Sexual Assault Vulnerability and Prevention Among Marginalized College Students: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Disability

Dr. Heather L. McCauley, ScD
Human Development & Family Studies
Michigan State University
What do we mean by “marginalized”? 

- Individuals and groups who are excluded from mainstream social, economic, cultural or political life, and/or those who experience exploitation, inequity and harm because of discrimination and injustice.
Sexual and gender minority college students
Three common indices of sexual orientation

**Romantic and/or sexual attraction**
- opposite gender
- same gender

**Sexual behavior**
- opposite gender
- same gender

**Identity**
- heterosexual
- bisexual
- gay/lesbian
The continuum is important

Identity

100% Heterosexual  Mostly Heterosexual  Bisexual  Mostly Gay/Lesbian  100% Gay/Lesbian
“Do you consider yourself heterosexual, gay/lesbian or somewhere in between?”

- In our sample of 2,140 college students across 28 campuses:
  - 70.8% of participants identified as something other than heterosexual
  - 9.2% of sexually active, cisgender participants (n=1,735) have had consensual sex with partners of other genders
What does the ‘mostly heterosexual’ group look like?
Identity, attraction and behavior do not perfectly overlap

- Our sexual identity, who we are sexually attracted to, and who we have sex with can be very different things.
- How does this impact our ability to measure the prevalence of sexual assault?
  - e.g. measurement of sexual and gender minority status
- How does this influence our response to sexual assault?
  - Varied needs among community members

The Gender Unicorn

Gender Identity
- Female/Woman/Girl
- Male/Man/Boy
- Other Gender(s)

Gender Expression
- Feminine
- Masculine
- Other

Sex Assigned at Birth
- Female
- Male
- Other/Intersex

Physically Attracted to
- Women
- Men
- Other Gender(s)

Emotionally Attracted to
- Women
- Men
- Other Gender(s)

To learn more, go to: www.transstudent.org/gender

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore
Epidemiology of sexual assault and harassment among college students
What is the AAU Climate Survey?

- The AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct was carried out during April and May of 2015 at 26 AAU member universities – including University of Michigan and Michigan State University -- plus one private non-AAU institution.

- 150,072 students participated in the survey, including 92,306 undergraduate students and 57,776 graduate and professional students.
Findings from the AAU Campus Climate Survey

Sexual assault involving physical force or incapacitation

- 14% of gay or lesbian students
- 25% of bisexual students
- 19% of asexual or questioning students
- 11% of heterosexual students
- 12% of transgender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming students

Sexual assault involving lack of affirmative consent

- 9% of gay or lesbian students
- 14% of bisexual students
- 14% of asexual or questioning students
- 5% of heterosexual students

Sexual harassment is ubiquitous

- 60% of gay or lesbian students
- 69% of bisexual students
- 46% of heterosexual students
- 75% of transgender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming students

These findings have been replicated in study after study

- A 2015 study by Edwards and colleagues found that sexual minority students from eight New England universities (n=6,030) were **2.3 times more likely** than heterosexual students to experience sexual assault in the six months prior to the survey.

- Analysis of the Campus Sexual Assault Study (Martin 2011) conducted at two Midwestern Universities (n=5,439) found that 18% of lesbian women and 24% of bisexual women experienced sexual assault while in college, compared to 13% of heterosexual women.


Sexual and gender minorities and revictimization

- LGB youth are significantly more likely to experience sexual abuse, parental physical abuse, or assault by their peers (Friedman 2011)

- Sexual minority people are also equally or more likely to experience intimate partner violence (McCauley 2015)


Many students have experienced assault *prior to college*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Queer, cisgender students (behaviorally defined; n=158)</th>
<th>Non-queer, cisgender students (behaviorally defined; n=1558)</th>
<th>Transgender or genderqueer students (n=31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted fondling, kissing or touching</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted vaginal sex</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted oral sex</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted anal sex</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted penetration with fingers or objects</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(PI: E. Miller; Co-I: McCauley)
Early exposure and revictimization

- Violence victimization, including dating violence, sexual assault and child abuse, is associated with an increased risk for sexual assault in young adulthood.

- People who experience both sexual abuse in childhood and sexual assault in adulthood have higher levels of psychological distress, suicidality, alcohol use, and self-harm behaviors (regardless of sexual orientation) (Balsam 2011).

## Sexual assault in college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Queer, cisgender students (behaviorally defined; n=158)</th>
<th>Non-queer, cisgender students (behaviorally defined; n=1558)</th>
<th>Transgender or genderqueer students (n=31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted fondling, kissing or touching</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted vaginal sex</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted oral sex</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted anal sex</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwanted penetration with fingers or objects</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>44%</strong></td>
<td><strong>35%</strong></td>
<td><strong>27%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(PI: E. Miller; Co-I: McCauley)
There is increased risk for students with multiple intersecting identities

- A recent study of 71,421 undergraduate students (of whom 177 identified as transgender) from 120 higher education institutions (NCHA) found that **Black transgender students had the highest predicted probability of sexual assault (58%)**, compared to the predicted probability of sexual assault among Latino transgender students (27%) and white transgender students (14%) (Coulter 2017)

Frameworks for understanding LGBT sexual assault

- **Minority Stress**: heightened conflict with the social environment and limited access to resources result in increased vulnerability to poor health and maladaptive coping (e.g. substance use)

- **Intersectionality**

- **Gender attitudes** and gender role beliefs and cultural norms that condone sexual violence


Bisexuality and sexual assault

- Hypersexualization of queer people, bisexual people, in particular
- Corrective rape/sexual assault
- Stigma
  - Social isolation from both gay and straight communities
Gay and bisexual men

- “Traditional gender role norms, which specify that men are expected to live up to a heterosexual masculine ideal and possess traits such as toughness, aggressiveness, and dominance, are incongruent with the social perception of sexual assault victims as feminine, weak, and defenseless.” (Turchik 2013)
- Myths that men cannot be assaulted
- These rape myths are compounded by norms regarding hypermasculinity influencing gay and bisexual men


Sexual assault risk among gender diverse people

- National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that gender non-conformity is associated with violence and discrimination

- Transphobia: hatred or negative attitudes toward transgender people
Sexuality and gender identity can impact care seeking and disclosure
Trauma, internalized homophobia & mental health

- Acceptance of negative stereotypes and myths about homosexuality or “direction of negative social attitudes towards the self” (Frost 2009)

- LGB people who have experienced multiple forms of sexual abuse (e.g. in childhood and later in adulthood) are significantly more likely to have feelings of internalized homophobia (Gold 2007, 2009)

- Individuals who have feelings of internalized homophobia experience greater depressive and PTSD symptom severity (Gold 2007, 2009)

Internalized homophobia and disclosure

- LGB people who have feelings of internalized homophobia may blame themselves for the sexual assault, potentially impacting whether they disclose the assault to others.
Sexual assault and coming out

- If an LGBT person is struggling with coming out, he/she may believe that the sexual assault could have simply been a first-experience — something everyone must go through when coming out
- The survivor may not be able to make the distinction between consensual sex and sexual assault
- The survivor may choose not to come out
Why survivors do not disclose to health care providers…

“After the sexual assault, I did go to a free clinic that was for LGBT people. She asked me and I didn’t tell her the whole truth… I don’t know if she believed me or not… I just didn’t want it to be on my medical records…. [regarding sex work] I didn’t want to be shamed…. [regarding sexual assault] I just didn’t feel like it was relevant to my visit necessarily. Or that person, that physician, actually cared. Like, that they weren’t going to hand me another handout and rush me out. I feel like there’s a sense of urgency when you go to those appointments… they don’t have time to listen to your sob-story… You don’t really want to talk about it. I’m just going for my gynecological appointment. I’m not trying to have a mental breakdown.”

- white, bisexual-identified woman

(Mccauley 2018, in progress)
Why gender diverse students may not disclose

- Experience discrimination in the health care system
  - Trans people may delay care (or not disclose the violence they have experienced) because of their past history while care seeking

- Experience discrimination by law enforcement
  - “I got raped at 18 because they wanted to set me straight. I went to the police and the police said to me, ‘he who lays with dogs should expect to get fleas,’ that's what I got. So from that moment on I knew the police were never gonna help me.” Interviewee (Moran & Sharpe, 2002)
Perceived inclusivity of sexual and gender minority people on campus is associated with significantly lower odds of sexual assault (Odds Ratio 0.73; 95% CI 0.57,0.93)

How do LGBT-inclusive climates reduce sexual assault?
- Perpetrators may be less likely to target LGBT populations
- Increased positive bystander intervention for LGBT people
- Empower LGBT individuals to engage in harm reduction strategies

Findings from the AAU Campus Climate Survey: sought university resource

- Percent of victims of nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or incapacitation who sought help from a university resource:
  - 26% of cisgender female survivors
  - 23% of cisgender male survivors
  - 41% of transgender, genderqueer or gender non-conforming survivors

- Who else did you tell?
  - 78% of all victims told a friend

Key resources

Improving campus climate:
- Safe Space/Zone program
- Antidiscrimination policies
- LGBT centers

futureswithoutviolence.org
College students with disabilities
Findings from the AAU Campus Climate Survey

Disability status: “Do you have a disability registered with the university?”

Sexual assault involving physical force or incapacitation
- 21% of students with a disability
- 11% of students without a disability

Sexual assault involving lack of affirmative consent
- 11% of students with a disability
- 6% of students without a disability

Perpetrators may use a survivor’s disability to control, manipulate and abuse them
- Name calling (e.g. “crazy” or “bipolar”)
- “[He would say] ‘you always get so emotional, you need your safe space’”
- Blaming prior victimization on disability

Exacerbated mental health consequences

Perpetrators using disability to manipulate and control partners

“And, you know, obviously you don’t mix those [Xanax and vodka], but I did. And then so he called me that night, and at that point I just sounded like a mess, then so he offered to come, you know, get me, you know ‘you shouldn’t be alone,’ so I did, you know, accept the offer. I just like blacked out you know at some point, and so, when I woke up he was on top of me, he was having sex with me, and, um, I remember it really hurt. So I said to him stop, what are you doing, no.”

Contexts and consequences

- Stigma and social discrimination
- Isolation
  - Lack of accessibility
  - Lack of mobility and social isolation
- Dependency
- System and cultural barriers

Students with disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to experience depression symptoms, self-harm behavior, and stress after violent victimization.

Sexual assault response
Organizational readiness

- Assess staff comfort working with marginalized student groups
  - Implicit bias training
- Ensure that our universities have faculty, staff and administrators who reflect the social identities of all of those we serve
- Collaboration with community-based organizations for survivors
- Trauma-informed policies and practices
Speaking with a survivor

- Survivors have multiple intersecting identities
- Avoid assumptions (driven by stereotypes) about a client based on their appearance, the way they talk, or who they have had relationships with in the past
- Reflect the language that clients use to describe themselves and their sexual assaults
Thank you!

Heather L. McCauley, ScD

Department of Human Development & Family Studies
Michigan State University
mccaul49@msu.edu