



Sexual orientation and sexual assault victimization among US college students[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Sexual victimization continues to be a problem on college campuses across the United States. Research on risk focuses on victimization of heterosexual women while that of sexual minority students is under-studied. The current study uses National College Health Assessment data to examine the relationship between sexual identity and four measures of self-reported sexual victimization. Several victimization correlates identified in prior research are included in analyses. Logistic regression results show that gay men and bisexual men and women were more likely compared to heterosexuals to report all four victimization types, and unsure students are more likely to report three types. However, lesbian students are no more likely than heterosexual students to report any sexual victimization. Also, transgendered students were more likely compared to female students to report three victimization types.

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1. Introduction

Sexual victimization among students remains a major problem confronting colleges and universities across the country (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006; Banyard et al., 2007). Women are at much higher risk of sexual victimization than men (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner,

2000), but it is unknown if sexual minorities also face higher risk. The current study examines this risk utilizing a national sample of college students. It tests if sexual minority students are at greater risk of sexual victimization compared to heterosexual students, controlling for risk and protective factors popularly associated with sexual victimization among college students.

1.1. Sexual orientation and sexual victimization

Minority stress theory suggests that sexual minorities are at risk of violent victimization (Meyer, 2003). A relatively small number of studies tend to support this (Anderson, Hughes, Zou, & Wilsnack, 2014; Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Conron, Mimiaga, & Landers, 2010; Duncan, 1990; Edwards et al., 2015; Finneran & Stephenson, 2014; Heidt, Marx, & Gold, 2005; Hequembourg, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2011; Hequembourg, Livingston, & Parks, 2013; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012;

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Kuyper & Vanwesenbeeck, 2011; Mahoney, Davies, & Scurlock-Evans, 2014; Oshri, Handley, Sutton, Wortel, & Burnette, 2014; Priebe & Svedin, 2012). However, as will be discussed, this past research suffers from major limitations.

Kuyper and Vanwesenbeeck (2011) propose that GLBs are more at risk for sexual health problems because they experience unique chronic stress due to minority status, such as prejudice, expectations of discrimination, hiding sexual orientation, and internalized homophobia. Conceptualized by Meyer (2003), this extension of social stress theory proposes that stigmatized minority groups, such as ethnic and sexual minority groups, experience social environmental conditions and unique stressors associated with their status and identity that can harm their quality of life. Meyer (2003) mentions four LGB minority stress processes: receiving acts of prejudice and discrimination committed by others including violence, expecting such events, internalizing negative social attitudes toward sexual minorities, and concealing one's sexual orientation. To cope with experiences such as name-calling, denial of workplace and marital benefits, distancing oneself from others who may reject them, or shunning by family members and peers, sexual minorities, like anyone facing high stress, may use harmful approaches. One possibility is that sexual minorities are more likely to engage in behaviors known to increase risk of sexual victimization, such as alcohol and drug abuse, to cope (Ridner, Frost, & Lajole, 2005). In fact, Conron et al. (2010) find that compared to heterosexuals, bisexuals reported more sadness and suicidal ideation and binge drinking is more common among bisexual women.

Sexual minorities frequently face negative circumstances in college. Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, and Hope (2013) find in an online sample of LGBT university students that unfair treatment by instructors, anti-LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) bias on the part of friends and family, and hiding one's LGBT identity are associated with poorer campus climate. Using Fall 2009 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) data, Oswalt and Wyatt (2011) find that GLB and unsure students reported higher levels of mental health issues and more frequent impact of mental health issues on academics compared to heterosexual students. These circumstances may then lead to participation in behaviors such as substance abuse. Ridner et al. (2005) find that lesbian and bisexual women drink more than heterosexual women (but not that gay and bisexual men drank more than heterosexual men). Also, Hequembourg and Dearing (2013) find that alcohol and drug abuse are positively related to shame-proneness but negatively related to guilt-proneness, and that shame is connected to internalized heterosexism.

However, alcohol and drug use does not increase victimization risk unless they are used in contexts where potential offenders are present. Thus, a minority stress explanation of victimization incorporates Cohen and Felson (1979) routine activities theory (RAT). RAT argues that some lifestyles or behavioral routines put individuals at risk of victimization by making them more vulnerable and/or exposed to potential offenders in environments

that lack "capable guardianship" such as police or school authorities. Much of the drinking and drug use among college students takes place under circumstances which bring potential victims and offenders together in locations containing insufficient guardianship—bars, house parties, or small gatherings for example, thereby increasing the danger of victimization.

Some studies associate minority stress with victimization. In a community-based sample of GLBs, Heidt et al. (2005) find that sexual assault victimization is associated with greater psychological distress. In a community sample of gay and bisexual men, Hequembourg et al. (2011) find that sexual victimization is associated with increased substance use, sexually transmitted infections, sexual compulsivity, and gay-related stigma. In a sample of bisexual and lesbian women in a metropolitan area, Hequembourg et al. (2013) find that 56.4% reported that their most recent sexual victimization incident occurred after coming out, and that adult sexual victimization is associated with lifetime number of sexual partners and alcohol abuse. In their study of men who have sex with men, Finneran and Stephenson (2014) associate homophobic discrimination and internalized homophobia with intimate partner violence and sexual risk.

However, the risk of substance use likely varies according to gender, of both potential victim and offender. Thus, risk should vary among specific sexual minority groups. Schwartz and Pitts (1995) offer a feminist perspective on routine activities theory to better understand women's risk of sexual victimization. "Feminist RAT" applies particularly well to college sexual assault, arguing that campuses offer a "criminogenic convergence" of males motivated to sexually assault women, female targets, and lack of capable guardians willing to intervene including anti-rape male peers and protective female groups. Many studies of routine activities and lifestyles focus on risky behaviors that increase target suitability, but feminist RAT focuses more on offender motivation and proximity to motivated offenders. Among college students are several young men highly interested in sex who were raised in a mainstream culture that supports male sexual aggression. Then in college, these young men join male peer groups that further encourage sexual aggression toward women and thus increase offender motivation (Schwartz & Pitts, 1995). Men are much more likely to commit sexual violence, and the majority of victims know their offenders (Ullman & Najdowski, 2010). Thus, sexual minorities with more intimate contact with males may have a heightened risk of victimization.

Historically, research on sexual victimization focused on heterosexual women, showing that most victims are female and most perpetrators are male (Foubert & Newberry, 2006). However, more recent research examines the sexual victimization of sexual minorities, primarily gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) persons. This body of research suggests that sexual victimization is quite prevalent among GLBs (Rothman, Exner, & Baughman, 2011). Duncan (1990) conducted what was perhaps the first study that centered on comparing the sexual victimization rates of sexual minorities and heterosexuals, using a sample of students in a course at one university. A bivariate

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