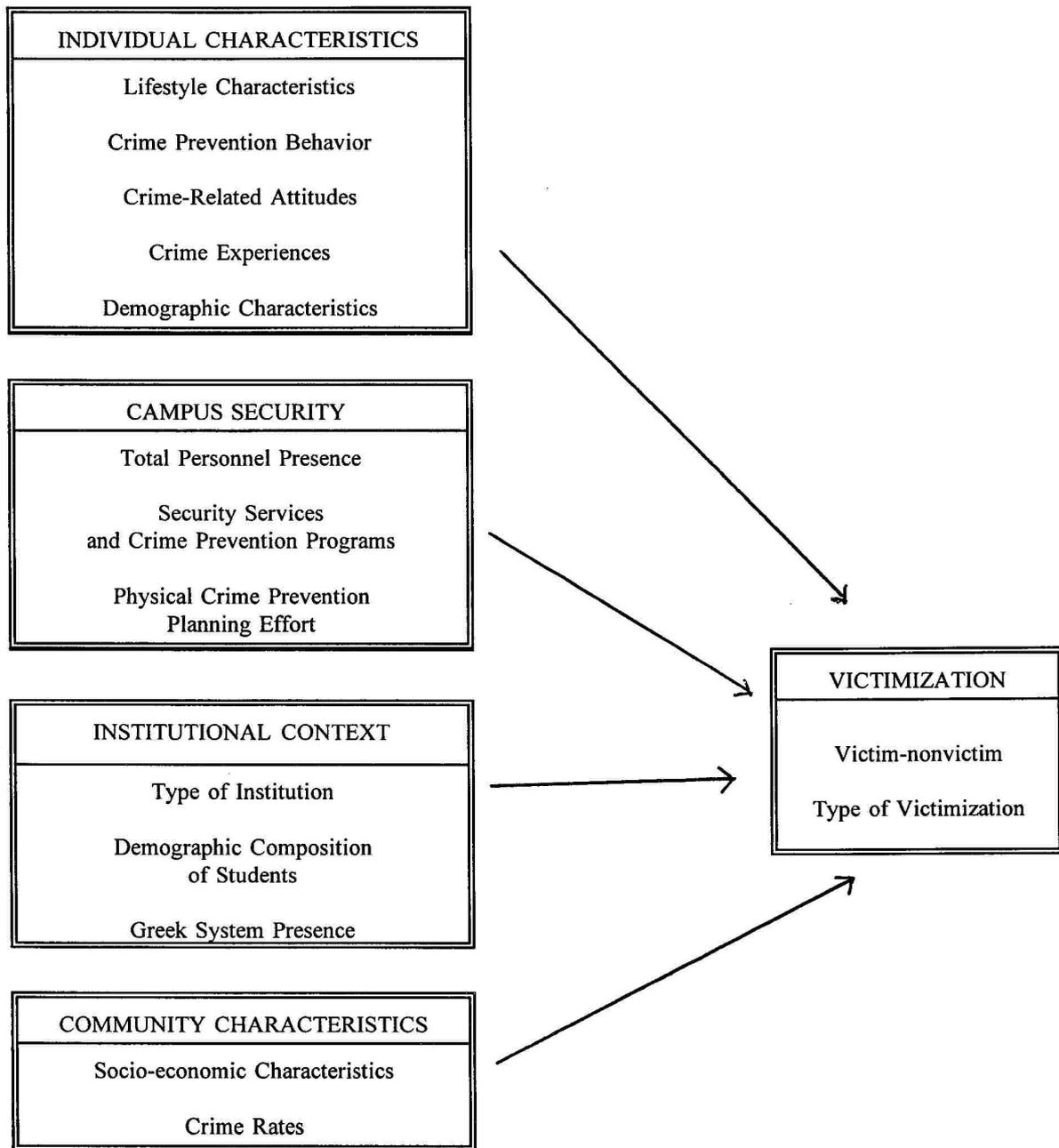
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┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│      INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS      │
├─────────────────────────────────────┤
│       Lifestyle Characteristics      │
│                                      │
│      Crime Prevention Behavior       │
│                                      │
│        Crime-Related Attitudes       │
│                                      │
│          Crime Experiences           │
│                                      │
│      Demographic Characteristics     │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│           CAMPUS SECURITY            │
├─────────────────────────────────────┤
│       Total Personnel Presence       │
│                                      │
│          Security Services           │
│     and Crime Prevention Programs    │
│                                      │
│       Physical Crime Prevention      │
│            Planning Effort           │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────────────────┐      ┌───────────────────────┐
│        INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT         │      │      VICTIMIZATION     │
├─────────────────────────────────────┤      ├───────────────────────┤
│          Type of Institution         │      │    Victim-nonvictim    │
│                                      │      │                        │
│        Demographic Composition       │      │   Type of Victimization│
│             of Students              │      └───────────────────────┘
│                                      │
│        Greek System Presence         │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│       COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS      │
├─────────────────────────────────────┤
│    Socio-economic Characteristics    │
│                                      │
│             Crime Rates              │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
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Type of Crime	Number of Victimizations	Percent of Victimizations within sector	Percent of all Victimizations
All Crimes	2201		
Personal Sector	918	100.0	41.7
Crimes of Violence	243	26.5	11.0
Rape	51	5.6	2.3
Sexual assault	68	7.4	3.1
Robbery	10	1.1	0.5
Assault	114	12.4	5.2
Aggravated Assault	26	2.8	1.2
Simple Assault	88	9.6	3.9
Crimes of Theft	675	73.5	30.7
Personal Larceny with Contact	39	4.3	1.8
Personal Larceny without Contact	551	60.0	25.0
Motor Vehicle Theft	3	0.3	0.1
Motor Vehicle Burglary	82	8.9	3.7
Living Quarters Sector	670	100.0	30.4
Burglary	226	33.7	10.3
Vandalism	396	59.1	17.9
Living Quarters Larceny	48	2.2	2.2
Threat Sector	126	100.0	5.7
Harassment Sector	380	100.0	17.3
Verbal	228	60.0	10.4
Telephone call	152	40.0	6.9
Unknown Sector[a]	107	100.0	4.9

Note: [a] Incidents that could not be properly categorized due to incomplete survey information by victims.