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Reports of sexual assaults rise on Boston-area college campuses

Posted by Matt Rocheleau February 3, 2014 11:00 AM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Boston.com Staff

Reports of sexual assaults at Boston-area colleges have risen over the past five years, a [Globe review](#) of federally reported data has found.

Campus safety experts say the rise in reporting of sexual assaults suggests that many colleges – pushed by government agencies, victims, and new federal guidelines – are improving efforts to address the problem by expanding education and outreach and by more thoroughly reporting the [widely underreported crime](#).

“When we see sexual assault numbers increase, that hopefully means the barriers to reporting are finally beginning to be addressed, which means you are beginning the steps to solve the problem,” said S. Daniel Carter, director of the [32 National Campus Safety Initiative](#) who has spent more than two decades studying campus safety.

An estimated 88 percent of college victims do not formally report sexual assaults, according to a [federal study](#).

Across 22 of the largest campuses in and around Boston, reports of “forcible sex offenses” rose by nearly 40 percent between 2008 and 2012, according to the most recent data supplied by colleges as required under the federal Clery Act.

The total of 113 sexual assaults reported in 2012 at the Boston-area colleges reviewed for this report is the highest level in a decade, and mirror trends at campuses nationwide. Meanwhile, reports of other serious type of crime at area schools – murder, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and arson – have declined or barely increased, according to the [federal data](#).

The Clery reports cover allegations of crimes that occurred on campus, including dorms and other public property; at property owned by but separated from the main campus; and fraternities and sororities. They exclude other off-campus housing.



Below are examples from some of the schools’ with data that stood out:

Harvard

Over the past five years, Harvard University has consistently reported more sexual assaults per year, and more incidents per enrolled student, than any other campus in the Boston area. In 2012, 38 cases were reported, up from 19 in 2008.

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Harvard officials said the university has been active in recent years in trying to address the issue, including creating in 2002 a centralized office with victim-support services and resources to help students learn about sexual assault prevention and response.

“We firmly believe that more robust reporting of sexual assaults by victims is an important component of our efforts to prevent these crimes and ensure that victims get the support that they need,” said Harvard spokesman Kevin Galvin.

UMass Boston

UMass Boston reported the second-highest number of alleged assaults in 2012, at 13, up from 0 five years earlier.

Crystal Valencia, a spokeswoman for the school, said none of the 2012 incidents involved a student from the university and only one of the 2012 reported incidents occurred on campus. The others happened at off-campus property the university either owns, leases, or controls.

“UMass Boston is committed to maintaining the highest standards for the safety and security of every person on campus,” Valencia said.

BU, Northeastern

Over the past five years, Harvard has led all local schools reporting on average about 10 sexual assaults each year for every 10,000 students. Still, those rates are still well-below estimates of actual annual rape rates. For instance, a 2007 Department of Justice-funded [study](#) estimated that about 5.2 percent of college women, or 520 in every 10,000, are sexually assaulted each year; the study did not calculate a rate for men or men and women together.

Other large local schools have reported significantly fewer sexual assaults each year. Over the past five years, Boston University and Northeastern University have each reported on average about two sexual assaults each year for every 10,000 students.

Alison Kiss, executive director of the [Clery Center for Security On Campus](#), a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit that trains colleges and universities to comply with the Clery Act, said she’s usually most alarmed by Clery reports with low sexual assault figures.

“We constantly tell parents and students that higher sexual assault numbers aren’t necessarily a bad thing,” she said. “It often means students know where to go to report and that they’re comfortable doing so.”

“I’m typically more concerned when I see a school reporting zeroes across the board,” Kiss added.

Yet, “All too-often it’s the colleges with the higher statistics that get labeled as being dangerous when in fact they’re usually the ones who are doing a better job reporting,” Carter said.

Madeleine Estabrook, associate vice president for student affairs at Northeastern, said the university is “very diligent” in reporting its Clery data.

She said the school’s low sexual assault reporting may be due to a wide range of variables that could impact the data, including the school’s geographic location and configuration, the number of students living on campus and the university’s efforts around sexual assault prevention and response.

“The work that is done to make the campus safe in secure is a very important variable to consider,” Estabrook said.

She said that five years ago, with help from a grant from the Department of Justice, the university revamped its violence support, response and education programming. That effort included building a collaboration among existing services on the campus, uniting programs around sexual assault, alcohol use and other campus safety issues.

Estabrook said the university's programming around campus safety is regarded as "cutting edge not only in Boston but also nationally."

BU created a campus crisis center in 2012 to focus on rape and sexual assault prevention and support for victims of such acts as well as other forms of physical abuse, such as hazing.

Colin Riley, a spokesman for BU, said the university is thorough and accurate in its reporting of Clery data.

And, "We also recognize it's very important that students feel comfortable reporting," he said.

Riley said the university works to ensure students are aware of the issue.

"This is a topic that is frequently discussed on campus," he said.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).

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It is easy to pick on any school because sexual assault happens on EVERY campus. The ones with the higher number of reports may well be the safest campuses. Watch out for the ones that pretend everything is OK.

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This story was not intended to be all inclusive. It provided examples "that stood out". You can follow the link to the Clery data and check out BC.

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And Boston College is not mentioned in this story because ?

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