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MAJOR ARTICLE



## Sexual violence victimization among community college students

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To assess the prevalence of sexual violence victimization among a community college student population. **Participants:** In March 2017, students (800) from seven community colleges in a northeastern state participated in an online campus climate survey using the ARC3 Survey Instrument. **Methods:** We analyze demographic differences between participants who were victimized and those who were not, and we examine the relationship between participant victimization and well-being. **Results:** Participants who identified as female, younger than 26, not heterosexual, or a race other than Caucasian were significantly more likely to report victimization. Participants who reported victimization were significantly more likely to score negatively on well-being scales than those who did not.

**Conclusions:** Sexual violence prevalence rates among community college students are similar to reported prevalence rates among traditional 4-year undergraduate students. Results suggest a need for increased research on sexual violence among the understudied community college student population.

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The serious public health problems of sexual assault, relationship violence, stalking, and sexual harassment at 4-year United States colleges and universities are well documented.<sup>1–5</sup> However, little is known about the prevalence of these problems among community college students. For that reason, we conducted a study to assess the prevalence of these forms of victimization in a community college population. Given that there is not a specific term to encapsulate this broad spectrum of interpersonal violence, we choose to use the phrase “sexual violence” as detailed in a *Journal of American College Health* White Paper outlining the serious implications of violence on campus.<sup>6</sup>

Community colleges are a central component of the U.S. higher education system, with more than 40% of undergraduates in the United States enrolled at 2-year institutions.<sup>7</sup> The affordability and flexibility offered at community colleges have allowed for a diverse student body, with high rates of enrollment among marginalized groups including women;<sup>8</sup> racial and ethnic minorities;<sup>9,10</sup> students with disabilities;<sup>11</sup> students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ);<sup>12</sup> and students of lower socio-economic status.<sup>13</sup> National sexual violence prevalence statistics suggest that these student

demographics represent a population more vulnerable to victimization,<sup>14–18</sup> yet little is known about the prevalence of sexual violence among community college students.

Comparatively, 4-year colleges and universities have been the focus of sexual violence research for approximately 30 years,<sup>4,19</sup> and victimization has been shown to negatively affect a college survivor’s short- and long-term mental health, physical health, and overall well-being.<sup>20–23</sup> For college students who are sexually victimized, the trauma often impacts their educational goals, career aspirations, and income potential.<sup>24–26</sup> Based on studies conducted at 4-year institutions, undergraduate sexual violence survivors are more likely to drop classes or change residences than nonvictimized students,<sup>2,27</sup> and victimization has been shown to negatively impact a college student’s grade point average (GPA)<sup>25,28</sup> and overall academic performance.<sup>20,24,27</sup>

Although high rates of sexual violence are well documented at traditional 4-year colleges and universities,<sup>4,3,5</sup> we were only able to find one published study focused on sexual violence among the community college population, which revealed high rates of intimate partner violence and sexual assault among female community college students.<sup>29</sup> In this study,

we aim to quantify rates of different forms of sexual violence victimization among males and females attending community college. We present findings from a campus climate survey administered at seven community colleges to demonstrate the unique demographics, needs, and challenges faced by students at these institutions, as well as the similarities and differences between community college students and students attending traditional 4-year colleges and universities. Additionally, we have examined the relationship between sexual violence victimization and three dimensions of well-being: academic engagement, mental health, and life satisfaction. To our knowledge, this is the first study to include an examination of the relationship between sexual violence victimization and well-being in a community college sample.

### Community college student demographics

Over the past century, the U.S. higher education system has transformed and expanded to meet the needs of individuals from varying backgrounds who desire to earn a college degree.<sup>30</sup> Though the “traditional” college experience still revolves around the notion of students living and attending classes on campus, today only 15% of all undergraduates in the U.S. live in residential on-campus housing.<sup>31</sup> The vast majority of students live at home and commute to their college campus or take classes online through distance learning programs. One-year certificate and 2-year associate degree programs offered at community colleges have provided affordable access to post-secondary education for individuals with more diverse backgrounds.<sup>32</sup>

Compared to students at traditional 4-year colleges, community college students are typically older and more likely to balance raising a family and maintaining a full-time job while pursuing their education.<sup>7</sup> These students are also more likely to be first generation college students and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>13,33</sup> The majority of Black, Hispanic, and Native American college students in the U.S. attend community colleges.<sup>7,30</sup> Other marginalized groups including women,<sup>8</sup> immigrants,<sup>34</sup> people with disabilities,<sup>11</sup> and people who identify as LGBTQ<sup>12</sup> also attend community colleges at higher rates than traditional 4-year colleges. According to national sexual violence statistics, these student demographics represent a population more vulnerable to victimization,<sup>14–18</sup> yet less likely to file a report with their school or law enforcement if they are victimized.<sup>35,36</sup> As described in a UN Special Report on sexual violence and vulnerable populations, factors

such as race, sexual or gender identity, language barriers, disability, class and ethnicity can “exacerbate the institutional failure with regard to the response to rape and sexual violence.”<sup>37</sup> Marginalized students may feel mistrustful of campus administrators or law enforcement due to past experiences of discrimination by authority figures.<sup>36</sup> Like their peers at traditional 4-year institutions,<sup>2</sup> community college students may stop attending classes after they are victimized instead of accessing the resources that can help them to recover from the trauma and achieve their educational goals.<sup>35,38</sup>

### Sexual violence incidents at community colleges

Since the majority of community college students commute to campus and do not live in a contained campus environment as do many of their peers at 4-year institutions, the nature and type of incidents of sexual violence reported by community college students often differ from those reported at traditional colleges with residential housing.<sup>35</sup> As noted in the 2015 Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA) report, because many sexual violence incidents reported to community colleges occur off campus and involve nonstudents, such as family members or intimate partners, the institution can only play a “limited role of providing support by connecting the victimized to local community resources and/or enforcing civil orders of protection on campus.”<sup>35</sup> In a review of the most recent Clery Act crime data available for this study, in 2015 only 11.9% of the 20,957 sexual violence crimes reported at colleges in the United States occurred at 2-year institutions. When broken down into more specific components, this overall percentage included 15.5% of stalking cases, 14.7% of relationship violence cases, and 7.4% of sex offenses (e.g. rape, fondling, incest).<sup>39</sup> While these data could be interpreted as evidence that sexual violence is not as prevalent among the community college population, critics of the Clery Act argue that these statistics only represent crimes that occur on campus and that are reported to administrators or law enforcement. Clery Act data does not take into account unreported crimes, or crimes that occur at a commuter student’s home or other off-campus location.<sup>40,41</sup> Given that the vast majority of community college students do not live on campus,<sup>7</sup> and the research showing that up to 90% of college sexual violence crimes go unreported,<sup>42</sup> it may be presumed that the rates of sexual violence crimes among the

community college population are much higher than depicted in Clery Act statistics.<sup>43</sup>

*Past victimization.* In a recent study examining sexual violence among a community college population, over 27% of female students in the sample experienced intimate partner violence within the last 12 months, and over 25% of female students experienced sexual assault in their lifetime.<sup>29</sup> The participants also reported a high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with nearly 20% of female community college students in their sample meeting the criteria for current PTSD.<sup>29</sup>

Another study examined lifetime traumatic experiences among a community college population and found high prevalence rates of past victimization experiences, including sexual assault victimization (35.8% of females and 16.6% of males), relationship violence victimization (18.8% of females and 12.1% of males), and stalking victimization (27.3% of females and 12.9% of males).<sup>44</sup> The researchers also found that students with these forms of interpersonal trauma were more likely to report experiencing depression, which has been linked to poor academic performance.<sup>45</sup> Compared to students attending traditional 4-year institutions, community college students are often still living in the homes and neighborhoods where the previous traumatic victimizations occurred.<sup>44</sup> In view of the research detailing the impact of trauma on a student's academic success,<sup>46,47</sup> and that Clery Act statistics are based on reported crimes only, it is important for community college educators and administrators to be aware of the high rates of students' past victimization, and cognizant of the effects of trauma on a student's school performance.

*Alcohol and victimization.* While reports of sexual assault are less common at community colleges than 4-year colleges,<sup>39</sup> the ASCA notes that community colleges do receive reports of sexual assault occurring at off-campus parties involving alcohol.<sup>35</sup> In general, students at community colleges report less alcohol abuse and binge drinking behaviors than their peers enrolled at 4-year institutions.<sup>48,49</sup> Chiauzzi and colleagues suggest that this difference is related to a number of the risk factors associated with alcohol use on traditional campuses that are not present on community college campuses, such as residence halls, Greek life, or athletics.<sup>49</sup> Considering the strong link between alcohol abuse and sexual assault perpetration and victimization,<sup>3</sup> the lower incidence of drinking on community college campuses removes the high-risk partying atmosphere to which students at 4-year colleges are often exposed,<sup>50,51</sup> and in turn reduces the

likelihood of alcohol-facilitated sexual assault. Compared to students at 4-year institutions, community college students report less alcohol abuse, but report higher rates of other forms of substance abuse (e.g. marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines),<sup>49,52</sup> which have also been linked to violent behavior, especially in the context of ongoing relationship violence among intimate partners.<sup>53–55</sup>

*Survivor resources.* Previous research focusing on students at 4-year institutions indicates that student survivors of sexual violence frequently have trouble attending class due to mental health impacts from the trauma.<sup>2,27</sup> As Edman and colleagues note, community college student survivors often have added stressors, including fewer financial resources, families to care for, and full-time employment off campus. These survivors are likely to miss class due to competing demands such as court appearances, doctor visits, or relocating their household to a safer environment.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, students in abusive relationships may experience intentional school sabotage by their partner, such as behaviors that keep them from studying or attending class (e.g. destroying homework, denying access to transportation), as well as stalking or harassing the victim at their school. Given the importance of educational attainment on an individual's income potential, these school sabotage tactics can severely impact a victim's ability to gain the economic independence needed to escape the abusive relationship.<sup>56</sup>

Research suggests that access to disability services and mental and physical health care after a traumatic incident can greatly affect a survivor's chances of remaining in school and recovering from the trauma.<sup>38,57,58</sup> However, most college students are not aware of resources their school provides, including disability services for students diagnosed with mental health disorders, such as PTSD and depression.<sup>59,60</sup> Considering that more than 60% of community college students drop out of school before obtaining their degrees, these supports are essential to help all students victimized by sexual violence crimes succeed in their academic endeavors.<sup>61</sup>

### Campus administrator challenges

Community colleges face many challenges to meet the sexual violence prevention and response expectations detailed in federal guidelines, including Title IX, the Clery Act, and the Campus SaVE Act.<sup>28,35,62</sup> While community colleges hold a vital role in our education system, they are often underfunded and staff members are overworked.<sup>63</sup> A 2016 report from a forum of

community college campus leaders highlights the challenges administrators face in obtaining the “resources, buy-in, and momentum” to create a climate for preventing and responding to campus violence.<sup>63</sup> Compared to traditional 4-year institutions, community colleges are less likely to have designated full-time Title IX investigators, victim advocates, legal counsel, health educators, or student affairs staff, which are often critical to effective campus violence prevention and response.<sup>35,63</sup> Together, these challenges have caused community college administrators to struggle to comply with legislation that is generally targeted at institutions serving full-time college students who are of traditional college age (18 to 24 years-old).<sup>35</sup>

Although federal mandates require all publicly funded educational institutions to participate in yearly sexual assault prevention programs, many community college administrators are not fulfilling this obligation. In a study of the health resources available to college students, only 29% of community college students reported receiving any information on sexual assault and relationship violence prevention, compared to 60% of traditional university students.<sup>64</sup> Access to health resources is often neglected at community colleges due to the misconception that the significant proportion of commuter students are able to access health care in their communities.<sup>65</sup> However, research suggests that community college students are actually in more need of mental and physical health services than their counterparts at traditional colleges, as they are more likely to report severe mental health problems,<sup>64</sup> and are less likely to have health insurance.<sup>66</sup> These findings highlight the need for more funding and focus on sexual violence prevention and mental health services on community college campuses.

### The current study

The limited research highlights the importance of better understanding sexual violence victimization experiences of community college students, and the unique needs and challenges administrators on these campuses face in their efforts to address sexual violence. Currently, little is known about the prevalence rates of sexual violence victimization among community college students. The purpose of this study was to determine rates and demographic risk factors of sexual violence victimization among community college students, including sexual assault; relationship violence; stalking; sexual harassment by faculty/staff; and sexual harassment by fellow students.

Given the demonstrated impact of sexual violence victimization on a traditional 4-year college survivor’s academic and general well-being,<sup>24–27</sup> we also examined the relationship between sexual violence victimization and three dimensions of well-being: academic engagement, mental health, and life satisfaction. We hypothesized that participants who experienced any form of victimization since enrolling at their institution would report lower mental health, and life satisfaction scores and higher academic disengagement scores than participants who did not experience any form of victimization. Additionally, participants who experienced a greater number of types of victimization would report lower well-being scores than participants who experienced fewer or no incidents of victimization. To our knowledge, this is one of only a few studies to focus on sexual violence in a sample of community college students, and the first to analyze the relationship between sexual violence victimization and well-being among this population.

## Methods

### Study population

The study populations were students enrolled at seven community colleges located in a northeastern state. All seven colleges are publicly funded, open enrollment institutions that are part of a collaborative project funded by the Office on Women’s Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to facilitate campus sexual violence prevention and response efforts. The project requirements include the administration of a campus climate survey to gauge sexual misconduct prevalence among their student population.<sup>67</sup>

In the spring semester of 2017, the researchers collaborated with the seven partner colleges to disseminate the campus climate survey to all students. The collective sample is unique because it provides a view of sexual violence victimization among a community college population, a demographic that has been studied on a very limited basis.

*Participant recruitment.* Following IRB approval from the research university and the seven community colleges, invitations to partake in the survey were sent to all students enrolled in classes at the participating institutions via their student email account in March 2017. The email was sent from the community college system’s Title IX Coordinator and invited students to participate in an anonymous public health survey that would take approximately 25 min to complete. Students were offered the chance to win one of one hundred \$20 gift cards for their participation. To

assure anonymity, students who completed the survey were redirected to a separate survey form to enter their email addresses for participation in the gift card raffle. The researchers collected and managed data using Qualtrics, a secure, web-based application designed to support data collection for research studies. All analyses were performed using SPSS software version 24.0.

### Survey instrument

The Administrator Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative (ARC3) Climate Survey is an empirically-sound, no-cost, campus climate survey for U.S. institutions of higher education, designed by a consortium of experts in the field of sexual violence.<sup>68,69</sup> The ARC3 climate survey has been recommended by the Office of Violence Against Women and the Changing Campus Culture organization,<sup>70,71</sup> and was considered favorably in a review of ten different campus climate surveys,<sup>41</sup> due to its “wide scope of assessment and the integration of existing, validated measures of sexual misconduct.”<sup>69</sup>

The ARC3 measures prevalence and incidence rates of sexual violence among student population, and also includes questions regarding students’ well-being; knowledge on institutional response to sexual violence; and social norms.<sup>72</sup> The survey uses existing validated measures to determine rates of sexual violence, which are divided into modules to allow institutions to adapt the survey content for their individual campus needs, while maintaining validity of measurements.<sup>68</sup> Pilot tests conducted by the survey creators at three universities demonstrated internal consistency, and “relations between constructs assessed are in line with the extant research literature on those topics.”<sup>69</sup> The researchers chose to use the ARC3 survey given that it was easily adapted for use with different types of college campuses, and because currently, there are no climate surveys tailored specifically for community and nonresidential college students.<sup>41</sup>

### Demographics measures

The ARC3 modeled the participant demographics questions on the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault Climate Survey and the Rutgers Campus Climate Survey.<sup>73,74</sup> The questions provide information on the participant’s age; gender identity; race; sexual orientation; semester enrolled at their school; and with whom they live.

### Participant well-being

In this study, participant well-being was measured using three scales within the ARC3: academic disengagement, life satisfaction, and mental health.

*Academic disengagement* was assessed using an eight-item measure of behaviors during the past academic semester, including missed class, made excuses to get out of class, been late for class, done poor class-work, attended class intoxicated, slept in class, thought about dropping class, or thought about quitting school.<sup>75</sup> For each behavior, participants responded on a five-point scale from 0 = *almost never* to 4 = *almost always*. The version of this measure included in the ARC3 Campus Climate Survey has evidence for acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .69.<sup>68</sup> In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .74.

*Life Satisfaction* was assessed using the Satisfaction with Life Scale.<sup>76</sup> Items included “I am satisfied with the conditions of my life” and “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.” For each item, participants responded on a five-point scale from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. The version of this measure included in the ARC3 has evidence for strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .89.<sup>68</sup> In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .89.

*Mental Health* was assessed using five emotional well-being items that the ARC3 authors selected from the Medical Outcome Study 36-Item Short-Form Health Survey.<sup>77</sup> Participants were asked about their behaviors over the past four weeks including how often they “felt calm and peaceful,” “felt down-hearted and blue,” or “felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up.” For each item, participants responded on a 5-point scale from 0 = *never* to 4 = *always*. The version of this measure included in the ARC3 has evidence for strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .82.<sup>68</sup> In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .84.

### Sexual violence victimization

The ARC3 includes pre-existing validated measures for five types of sexual violence victimization including sexual assault, relationship violence, stalking, sexual harassment by a faculty or staff member, and sexual harassment by a fellow student. Participants were asked to report victimization incidents that have occurred since they enrolled at their current institution. For each form of sexual violence, participants who indicated experiencing at least one incident of victimization were asked follow-up questions about

the context of the incident that had the greatest impact on them. For the current analyses, we used a dichotomous variable with “1” scored if any of the victimization items were endorsed, and “0” if none of the items were endorsed. Chi-square tests were used to compare demographic information between participants who reported victimization and those participants who did not.

**Sexual assault.** Sexual assault victimization was measured using the Sexual Experiences Survey Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV).<sup>78,79</sup> The SES-SFV measures experiences of unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape (anal, oral, and vaginal), and rape (anal, oral, and vaginal). Each item is endorsed in relation to one of five types of perpetrator tactics: verbal pressure from the perpetrator, expression of anger from the perpetrator, victim incapacitation due to intoxication, threat of physical harm from the perpetrator, and use of physical force by the perpetrator. The version of this measure included in the ARC3 has evidence for strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .92.<sup>68</sup> In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .94.

**Relationship violence.** The Relationship Violence Victimization module used measures from the Partner Victimization Scale<sup>80</sup> and the Women’s Experience with Battering Scale<sup>81</sup> to assess both physical and psychological relationship violence experienced by participants. In this module, items such as “Not including horseplay or joking around, the person pushed, grabbed, or shook me,” “the person hit me,” “the person beat me up,” and “the person stole or destroyed my property” assess the type and frequency of physical relationship violence a participant has experienced; items such as “Not including horseplay or joking around, the person can scare me without laying a hand on me” and “the person threatened to hurt me and I thought I might really get hurt” assess the type and frequency of psychological relationship violence. The version of this measure included in the ARC3 has evidence for strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .89.<sup>68</sup> In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .88.

**Stalking.** The Stalking Victimization module used eight items from The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) to assess the frequency of stalking victimization.<sup>82,83</sup> The scale included items such as, “someone watched or followed me from a distance, or spied on me with a listening device, camera, or GPS [global positioning system]” to assess in-person stalking. The scale also included items such as, “someone sent you unwanted emails,

instant messages, or sent messages through social media apps” to assess cyber stalking. The version of this measure included in the ARC3 has evidence for very strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .89.<sup>68</sup> In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .87.

**Sexual harassment by faculty or staff.** Sexual harassment by a faculty member, instructor, or staff member was assessed using the 16-item *Department of Defense Sexual Experiences Questionnaire* (SEQ-DoD), which measures sexist hostility/sexist gender harassment, sexual hostility/crude gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion experienced by a faculty or staff member.<sup>84–86</sup> The version of the SEQ-DoD included in the ARC3 has evidence for very strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .95.<sup>68</sup> In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .93.

**Sexual harassment by students.** Sexual harassment by fellow students was assessed with nine items from the SEQ-DoD, which measured sexist hostility/sexist gender harassment, sexual hostility/crude gender harassment, and unwanted sexual attention.<sup>84–86</sup> Additionally, sexual harassment via electronic/online communication was measured with three items from the AAUW Knowledge Networks Survey.<sup>87</sup> The version of this measure included in the ARC3 has evidence for very strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .93.<sup>68</sup> In the current study the Cronbach’s alpha was .92

## Results

### Participant demographics

Of the 11,488 community college students emailed the survey link, 1,053 opened the link and completed some part of the survey. Thus, the overall response rate was 9.2%. Of the 1,053 students who responded to the survey, 800 (75.9%) completed all 18 survey modules to comprise the final sample. Response rate by college ranged from 6.6 to 11.5%.

The majority of participants in the final sample identified as female (68.8%), 28.0% identified as male, and 3.3% identified as transgender/gender nonbinary. Most participants identified as heterosexual (80.8%). Forty-six percent of the participants were between the ages of 18–21; 18.0% between the ages of 22–25; and 35.6% were 26 years or older. Racially, the sample was quite homogenous, with 90.8% identifying as White/Caucasian. The other 9.2% of the participants identified as one or more of the following races; Black/African American, Asian or Asian American, Hispanic, Native American, or Pacific Islander, as well

**Table 1.** Reported participant victimization by gender.

Types of victimization	Females (N = 550)		Males (N = 224)		Trans/ nonbinary (N = 26)		All reported victimization (N = 800)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sexual assault	70	12.7	12	5.4	6	23.1	88	11.0
Relationship violence	113	20.5	23	10.3	7	26.9	143	17.9
Stalking	80	14.5	30	13.4	4	15.4	114	14.3
SH <sup>a</sup> by faculty/staff	105	19.1	44	19.6	14	53.8	163	20.4
SH <sup>a</sup> by student	149	27.1	58	25.9	16	61.5	233	27.9
Any victimization	281	51.1	87	38.8	19	73.1	387	48.4

<sup>a</sup>Sexual harassment.

as students who identified as two or more races including White/Caucasian. The lack of racial diversity in our sample is consistent with demographics in this geographical area; however, White/Caucasian students were overrepresented in our sample, based on institutional data comparisons using paired samples t-tests across the seven colleges,  $t(6) = 4.66$ ,  $p \leq .01$ . Women were also overrepresented across all institutional subsamples  $t(6) = 3.97$ ,  $p \leq .01$ , with men and racial minorities slightly underrepresented.

Approximately 42.7% of participants were enrolled in their first or second semester at their institutions, with 27.2% in their third or fourth semester, and 29.8% enrolled for five semesters or more. Nearly half of participants (48.8%) reported taking all of their classes on campus, while 45.6% reported taking some classes on campus and some online, and 5.6% reported taking all of their classes online. The majority of participants lived off-campus (95.4%), except for a small percentage of participants who reported living in on-campus housing offered at two of the community colleges. Many participants reported living with family: 40.7% with a partner and/or children and 44.8% with a parent and/or other family member. Additionally, 5.5% of participants lived alone off-campus, and 6.7% lived with a friend, roommate or other living situation off-campus.

### Participant victimization

The aggregate data revealed that nearly half (48.4%) of study participants reported at least one form of sexual violence victimization since enrolling at their college, including sexual assault (11.0%), relationship violence (17.9%), stalking (14.3%), sexual harassment by faculty/staff (20.4%), and sexual harassment by students (27.9%) (Table 1). Nearly a quarter of the participants (24.8%) reported multiple types of victimization since enrolling in their current institution. Ninety-six participants (12.2%) reported two types of victimization; 52 participants (6.6%) reported

three types of victimization; and 37 participants (4.7%) reported four or more types of victimization since enrolling at their college.

### Participant demographics and victimization

Univariate descriptive statistics were obtained for both the participants who reported victimization and the participants who did not report victimization. Chi-square statistical tests were calculated to examine victimization in the context of participant demographics, and several demographic characteristics were significantly related to victimization. In Table 2, we present the demographic information of participants who reported at least one type of campus violence victimization since enrolling at their school, compared to participants who did not report victimization. A significantly higher percentage of women and participants who identified as transgender or gender nonbinary reported victimization compared to men,  $X^2 = 16.1$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants who had been victimized were significantly more likely to be under the age of 26 compared to nonvictimized students,  $X^2 = 31.5$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ . Significant differences were also found based on race, with participants identifying as a race other than White/Caucasian reporting significantly higher rates of victimization compared to participants who identified as White/Caucasian,  $X^2 = 8.2$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ . Identifying as a sexual orientation other than heterosexual was related to an increased likelihood of experiencing victimization compared to identifying as heterosexual,  $X^2 = 22.3$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ . A significant difference in victimization was also found based on a participant's housing situation, with participants who lived with a partner and/or children significantly less likely to report victimization when compared with participants in other housing situations,  $X^2 = 30.9$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p < .001$ .



**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics by reported victimization.

Characteristics	n	Reported victimization		No reported victimization		X <sup>2</sup>	df	p
		%	%	%	%			
Gender identity						16.1	2	<.001
Female	550	51.1	48.9					
Male	224	38.8	61.2					
Trans/nonbinary	26	73.1	26.9					
Sexual orientation						22.3	1	<.001
Heterosexual	636	44.2	55.8					
Nonheterosexual	151	65.6	34.4					
Age						31.5	1	<.001
18–25	513	55.8	44.2					
26 or older	283	35.0	65.0					
Race						8.2	1	<.01
Caucasian	727	46.8	53.2					
Non-Caucasian	73	64.4	35.6					
Living situation						30.9	5	<.001
Live with partner and/or children	307	37.1	62.9					
Live with parent and/or family	339	52.5	47.5					
Live with partner and/or children and parent and/or family	19	52.6	47.4					
Live on-campus	37	70.3	29.7					
Live alone (off-campus)	44	56.8	43.2					
Live with friends/roommates/other (off-campus)	54	63.0	37.0					
Semesters enrolled						2.4	2	.306
1–2 semesters	339	45.7	55.9					
3–4 semesters	217	47.0	53.6					
5 or more semesters	237	53.2	46.8					
Online versus on campus						2.2	2	.336
All classes on campus	390	51.0	49.0					
All classes online	45	44.4	55.6					
Both	365	46.0	54.0					

**Table 3.** Follow-up questions from participants reporting victimization.

	Sexual assault		Relationship violence		Stalking	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
What was the gender of the perpetrator?						
Male	70	90.9	117	84.2	78	75.7
Female	7	9.1	22	15.8	25	24.3
What was your relationship to the perpetrator?						
Current/former partner	34	42.5	125	88.7	21	19.4
Friend/acquaintance	35	43.8	12	8.5	55	50.9
Stranger	8	10.0		NA	26	24.1
Other	3	3.8	4	2.8	6	5.6
Did this happen on campus?						
Yes	11	13.6	11	7.8	46	43.0
No	70	86.4	130	92.2	61	57.0
Was the perpetrator a student at your school?						
Yes	19	23.8	23	16.8	62	59.0
No	55	68.8	114	83.2	28	36.7
I don't know	6	7.5		NA	15	14.3
Had the perpetrator been using alcohol or drugs prior to the incident?						
Yes	34	42.5	36	25.6	16	14.7
No	26	32.5	73	51.8	41	37.6
I don't know	20	25.0	32	22.7	52	47.7
Had you been using alcohol or drugs prior to the incident?						
Yes	30	39.0	24	17.0	13	12.0
No	47	61.0	117	83.0	95	88.0

**Participant victimization context**

Participants who reported at least one experience of victimization were directed to contingent questions regarding the experience that impacted them most. Most (96.8%), but not all respondents who reported victimization completed these contingent questions. In

Table 3, we present the results of the follow-up questions for sexual assault, relationship violence and stalking, with information on the perpetrator and incident characteristics. For all three forms of sexual violence, the majority of participants reported that the perpetrator was a male (sexual assault = 90.9% relationship violence = 84.2%; stalking = 75.7%). and

was someone the victim knew rather than a stranger (sexual assault = 90%; relationship violence = 100%; stalking = 75.9%). For incidents of relationship violence and sexual assault, the majority of perpetrators were not students at the participant's school and the incident did not occur on campus. However, more than half of stalking victims (59.0%) reported that their perpetrator was a student at their school, and almost half of the stalking incidents (43.0%) occurred on campus. When asked if the perpetrator was using alcohol or drugs prior to the incident, many participants were unsure. The majority of victims were not using alcohol or drugs before the incident (79.4%). Participants who reported sexual harassment by faculty/staff or sexual harassment by students were also asked follow-up questions about the gender of their perpetrator and how they reacted to the incident (not shown in table). For both types of sexual harassment (SH) victimization, the majority of perpetrators were male (SH by faculty/staff = 73.9%; SH by student = 80.3%). When asked how the participant responded to the harassment, the most common response was to ignore the person and do nothing (SH by faculty/staff = 57.9%; SH by student = 53.4%), and the least common response was to report the person (SH by faculty/staff = 6.6%; SH by student = 4.2%).

### Participant victimization and well-being

Using an independent samples *t*-test, we examined the difference in mean scores for three well-being scales, including mental health, life satisfaction, and academic disengagement. Compared to participants who did not report victimization, participants who reported victimization had significantly lower mental health scores,  $t(798) = -5.65, p < .001$ ; lower life satisfaction scores,  $t(790) = -4.17, p < .001$ ; and higher academic disengagement scores,  $t(785) = 5.98, p < .001$  (Table 4).

In Table 5, we present the results of an ANOVA which we used to examine whether mean score of the well-being scales differed depending on the number of types of victimization a participant had experienced. Polyvictimization was coded from no previous victimization (0) to four or more types of victimization (4). Number of types of victimization were significantly

correlated with more negative well-being, including mental health,  $F(4, 798) = 14.10, p < .001$ ; life satisfaction,  $F(4, 790) = 8.04, p < .001$ ; and academic disengagement  $F(4, 785) = 22.24, p < .001$ .

### Comment

This study revealed high prevalence rates of sexual violence victimization among the understudied community college student population. These findings demonstrate the need for further research and improved services on community college campuses. Nearly half of our sample (48.4%) reported experiencing at least one form of sexual violence victimization since enrolling at their institution. Overall, our findings were consistent with previous literature on rates of sexual violence victimization on traditional 4-year college and university campuses. The present results provide initial evidence that sexual violence victimization rates are similarly high among the community college student population when compared to previous studies of victimization at traditional 4-year colleges and universities.<sup>3,5</sup> Additionally, the demographic risk factors for sexual violence victimization in our sample were consistent with past research. For instance, identifying as female or transgender/gender nonbinary, being younger than 26 years of age, identifying as a race other than White/Caucasian, and disclosing a sexual orientation other than heterosexual were all statistically significant predictors of sexual violence victimization.<sup>15,17,18,88</sup>

The study also contributes to the wider research on the association between sexual violence victimization and well-being.<sup>26-28,89</sup> The present data supported our hypothesis that victimization of any kind was associated with greater mental health problems, lower satisfaction with life, and higher academic disengagement scores. The data also indicated that polyvictimization was significantly correlated with greater negative well-being, with the more types of victimization experienced by students associated with poorer mental health, lower life satisfaction, and higher academic disengagement. These findings add to the literature on the co-occurrence of different types of sexual violence, as 24.8% of participants reported experiencing two or

**Table 4.** Comparison of participant well-being measures by reported victimization.

	Reported victimization		No reported victimization		<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Mental health	11.13	4.08	12.75	4.05	-5.65	798	<.001
Life satisfaction	10.37	4.68	11.72	4.39	-4.17	790	<.001
Academic disengagement	4.32	4.21	2.72	3.26	5.98	785	<.001

**Table 5.** Participant well-being by number of reported victimization types.

	Number of types of victimization reported										ANOVA	
	0 (n = 406)		1 (n = 196)		2 (n = 96)		3 (n = 52)		4 + (n = 37)		F ratio	Alpha
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Mental health	12.82	4.04	11.82	4.07	11.62	3.89	9.89	4.19	8.86	4.14	14.10	<.001
Life satisfaction	11.82	4.46	11.14	4.54	10.70	4.34	9.36	5.17	8.45	4.59	8.04	<.001
Academic disengagement	2.72	3.26	3.35	3.71	4.29	3.72	5.67	4.72	7.60	5.07	22.24	<.001

more types of victimization since enrolling at their school. Participants who reported more types of victimization also reported higher scores of negative well-being, a finding consistent with previous research on sexual violence polyvictimization.<sup>27,90</sup>

### **Implications for institutional and community response**

Our findings reveal high rates of sexual violence victimization among the community college student population, and demonstrate the importance of providing support for students who are experiencing violence in their homes and communities. Research shows that access to mental health resources and disability services can increase the chances that a victimized student can stay in school and overcome the trauma.<sup>38</sup> However, when a community college student experiences sexual violence victimization, they have limited access to health and counseling resources through their institution, as only 42% of community colleges report having a health center on their campus<sup>49</sup> and only 24% of community college students report receiving information related to mental health issues from their institution.<sup>64</sup> Given the proven emotional and academic impacts of sexual violence,<sup>25–28,56</sup> additional supports for student survivors could greatly impact their chances of staying in school and completing their degree. Community college administrators need to make a focused effort to address the insufficient resources for survivors on their campuses. This can begin by building relationships with community-based health resources, such as local crisis centers, whose victim advocates are available to provide services to students who have been victimized, as well as help facilitate prevention trainings on campus.<sup>56,62</sup>

Additionally, community colleges must work to accurately identify the occurrence of sexual violence among their student population, and better inform students of reporting procedures on their campus. All colleges are required to report incidents of sexual violence in order to comply with state and federal laws,<sup>91</sup> yet research from 4-year colleges reveals that only a small proportion of students know where to report

sexual violence, or what will happen after a report is made.<sup>59</sup> A study by Crumb and colleagues demonstrated how training community college student leaders on sexual misconduct policies and procedures may lead to increased reporting on campus. These findings suggest that educating students about sexual misconduct is an effective way to disseminate reporting information, and can help create an environment where reporting is a “fluid and reasonable expectation.”<sup>91</sup> It is also important for community college administrators to consider ways to distribute sexual misconduct information to online students, who may never step foot on a traditional campus.<sup>35</sup>

### **Implications for prevention**

Most recommendations for campus violence policy and prevention implementation have targeted the involvement of student organizations; athletics; student affairs; campus based law enforcement; and health providers.<sup>63</sup> Community colleges, however, are not necessarily organized like residential colleges, lacking student associations common at traditional 4-year colleges and universities.<sup>35</sup> Thus, it is necessary to tailor prevention practices, strategies, and policies to address the needs and nature of community college students. It cannot be assumed that best practices and strategies created for residential, 4-year schools are most effective on community colleges with significantly different campus structure and student demographics.<sup>92,93</sup> Furthermore, research indicates that when target audience members see people who look like them or their classmates in the prevention strategy, the prevention message is more likely to resonate.<sup>94,95</sup> Therefore, it is important for community colleges to adapt prevention programs to reflect the diversity of the student population.

### **Limitations**

The current study has a number of limitations. First, the overall response rate was 9.2%. Of the 11,488 students who were sent invitations to complete the survey, 1,053 entered the survey and 800 completed the

survey. While this response rate is low, a sample size of 800 participants was adequate to provide individuals who had experienced sexual violence. Power analyses were conducted and all target sample sizes were smaller than the 800 samples obtained.<sup>96–98</sup> However, we used a convenience sample of community college students, which limits the generalizability of these findings. Even so, the sample size was large enough to provide valuable and new information about community college student populations' sexual violence victimization experiences, as well as the relationship between victimization and negative well-being of students in these populations. Second, all of the participating institutions were located in one state in the northeastern United States with limited racial diversity. Even though we found differences in victimization based on race, future research on this topic should include student populations from these institutions from geographic areas with more racially diverse populations in order to corroborate our findings.

Third, although the majority of participants in our sample (95.4%) live off campus and commute to their college or take classes online, a small portion of students live in residential housing offered at two of the community colleges. While most community colleges do not offer residential housing, according to the American Association of Community Colleges, 27% of public community colleges offer on-campus housing for students.<sup>7</sup> On traditional college campuses, living in a residence hall has been shown to be a risk factor for sexual violence victimization.<sup>2</sup> In our study, students living in residence halls were more likely to report victimization. Approximately 70.3% of participants living in residence halls reported at least one type of victimization since they started attending classes at their community college, compared to 49.0% of students at these two community colleges who did not live on campus. Additionally, the overall rates of victimization at these two colleges were slightly higher than at the other community colleges without residential housing. Further research should examine how on-campus residential housing at community colleges impacts the campus culture, and the rates of victimization among its student population.

Lastly, though we conducted the survey in coordination with the ARC3 designers, to our knowledge there are no published studies using the ARC3 Campus Climate Survey. While the ARC3 combines various validated measures, this is the first study to present these outcomes in a publication.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study is significant for identifying rates of sexual violence victimization

among community college students, as well as demonstrating the negative relationship between sexual violence victimization and well-being, which has not previously been studied among this population. Institutions of higher learning have a commitment to protect their students from sexual violence and respond when it occurs. Given the increasing importance of obtaining a college degree to an individual's lifetime earnings and overall well-being, the community college population could especially benefit from higher education to improve their social and economic standing.<sup>29,56</sup> Therefore, more must be done to support students who have been victimized, and prevent future victimization among this vulnerable population. This study is valuable for students, educators, and administrators at community colleges to better understand the high rates of sexual violence and the negative implications on academic and general well-being. In conclusion, this study demonstrates the importance of prevention and response to sexual violence on nontraditional college campuses. Future research is needed to better understand the prevalence of sexual violence victimization among community college students, and the most effective intervention strategies for protecting students from this serious public health problem.

## Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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