

LearningNetwork

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

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SEXUAL VIOLENCE (SV) ADVOCACY AND CAMPUS COMMUNITIES *SV CAMPUS POLICIES*

This Brief provides context for current sexual violence policies on post-secondary campuses and highlights the critical role of collective advocacy for bringing about change. It is a companion piece to the Learning Network 2022 Virtual Forum presented in partnership with Students for Consent Culture Canada: *Reinventing Our Campuses: Creating Real Community Safety to Address Sexual Violence*. [Click here to learn more about the Virtual Forum.](#)

If you're a student graduating from a Canadian university or college this year, it's more likely than not that your post-secondary experience has occurred within an institution that has a government-legislated sexual violence policy.

It wasn't so long ago that few to no colleges and universities in Canada had policies to address sexual violence. Advances in post-secondary policy came thanks to a combination of factors. A number of high-profile incidences of sexual violence occurring in North America in 2014 and 2015, coupled with the rise of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, means that awareness of sexual violence has been steadily increasing. While sexual violence has always been a problem on campuses and elsewhere, more and more, those that have experienced sexual violence are speaking about their experiences, seeking support, and pointing out the serious impacts of sexual violence.¹ In addition, some government investments in sexual violence responses created a positive example for other provinces and institutions. These social contexts created a climate where change was increasingly possible.

More than anything, this change is sustained through on-the-ground advocacy led by students, sexual violence survivors, and community-based activists. Their collective activism has helped bring about sexual violence policies in post-secondary institutions in Canada.

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[Nicole's work](#) has appeared in York University's Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering, the University of Toronto's Women's Health and Urban Life, and Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme. Nicole is also published in *Adoption and Mothering* (Demeter Press) and *Reena Virk: Critical perspectives on a Canadian murder* (Canadian Scholars Press).

WHY POLICY, AND WHY POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS?

Sexual violence can happen anywhere. Yet, colleges and universities in Canada are home to some of those who are at the highest statistical risk of experiencing sexual violence.

A 2020 Statistics Canada report showed that a majority (71%) of students at Canadian postsecondary schools witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours in a postsecondary setting in 2019.²

Students who were bisexual and students living with a disability were particularly overrepresented in having experienced sexual violence. While both women and men indicated that they experienced negative emotional consequences to sexual violence, these consequences were more common for women—for example, women were more likely to report impacts related to being fearful for their safety and impacts related to negative mental health.³ Still, few spoke with campus staff about their experiences. When asked why they did not tell anyone about what happened, students shared that they “saw what happened as not serious enough to report”; others cited “a lack of knowledge about what to do or a mistrust in how the school would handle the situation.”⁴



With the realities about prevalence and students’ limited awareness of support options, it is clear that post-secondary institution administrators should address sexual violence. Campus communities ought to be asking:

What measures are post-secondary institutions undertaking to prevent and respond to sexual violence on campuses?

What concerns are students facing at post-secondary campuses?

What help is available to support students affected by sexual violence?

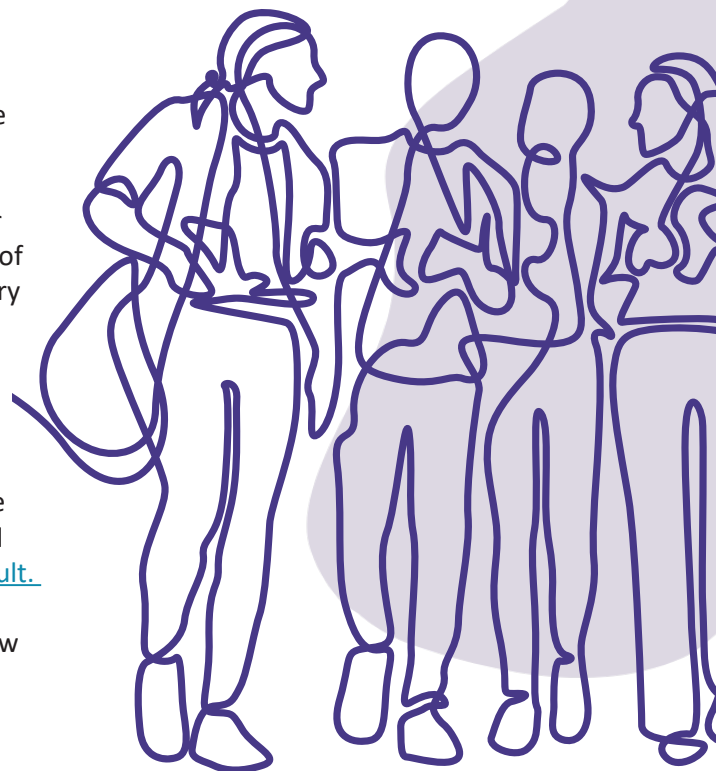


PUSHING FOR LASTING CHANGE

In 2014, a three-month-long Toronto Star investigation found that only nine of 78 Canadian universities had a sexual violence policy; of 24 colleges surveyed in Ontario at that time, none had a policy. The study found that Lakehead University in Thunder Bay developed a strong policy in the wake of a student’s sexual assault.⁵ But what if every

post-secondary institution waited for such circumstances to address sexual violence on campus?

Many were already taking action at the community level. In some communities, students petitioned for on-campus sexual violence services.⁶ In the Maritimes, student protests and demands for change resulted from incidents like the [2015 Dalhousie Dentistry scandal](#) and the [2013 Saint Mary’s University frosh week chant about sexual assault](#). Student groups and community-based sexual assault centres across Canada were also engaged in various collaborative projects, which saw campuses and community work together to address sexual violence.⁷ These collaborative projects initiated campus safety audits, needs assessments and support services for students, and led campaigns to increase awareness of sexual violence on campus.



People working in these areas wished to see sexual violence addressed proactively, in ways that were informed by survivors, and with awareness that different people experienced violence differently: for example, sexual violence supports should recognize “the intersections of issues pertaining to gender, race, class, and other forms of oppression”⁸, and integrate this into support and advocacy practices.

While this collective advocacy was effective, it was often undermined by the inevitability of turnover as student advocates graduate, limited institutional support, and a lack of resources. A significant step forward occurred in 2015 when Ontario’s government met with a chapter of the Canadian Federation of Students to talk about the problem of sexual violence on campuses. Soon after, the government initiated a provincial action plan to address sexual violence: it included campus sexual violence legislation which, for the first time in Canada, made sexual violence response policies mandatory.⁹ This legislation was lauded by community-based sexual violence advocates as progressive and positive. Between 2016 and 2018, British Columbia, Quebec, Manitoba, and Prince Edward Island enacted similar policies; Nova Scotia put a bill before its assembly in recent years.¹⁰

With these changes also came increased resources for campuses: awareness campaigns, formalized partnerships with community-based sexual assault centres, prevention education, bystander intervention training and responding to disclosures training. Many post-secondary institutions initiated dedicated sexual violence prevention and response offices.

Additional community and student-led work complemented these important efforts. For example, in October 2017, the [Our Turn National Action Plan](#) was published by Students for Consent Culture. The Action Plan gave student collectives tools to address campus sexual violence. It was researched and written by students (including undergraduate and graduate, survivors and allies) of varying ages, races, religions, abilities, and genders. Published just before the #MeToo movement flourished in North America, students saw a huge shift in conversations about sexual violence on campus before and after the publishing of the report.¹¹



FUTURE WORK: THERE’S ALWAYS MORE TO DO

Certainly, policy is just one part of change. But since post-secondary sexual violence policy has been enacted across Canada, students and advocates have gone on to challenge ineffectual policy, to point out poor policy application, and to ask for policy where there is none. For example,

in 2018, the McGill Student Union published an open letter calling for an external investigation into the Faculty of Arts handling of sexual violence complaints, a standalone policy, and better involvement of student leadership in anti-violence work on campus.¹² In Ontario, recent incidences of sexual violence on campus have seen students and community-based organizations come together to respond.¹³

In 2021, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) released a Checklist for Post-Secondary Institutional Policies on Sexual Violence and Harassment. Notably, this resource includes foundational directives for campus policies as defined by early survivor and community activists, such as being survivor-centered, inclusive, intersectional, accessible, and written in plain language.¹⁴

A successful sexual violence policy, advocates point out, should make clear what happens after a report is made: “Are sanctions applied? Is a remedy found? Is the complaint dismissed or advanced? What types of assaults are most commonly reported, and are there links between them? This data is inconsistently collected across the country; without data, how can students know what to expect from their schools? More importantly, how can schools judge their progress?”¹⁵

Additional work is required to improve campus sexual violence prevention and response. Nonetheless, policy has provided a place to begin. Policy has also created survivor-defined ways of understanding and addressing sexual violence and in some provinces a legislated commitment that cannot easily be reversed. Government-backed post-secondary legislation also compelled campus sexual violence responses; for many colleges and universities, this meant an *institutional recognition of sexual violence as a problem* for the first time. Finally, it has meant the ongoing investment of resources to intentionally address sexual violence.

On campus, like much other progress made in anti-violence work in Canada, these gains were made by “self-initiated citizen participation”¹⁶: that is, survivors, students, and community-based advocates, who approached their local college or university “with resolute perseverance, unrelenting lobbying...and demands for change.”¹⁷

If you need support, [please reach out](#).

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ENDNOTES

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- 11 Many thanks to Students for Consent Culture Canada (SFCC) for providing this information. SFCC is an organization dedicated to supporting intersectional and grassroots anti-sexual violence advocacy and activism on campuses across Canada by serving as a hub of resources, tools, and institutional memory for students

to engage with. SFCC also engages in advocacy at the provincial and federal level to create better policies, practices, and accountability measures to protect student survivors. Learn more: <https://www.sfcccanada.org/about-sfcc>

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