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Record number of campus assaults reported as more victims come forward

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

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Reports of sex assaults at New England colleges rose last year, continuing a dramatic multiyear climb that experts say is the result of increased monitoring of a historically underreported crime.

A total of 784 “forcible sex offenses” were reported during 2015 at 60 colleges in the region, including some of the area’s largest and most well-known institutions, according to a Globe review of [figures](#) the schools are required by federal law to collect and release each year.

That was a record high for those colleges, up from 734 in 2014 and more than twice as high as the 331 forcible sex offense reports the same schools fielded in 2011.

Despite the increase, the numbers are still believed to undercount the true number of sexual assaults occurring on area campuses because so many cases go unreported.

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Specialists say, and numerous studies have estimated, the actual number of assaults happening each year is several times higher than the number of cases captured in the reports, which are known as Clery Act reports. The campus security law requiring the reports is named for a college student raped and murdered in 1986.

College	State	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Amherst College	MA	12	12	9	17	19
Assumption College	MA	13	7	3	4	6
Babson College	MA	12	8	7	5	4
Babson College	MA	19	12	8	9	6
Bentley	MA	9	7	2	1	4
Boston College	MA	2	6	4	1	1
Boston College	MA	27	25	19	5	7
Boston College	MA	17	12	16	11	9
Boston College	MA	14	20	9	4	7
Boston College	MA	14	11	14	2	2

View Graphic

Table: Reports of sexual assault at 60 New England colleges

Figures cover the most recent five-year stretch of data.

“It’s a tremendous understatement of the problem,” said S. Daniel Carter, a Washington-based expert on campus security. “Even with the increase in Clery reporting, it’s still vastly understating the true scope of the challenge.”

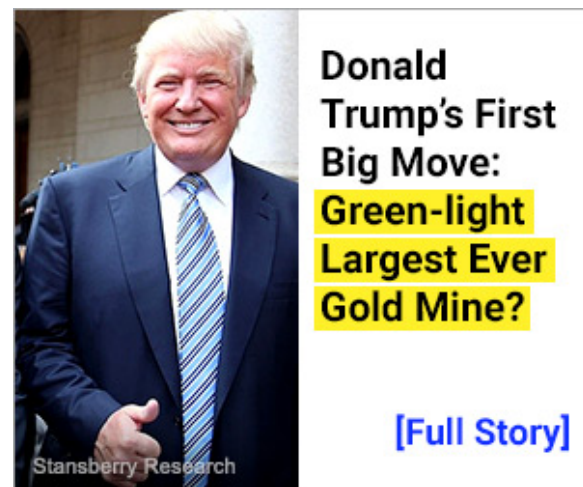
Still, he and others in the field said they are encouraged by the increase in the percentage of reported cases. The trend shows that more students are aware of and feel comfortable reporting a sexual assault, and it means more victims can seek help and justice, experts said.



Activists and federal officials, led by President Obama, in recent years have highlighted the issue, calling upon

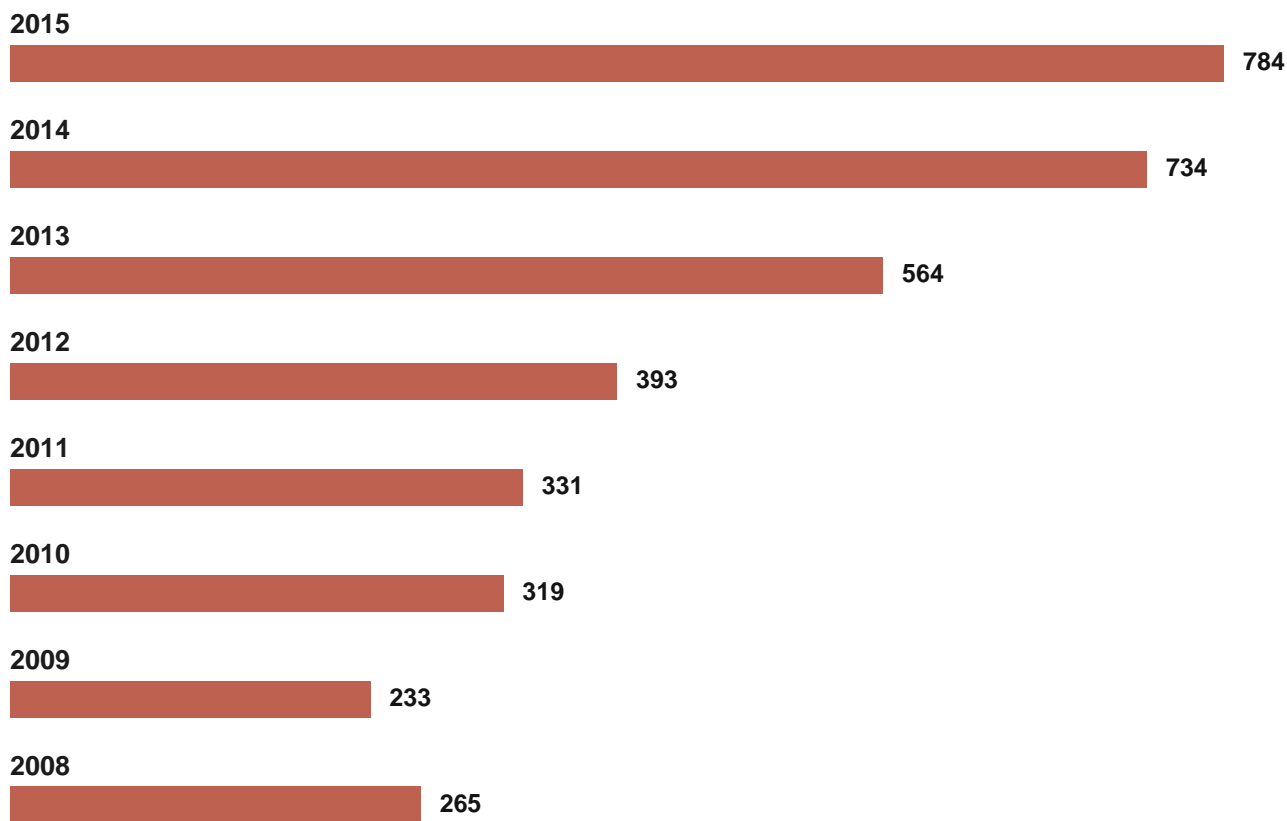
colleges to reduce sexual violence, raise awareness about it, and provide better resources to victims.

Of the 60 schools the Globe reviewed, the highest total was at Harvard University, which had 54 reported assaults during 2015, the school's Clery report said. The next highest totals in 2015 were 49 at the University of Connecticut and 45 at the University of New Hampshire.



Sexual assault reports have soared at New England colleges

This chart shows the dramatic rise in the number of "forcible sex offenses" across 60 colleges around New England. Experts say these figures only represent a fraction of the actual number of sexual assaults on campuses, because the crime often goes unreported.



SOURCE: Globe review of Clery reports

Officials from all three schools said the numbers are a welcome sign.

“While we are actively working to reduce the occurrence of such incidents, we are grateful that an increased number of our community members feel comfortable coming forward when an incident does occur,” Harvard spokeswoman Tania deLuzuriaga said.

Among other Boston-area colleges, reported assaults at Boston University increased from 12 in 2014 to 17 in 2015, assaults at Boston College went up from 23 to 27, and assaults at Northeastern University dropped from 22 to 18.

Experts say schools that report zeros and other low figures, particularly ones that have on-campus housing, raise red flags.

“Schools that have low data raise questions about what type of victim response and data collection they have in place,” Carter said.

Ted Kirkpatrick, dean of students at UNH, said he was recently at a meeting with officials from other colleges and asked them about how many reports of sexual assaults they had received in the last year.

“Many said, ‘Oh, two or three.’ And I said, ‘Are you . . . crazy?’ ” he recalled. “It suggests to me you’ve got to do a better job of getting out there” to raise awareness and encourage reporting.

Three colleges located near each other in Boston each reported zero sexual assaults in 2015 — Wentworth Institute of Technology, the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences.

Officials from all three schools said they offer an array of resources to combat sexual violence and encourage students to report the crimes. College of Pharmacy officials also noted the overwhelming majority of its students live in off-campus housing that would not be captured by Clery data.

Maureen Keefe, vice president of student development at MassArt, acknowledged that despite efforts by the college, getting victims to come forward is difficult. “We believe our students do feel comfortable coming forward, but candidly that’s an ongoing challenge for us, as it is for all colleges,” she said in an e-mail.

Another of the schools that reported zero sexual assaults in 2015 was Roxbury Community College,

which [acknowledged in 2013](#) that it had underreported sexual assault figures in previous Clery reports.

President Valerie Roberson, who [took the helm of the college after that underreporting](#), said she is confident in the zero assaults the college reported for 2015. “We’ve had a lot of training among our staff,” she said. “We also have training that we deliver directly to students so they know how to report incidents.”

Roberson said, and experts agreed, that a commuter school such as RCC without dorms is unlikely to have many or even any reports in a single year.

A number of victims, alleging their university’s staff mishandled their reports of being raped, have [sued](#) the schools and filed complaints that have triggered [investigations](#) by the federal Education Department.

In response, many campuses have stepped up training, support, and outreach.

Many schools also have [begun](#) conducting anonymous [surveys](#) of their students to try to gauge the true prevalence of sexual assault, beyond the [much-lower numbers](#) captured by Clery data.

Numerous [studies](#) have estimated that about one in four women are sexually assaulted while in college in the United States.

Area college officials said that although more victims have reported assaults in recent years, there has not been much change in the number of those who pursue the cases under the school’s student disciplinary system.

School officials — well aware of studies indicating that perpetrators of sexual assault are likely to reoffend — say they encourage victims to have their cases investigated.

But, in most cases, the decision is left to victims. Administrators, citing advice from experts and the federal government, say they worry that moving forward without the victim’s consent will not only make for cases that are difficult to prove but will also discourage other victims from reporting.

“The most immediate concern is health and safety and well-being — we want to make sure the person feels safe,” said Elizabeth Conklin, associate vice president of UConn’s Office of Institutional

Equity.

“Some students come in feeling very much ready to move into an investigation. Other students will wait months or years before they are ready.”

Some never seek an investigation.

There can be exceptions in which school officials investigate without a victim’s backing, including, for example, if a weapon was reportedly used during the assault or if the alleged perpetrator had been accused previously.

Of the forcible sex offenses reported in 2015 by the colleges the Globe reviewed, the overwhelming majority — 566 — were classified as rape. The rest, 218, were classified as “forcible fondling.”

Experts caution against comparing numbers of reported sexual assaults at different campuses for a variety of reasons.

For example, the reports do not reflect attacks in private off-campus apartments. The amount of such housing can differ widely from school to school.

Reports of stalking, dating & domestic violence also have risen


In addition to releasing statistics on reports of sexual assault, colleges in recent years have been required by federal rules to disclose reports of stalking, dating violence, and domestic violence. The figures below show how such reports have risen across the 60 New England colleges reviewed by the Globe.

Year	Stalking	Dating violence	Domestic violence
2015	240	181	214
2014	202	188	171
2013	133	98	136

SOURCE: Globe review of Clery reports

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