



Are college students *really* at a higher risk for stalking?: Exploring the generalizability of student samples in victimization research



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the validity of student samples for victimization research. Research has suggested that college students are at a higher risk for stalking, yet no study has directly compared experiences of college students and the general public.

Methods: Using data from the 2006 stalking supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, we directly compare stalking experiences among respondents enrolled in an institute of higher education ($n = 4,266$) and those within the general public ($n = 60,330$). Additionally, we examined differential experiences among college and non-college stalking victims in relation to stalking acknowledgement, tech-facilitated stalking, and the victims' decision to contact the police.

Results: Analyses found that college students were at a greater risk for stalking victimization. Additionally, college students were more likely to be stalked through the use of technology and identify their experience as 'stalking.' When the sample was limited to stalking victims between the ages of 18–24, however, no significant differences were found except for contacting the police. Attending college, however, does not increase one's risk for stalking, as the risk is mainly driven by individual differences versus student status.

Conclusions: There is some evidence supporting the continued use of student samples for victimization research, yet attention to measurement and sampling are paramount.

1. Introduction

Over the past quarter century, legislative and university administrative attention, such as the *Clergy Act* (20 U.S.C. §1092[f]) and the *Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act* (Campus SaVE act; see <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/s128/text>), has focused on holding institutes of higher education accountable for improving the safety and security of college and university campuses, particularly regarding interpersonal violence, sexual assault, and stalking (Fisher & Sloan, 2013). To date, however, very few studies have directly compared whether college students are at a higher risk for victimization than the general public. While some scholars have found no significant differences in victimization experiences among college students and the general public (Coker, Follingstad, Bush, & Fisher, 2015), others have found that non-college females aged 18–24 were at a higher risk for sexual assault (Sinozich & Langton, 2014) and intimate partner violence (Rennison & Addington, 2014) than their college counterparts. Noticeably absent from the literature are discussions regarding differences in risk and experiences of stalking among college students and the general public.

Although the stalking literature continues to expand, including occasional national prevalence estimates (Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009; Breiding et al., 2014), much of what we know about this phenomenon stems largely from college-based samples. In a recent review of 56 empirical stalking studies spanning from 1996 to 2011, Fox, Nobles, and Fisher (2011) found that 55% of victimization and 83% of perpetration articles used convenience samples of college students. This finding is not surprising considering that the use of college students as research participants is not uncommon in social science research (Payne & Chappell, 2008). Moreover, given the typical age of stalking offenders and victims, coupled with high-risk lifestyles (e.g., increased autonomy, substance abuse) and the regimented nature of college-life (e.g., regularly scheduled classes and other activities, designated parking, communal living/working on or close to campus, etc.), past empirical investigations have suggested that college students are at a higher risk for experiencing stalking compared to the general public (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Surprisingly, however, very few studies have directly compared stalking victimization estimates and experiences between college students and the

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general public.

The purpose of the current study is two-fold. The first goal seeks to answer the question of whether college students are at a higher risk for stalking than the general public. Second, the findings can be helpful for determining whether the use of student samples for victimization research can be generalizable to populations outside of the college campus. While extant research has shown interpersonal violence and sexual assault to be prevalent on college campuses (Cantor et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2002; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987), more research is needed with non-college based samples to determine whether findings from college-based samples are generalizable across populations. Therefore, this study will expand the current knowledge base by exploring the similarities and differences between college students' and non-students' experiences with stalking.

1.1. Validity of student samples

In academia, the use of college students as research subjects has been a common practice in criminological and criminal justice research for decades (Payne & Chappell, 2008; Peterson, 2001). Universities provide ample opportunities for researchers to easily access large samples of students for behavioral research. As a result, student samples have been regularly used in tests of criminological theories, pilot studies, and empirical investigations exploring attitudes, behaviors, and experiences related to deviant behavior and victimization (Bouffard & Exum, 2013; Fisher et al., 2002; Geistman, Smith, Lambert, & Cluse-Tolar, 2013; Hart, 2013; Hart & Miethe, 2011; Hart & Rennison, 2003; Payne & Chappell, 2008; Rennison & Addington, 2014; Wiecko, 2010).

Despite the ease, cost-efficiency, and accessibility of student samples, this method of scientific inquiry remains widely debated, especially regarding the generalizability and external validity of the findings. Ever since McNemar (1946, p. 333) described the nature of social science literature as “largely the science of sophomores,” scholars have continued to question whether the findings and implications from studies using student samples are applicable to the general public. Critics of the use of student samples have argued that there are important sociodemographic, developmental, and environmental differences that shape the attitudes and behaviors of college students (Henry, 2008; Peterson, 2001; Sears, 1986).

After an exhaustive review of the social psychology literature, Sears claimed that “...college students are likely to have less-crystallized attitudes, less-formulated senses of self, stronger cognitive skills, stronger tendencies to comply with authority, and more unstable peer group relationships” (p. 515) than the general adult public. As a result, Sears (1986) argued that the use of a narrow sampling frame of college students may produce biases that inaccurately describe human nature and the phenomena at hand, as the findings may be unique to the target population, both in the direction and magnitude of the relationships (Sears, 1986). In a second-order meta-analysis of 34 meta-analytic studies comparing the use of college students and non-students in social science research, Peterson (2001) corroborated Sears's (1986) speculations after finding that (1) responses of college students were more homogenous than non-students; and (2) the effect sizes among a host of behavioral and psychological relationships differed among college and non-college samples, both in magnitude and directionality.

Other scholars have claimed that the college environment is unique and different from other populations and that specific aspects of the college experience – increased autonomy, lack of authoritative supervision, increased peer influences – may differentially shape the attitudes and behaviors of college students (Horowitz, 1987; Moffatt, 1991; Sears, 1986). Over the last quarter century, college campuses have quickly evolved into ‘communities within a community’ that some would suggest foster a unique culture of collegiate existentialism that significantly differentiates college students from the realities of the ‘real world’ (Sears, 1986; Wiecko, 2010). Indeed, Moffatt (1991) has described the contemporary ‘college life’ as extending and preserving

adolescence, while other scholars have contended that the lifestyles and routine activities of college students place them at a higher risk for victimization and/or engaging in deviant behaviors (e.g., binge drinking/drug use, casual sexual encounters, attending social events/parties, etc.) (Fisher & Sloan, 2013; Franklin, Franklin, Nobles, & Kercher, 2012; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2003).

Conversely, findings from studies comparing rates of binge drinking and problematic gambling among college students and non-students have found that one's enrollment in college or student status is not a significant predictor of risky behavior (Barnes, Welte, Hoffman, & Tidwell, 2010; Carter, Brandon, & Goldman, 2010). Indeed, Barnes et al. (2010) used a nationally representative sample of college students and non-students aged 18–21 and found that socio-demographic factors, particularly gender and race, influenced problematic behaviors over and above student status. Additionally, Carter et al. (2010) found that younger college and non-college respondents drink at similarly heavy levels and inferred that many of the developmental and environmental forces of the ‘college life’ (e.g., increased autonomy, peer influences, etc.) are shared among college and non-college individuals in emerging adulthood.

Furthermore, advocates for the use of student samples argue that college students are appropriate for social science research, especially if a particular phenomenon (e.g., victimization) is relevant to the population of interest (Oakes, 1972; Wiecko, 2010). For example, given that some scholars suggest that college students may be at a greater risk for experiencing stalking (Fisher et al., 2002), student samples may be ideal for the development of effective campus-wide prevention and awareness programming. Collectively, the extant scholarship on the generalizability of student samples suggests that college students and individuals in the general public (hereafter, ‘non-college students’ or ‘non-students’) share similar developmental and environmental influences, and that differences in risky behaviors are largely driven by individual differences versus student status (Barnes et al., 2010; Carter et al., 2010). Moreover, less is known as to whether individual differences, student status, or the juxtaposition of the two significantly affects the risk for victimization.

1.2. Victimization: college students vs. the general public

Over the past 25 years, numerous empirical investigations have explored the extent and nature of crime and victimization on college campuses (Fisher & Sloan, 2013; Hart & Miethe, 2011; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Some research has examined comparisons of college students to non-students in terms of the theoretical foundations and empirical patterning of criminal offending (Bouffard & Exum, 2013; Nobles, Fox, Khey, & Lizotte, 2013; Wiecko, 2010). Very few studies, however, have employed methodologies that involve direct, systematic comparisons between students and the general public regarding their victimization experiences.

Much of the literature has suggested that college students are at a greater risk for criminal victimization (Fisher & Cullen, 1999; Fisher, Sloan, & Cullen, 1998; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Fisher et al., 2002; Hart, 2013; Rennison & Addington, 2014; Sinozich & Langton, 2014), yet very few studies have used non-college samples to compare victimization rates between college students and the general public. To date, most comparison studies of victimization estimates of college students and non-students have analyzed data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) (Hart, 2013; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Using nearly ten years of victimization data from the NCVS (2001 – 2010), Hart (2013) found that overall rates of violent victimization among college students and non-students in the 21st century have declined dramatically (20% decline for college students and 16% for non-students). Nevertheless, Hart (2013) found that non-students experienced higher rates of violent crime (47.3 per 1000 non-students) than their college student counterparts (34.4 per 1000 students). Indeed, college students aged 18–24 experienced lower rates of robbery

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