

# #iSPEAK Student Experiences, Attitudes, and Beliefs about Sexual Violence

## Results of the Rutgers University–New Brunswick Campus Climate Assessment

*Trigger Warning: This document addresses the issue of campus sexual violence, which may be a difficult topic for some readers. Please see the end of the document for resources available.*

### Executive Summary

#### About #iSPEAK

Sexual violence is a serious problem on college and university campuses, and institutions have been encouraged to take action to address it. The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault and the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) invited the Rutgers School of Social Work's Center on Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) to pilot a campus climate survey developed by OVW regarding students' experiences, behaviors, and attitudes related to sexual violence. In the academic year 2014–2015, Rutgers University–New Brunswick conducted a comprehensive campus climate assessment of students' experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about sexual violence; this effort was called #iSPEAK.

The #iSPEAK initiative builds on Rutgers' decades-long commitment to addressing campus sexual violence. The Center on Violence Against Women and Children at Rutgers' School of Social Work leads the campus climate assessment.

The assessment comprised three major components, the centerpiece of which was a campus climate survey. The assessment process also included an audit of available campus resources on sexual violence. Finally, focus groups (21 focus groups with 179 students) were held with the general student population and subsets of the student body, including athletes; sexual violence survivors; members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community; members of Greek life; and representatives from cultural centers.

All students at Rutgers University–New Brunswick were invited to take the online campus climate survey. A broad outreach campaign, including print materials, social media, and direct communications, publicized the survey.

■ Over two weeks, 12,343 students—29.5 percent of all students invited to participate—accessed the #iSPEAK survey. Nearly 11,000 completed the full survey.

■ Four out of every five survey respondents (80 percent) were undergraduates.

■ Of the students who took the survey, 64 percent identified as women, 36 percent identified as men, and less than 1 percent identified as transgender or another gender.

#### Definition of Sexual Violence<sup>i</sup>

The #iSPEAK survey definition of sexual violence is based on material from the White House Task Force's *Not Alone* toolkit: "Sexual assault' and 'sexual violence' refer to a range of behaviors that are unwanted by the recipient and include remarks about physical appearance, persistent sexual advances that are undesired by the recipient, threats of force to get someone to engage in sexual behavior, as well as unwanted touching and unwanted oral, anal, or vaginal penetration or attempted penetration. These behaviors could be initiated by someone known or unknown to the recipient, including someone they are in a relationship with."

Six survey items asked respondents about whether or not they experienced different types of unwanted sexual contact; if they endorsed one or more of these items, they were categorized as having experienced sexual violence.

#### Key Findings

**Many students have already experienced sexual violence before starting school.** Nearly one in four undergraduate women (24 percent) reported experiencing sexual violence before coming to Rutgers. Those students who did not identify as 100 percent heterosexual were two to three times more likely to experience sexual violence both before coming to college and since becoming college students. This is consistent with other national research that indicates that the lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations are at an elevated risk of sexual victimization throughout their lifetimes.<sup>ii</sup>

**Rutgers students experience sexual violence at rates similar to those reported by other schools.** Among undergraduate women,<sup>iii</sup> who research indicates are most at-risk, one in five (20 percent) reported at least one instance of unwanted sexual contact since coming to Rutgers. Published reports from other

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higher education institutions estimate rates of sexual violence among undergraduate women ranging from 19 percent to 35 percent<sup>iv</sup> depending on the definition used.

**Overall, students who experienced sexual violence were unlikely to use campus services. However, when services were used, students were likely to say they were helpful.** Less than 11 percent of undergraduate victims disclosed to campus resources incidents of sexual violence. But those who did access campus services were more likely than not to report they were useful.

**Peers are an important source of support for students who experience sexual violence.** One in five (20 percent) of all Rutgers undergraduate students have had another Rutgers student tell them that they had experienced sexual violence. A total of 77 percent of students who were victimized since coming to Rutgers–New Brunswick and who told someone about it, told a close friend. This suggests that peers have the potential to connect survivors with campus resources—if they know about them.

**Students don't know enough about how Rutgers responds to sexual violence—but they want to learn.** The #iSPEAK survey and focus groups asked students about their awareness of campus resources that work to prevent or address sexual violence; students generally had moderate to low awareness. However, a majority expressed that they would like to learn more about sexual violence or do more to address it.

## Implications of the Findings

These results confirm what is already widely known: sexual violence affects far too many students, both before and after they come to college. Victimization rates at Rutgers are consistent with those reported by other schools. That those students who do not identify as 100 percent heterosexual are at elevated risk for sexual victimization both before and during college is consistent with other studies' findings and emphasizes the need for services that are responsive to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual student community. The findings from #iSPEAK support continued investment in prevention and response efforts on campus, as well as an expansion of services to meet the needs of those students who experienced sexual violence before coming to college.

#iSPEAK results also illustrate the need for increased education efforts to disseminate information about the many ways Rutgers addresses sexual violence. Too few survivors of sexual violence use the services that are available, even though they are generally seen as helpful. Further, a student who experiences sexual violence is more likely to tell a friend or fellow student than anyone else; peers can be a powerful source of support and connection to resources. Students' interest in learning more about what they can do about sexual violence, as captured by this assessment, points to an opportunity for administrators, faculty, staff, and students to elevate conversations about the issue and inform the student population.

Rutgers is committed to actively and openly addressing sexual violence in its community. #iSPEAK findings directly inform the university's action plan for preventing and responding to sexual violence in order to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for all students.

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**For More Information:** The campus climate assessment is a collaborative project conducted by Rutgers' Center on Violence Against Women and Children, Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance, and Office of Student Affairs. Support for the project was provided by the Rutgers University–New Brunswick Office of the Chancellor, School of Social Work, and Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. Details about the campus climate assessment can be found on the website of the Center on Violence Against Women and Children, at [vawc.rutgers.edu](http://vawc.rutgers.edu). Email the research team (principal investigator Sarah McMahon and research team members Kate Stepleton, Julia O'Connor, and Julia Cusano) at [campusclimatestudy@ssw.rutgers.edu](mailto:campusclimatestudy@ssw.rutgers.edu).

The research team at the Center on Violence Against Women and Children is compiling a resource for higher education institutions embarking on campus climate assessments. *Understanding and Responding*

*to Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide for Colleges and Universities* ([socialwork.rutgers.edu/CentersandPrograms/VAWC/researchevaluation/CampusClimateProject.aspx](http://socialwork.rutgers.edu/CentersandPrograms/VAWC/researchevaluation/CampusClimateProject.aspx)) documents methodological issues for consideration, lessons learned, and recommendations across dimensions of the campus climate assessment process, including: fostering campus collaborations, conducting a resource audit, conducting a student survey, collecting qualitative data, and developing an action plan.

To speak confidentially with a trained advocate or counselor, contact the Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 848-932-1181. Services are free and confidential to all members of the Rutgers University community. For assistance outside of Rutgers, please visit the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault ([njcasa.org](http://njcasa.org)) or the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network ([rainn.org](http://rainn.org)).

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<sup>i</sup> Definition is based on one provided in *Not Alone* toolkit, in introduction to the Readiness to Help Scale, [www.notalone.gov/assets/ovw-climate-survey.pdf](http://www.notalone.gov/assets/ovw-climate-survey.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> See Rothman, Exner & Baughman (2011) for a systematic review of the literature on the sexual victimization of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in the United States.

<sup>iii</sup> Although results presented here focus on undergraduate women, all enrolled students, regardless of gender or graduate/undergraduate status, were invited to participate in the survey. Detailed results about the full #iSPEAK sample will be made available in the future.

<sup>iv</sup> A survey of two public universities commissioned by the National Institute of Justice found that 19 percent of undergraduate women experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault while in college (Krebs, C.P., Lindquist, C.H., Warner, T.D., Fisher, B.S., & Martin, S.L. (2007). *The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study*. National Institute of Justice. Retrieved from: [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf)). Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) reports that 35 percent of undergraduate women experienced sexual harassment, rape, sexual assault, or other unwanted sexual behaviors while at MIT. (October 2014). *Survey Results: 2014 Community Attitudes on Sexual Assault*. Retrieved from: [web.mit.edu/surveys/health/MIT-CASA-Survey-Summary.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/surveys/health/MIT-CASA-Survey-Summary.pdf).