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# Sex assault reports up at Boston-area campuses

New measures underway as total reaches 10-year high

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 03, 2014



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Reports of sexual assaults on Boston-area college campuses have risen sharply over the past several years, according to a Globe review of federal statistics, shedding light locally on what victims' advocates and President Obama have called a national epidemic with devastating effects.

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 story is the highest level in a decade.

The 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.

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 such assaults, considered widely underreported.

The need for such a push is evident: An estimated 88 percent of college victims do not formally report sexual assaults, according to a federal study.

"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.

Advocates for victims say they have seen a surge in activism among students, campus organizations, and alumni.

Students from several Massachusetts schools — including Amherst and Emerson colleges — have spoken publicly about being raped. They have filed federal complaints with the US Department of Education alleging that officials on their campuses violated Title IX, the federal civil rights law protecting students from gender discrimination, by downplaying, not fully investigating, or offering inadequate support after they reported the crimes.

In the aftermath of the complaints, both Amherst and Emerson are making changes in how they handle sexual assaults.

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 Graphic: Sex assault reports

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*'When we see sexual assault numbers increase, that hopefully means the barriers to reporting are finally beginning to be addressed.'*

Emerson sophomore Sarah Tedesco, 19, is among the students who filed a complaint against the school and called for changes at Emerson and other campuses.

"I think sexual assault is still a huge problem, and I think the reports are much lower than they should be," she said. "But the problem has really gotten a lot of press and a lot of pressure and that has made students more comfortable to come forward, because it helps them to know they're not alone."

She said she is encouraged by Emerson's response since the federal complaint was filed, including its plans to soon hire an advocate to support victims and oversee the college's response and prevention programs.

But Tedesco said there is more work to be done. "We're hoping they can enact change faster," she said.

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.

"Harvard often gets panned because they have such high numbers, but that tells me students are reporting, getting help, and likely being able to continue living and studying on campus," said Colby Bruno, an attorney at the Victim Rights Law Center in Boston.

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 support services for victims 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 reported the second-highest number of alleged assaults in 2012, at 13. The college did not report any assaults five years earlier.

UMass Boston spokeswoman Crystal Valencia said none of the 2012 incidents involved a student from the university and only one of the reported incidents occurred on the main 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.

Reports of serious crimes other than sexual assaults at area schools — including murder, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft — have declined or barely increased, according to

the federal data.

Recent investigations found that numerous schools — including Roxbury Community College in Boston, University of Southern California, and Yale University — had underreported the number of sexual assaults on their campuses.

The issue was vaulted into the national spotlight two weeks ago when Obama highlighted the stunning prevalence of campus rape: 1 in 5 women said they have been sexually assaulted while in college, according to a White House report. Calling the crime “an affront on our basic decency and humanity,” Obama ordered a federal task force to target the problem.

Officials believe drug and alcohol abuse fuels the high rate of assaults on campuses. Many victims are assaulted while drunk, high, passed out, or otherwise incapacitated.

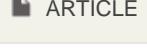
Survivors often suffer a range of health issues, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and are more likely to drop out of school and to consider suicide, the White House report said.

On the Boston University campus, Katie Lacasse, a 21-year-old senior studying marketing and international management, said she feels reassured by the resources available at the university. From 2008 to 2012, BU has reported an average of seven sexual assaults each year, one of the lowest annual per-student averages among local colleges.

“If I was ever sexually assaulted, I feel like there are good services here to turn to for help,” she said. “I think they take the issue pretty seriously.”

*Catherine Cloutier of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at [matthew.rocheleau@globe.com](mailto:matthew.rocheleau@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter @mrochele.*

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