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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Distorted Campus Assault Math

A survey claims 41% of Tulane women have been sexually assaulted.

By The Editorial Board

Feb. 8, 2018 7:18 p.m. ET

Forty-one percent of Tulane's undergraduate women have been sexually assaulted since arriving on campus, the university reported last month. That's a shocking statistic, but is it true? The number is worth breaking down because Congress may soon require all colleges to use similar surveys to inform their practices.

One problem is how broadly Tulane defines sexual assault. The school goes beyond rape or attempted rape to include any form of unwanted sexual contact, including a stolen kiss or hug. The latter may be unwelcome but are they assault? This definition helps explain why nearly 38% of female undergraduates and 16% of males said they'd been victims of unwanted sexual contact. The statistics for rape or attempted rape are lower, but the 41% can't be easily broken down because some students reported more than one form of assault.

Other questions are subject to questionable interpretation. Students were asked if they agreed with the statements, "I don't think sexual violence is a problem at Tulane" and "there isn't much need for me to think about sexual violence while at college." Disagreement indicates that sexual violence is a pressing issue. But students who agree risk being seen as ignorant or uncaring, which some campuses and activists say is evidence of a "rape culture."

Self-selection almost certainly occurred to some extent. Tulane highlights its large pool of 4,500 respondents. But the university boosted participation by offering "incentives for Greek organizations, residence halls, and graduate/professional schools" to recruit members to take the survey. Tulane's Institutional Research Board approved these incentives, but we wonder if the groups urging students to participate may have also influenced answers.

Other survey elements are so subjective they raise more questions than they answer. Among students who said they were sexually assaulted, 73.5% of undergraduate women and 86.7% of men said they were incapacitated by

alcohol, not force. Tulane never defined how many drinks render someone incapable of consent, leaving that to the discretion of students.

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Tulane University in New Orleans. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

But that's a hotly debated question on campus and off, and some of the standards have been extreme. U.S. military sexual-assault prevention training

sessions recently claimed “one drink means you can't consent.” The U.S. Navy-Marine Corps Court of Criminal Appeals said in 2016 that this standard was a “legally-inaccurate proposition.”

The Tulane results matter because such flawed “campus-climate surveys” could soon become mandatory across the country. The House of Representatives will soon consider legislation to reauthorize the Higher Education Act, and it is likely to include direction on how universities should respond to sexual assault. More legal clarity is overdue, and several proposed changes would reinforce due-process rights while supporting victims.

But the bill that cleared the House Education and Workforce Committee in December would also require administrators to conduct campus-climate surveys on sexual assault every three years. The Education Department could offer a sample survey with strong methodology, but universities would be under no obligation to use it. If federal lawmakers fail to require

rigorous standards for these surveys, universities could create sexual-assault policies based on false assumptions and faulty data.

That doesn't help women. Last May Stanford student Rhea Karuturi described how female students suffered from "rape anxiety"—the perception that "when you're walking, when you're going somewhere new, whatever—that there is a danger you could get raped."

Increasingly, campus-climate surveys tell women they're in perpetual danger, though federal crime statistics suggest they're safer from sexual assault in college than off campus. If the goal is to protect women, this is the wrong way to do it.

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