

# Sexual Assault and Panhellenic Affiliation: Perspectives From Sorority Females and Local Law Enforcement

by Lily O'Doherty and Amelie Pedneault

*This article highlights the harsh realities facing young women who are members of sororities on campuses across the United States. It is well understood that sorority life may bring significant social benefits to its members, but it also comes with a considerable downside—including the fact that, based on previous studies, anywhere between one out of three to one out of two sorority sisters report having been sexually victimized. The present study surveyed Greek and non-Greek affiliated students at a large midwestern university. Information also was collected from focus groups and from members of law enforcement. Results confirmed what has been previously documented: that membership in a sorority is associated with a higher risk of sexual assault. This piece demonstrates the critical importance of developing campus-based programs to protect these potential victims and to enforce sanctions against those who would take advantage of them.*

## SEXUAL ASSAULT ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

People enroll in college to earn an education and to better themselves and their communities. Many are unaware of the reality that they may also face

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risks to their physical and mental well-being by doing so. Empirical findings have indicated that one in five women has been sexually assaulted or raped on a college campus in the United States (Fisher, et al., 2000), prompting some to call the issue an “epidemic.” This traumatic experience can have lasting mental, physical, and economic effects on a person’s life (Goodman, et al., 1993). The “one in five” statistic, however, has been further nuanced with additional results bringing attention to the heterogeneity existing between colleges and the individual victimization risk of various students (Krebs, et al., 2016; Minnow & Einolf, 2009). For example, researchers have found that students do not share equal risk of sexual harm; students at the beginning of their undergraduate careers, students from a sexual and/or gender minority, and members of a Panhellenic chapter are at an increased risk of victimization (Santelli, et al., 2018; Edwards, et al., 2015; Minnow & Einolf, 2009). In the current report, we focus specifically on sorority members who experience sexual victimization during their undergraduate careers.

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT OF PANHELLENIC FEMALES**

Various empirical studies have documented the high risk of sexual victimization of sorority women by fraternity men. For example, in Copenhaver and Grauerholz’s 1991 study, results showed that among the sorority women studied:

Almost half had experienced some form of sexual coercion, 24% experienced attempted rape, and 17% were victims of completed rape. [In addition,] almost half of the rapes occurred in a fraternity house, and over half occurred either during a fraternity function or was perpetrated by a fraternity member (p. 31).

More recently, Minow and Einolf (2009) found:

29% of sorority women reported having been sexually assaulted while in college, four times the rate (7%) among non-sorority members. The difference between Greek and non-Greek women remained large even when controls were included for alcohol consumption and attendance at Greek parties where alcohol is served (p. 835).

Another study demonstrated that residing in a sorority house (as opposed to membership) led to increased rape victimization (Mohler-Kuo, et al., 2004). In a 2016 study, results showed that a variety of risk factors predict sexual assault in sorority women in a comparison with their counterparts, including quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption, risk-taking in sexual settings, delayed time to recognize and address danger cues in sexual settings, and frequency of contact with fraternity men (Franklin, 2016). All in

all, Panhellenic-affiliated females appear to be experiencing a constellation of factors putting them at an increased risk of sexual victimization.

## RESEARCH FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY

In the current study, we first present the results of a quantitative survey of female undergraduate students at a large northwestern university. An Internet Qualtrics survey was sent to a randomly selected list of 2,500 emails of female students, equally distributed among freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. We received 332 responses, of which 29.6% had a Panhellenic affiliation and 70.4% did not. Among other questions, the survey asked about three types of sexual assaults that were attempted or achieved: by force, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or by manipulation/social pressure. The survey also covered the survivor's decision to report (or not) to law enforcement. When researching current literature on this topic, we found that victims are sometimes unable to identify their sexual assault with words such as "rape" or "assault" (Fisher, 2000). In light of this information, we asked behavior-specific questions in order to increase the validity of our data.

Next, we report qualitative findings obtained from both individual and focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were conducted with two groups of female undergraduate members of the Panhellenic community at the university, and two individual interviews conducted with members of the local police department (a detective and an officer) who were frequently involved in sexual assault investigations. Qualitative interviews were transcribed and are used here to examine the issues associated with the sexual victimization of Panhellenic students.

## QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Results indicate that 47% of survey respondents reported some type of sexual victimization during their time in college. Significant differences existed, with Panhellenic women experiencing higher rates of any sexual victimization than non-Panhellenic women (57.7% to 43.3%;  $\chi^2 = 5.713$ ,  $p = .017$ ). Specifically, female students with Panhellenic affiliation were more likely to experience sexual assault by force (36.8% vs 24.5%;  $\chi^2 = 4.562$ ,  $p = .033$ ) and by manipulation/social pressure (47.1% vs 33.0%). The difference did not reach statistical significance for sexual assault involving alcohol or drugs negating consent (45.5% vs 34.1%,  $\chi^2 = 3.404$ ,  $p = .065$ ). Furthermore, our data shows that women who have Panhellenic affiliation believed that sexual assault is an issue at the university more often than women without this affiliation (89.7% compared to 74.4%). This difference is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 9.285$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Among all respondents who had been sexually victimized, 43% told about their assault to someone, but reported their assault to the police only 1.9% of the time.

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

### Focus Groups

The Panhellenic focus groups brought to light the many reasons for which a Greek-affiliated female may not report a sexual assault to law enforcement. A first concern was the potential repercussions of reporting both for the sorority and fraternity involved, including breaking personal relationships between members. Interviewees reported anxiety over having a victim's sorority blamed for the revocation of a fraternity recognition or her friends being unable to visit a chapter house. For example, a few participants recalled lack of reporting due to the possible consequences in their relationships with fraternity men:

She didn't want all of her guy friends to get mad at her in case the house got shut down.

\* \* \*

A lot of times, girls don't feel that's the appropriate route to take because they are friends with some of the guys in the house, or they don't want to be blacklisted because then they can't hang out with their friends . . . It depends on what sorority you are in too. With [Sorority name redacted for confidentiality] if I told our president something had happened, there would be hellfire . . . because I have that band of sisters.

This concern with loss of friendships was noted not only in relation with fraternity men, but also with other sorority members. For example, one participant stated that the pressure other women put on her were her reason for not reporting.

Certain girls in my PC [Pledge Class] . . . they love that house a ton, and even though I have told them what happened, and even though they were there that night, they've ignored the fact that it happened . . . Because of the way females have treated me, not because the frats have treated me, is the reason I won't report it. Nothing would've been done about it, I'm nearly 100% sure nothing would happen to the guy because he is in strong standing with the house . . . he has too many friends who would back up his story before mine.

Another woman explained the high potential social costs to reporting a sexual assault for the sorority organization itself, with other non-victimized members not wanting to lose access to parties organized by fraternities:

From what I've seen, it's more on girls who put the pressure [not to report] on [victims] than guys do. I remember my freshman year, we did a sisterhood with a sharing circle, and there were people sharing that she was sexually assaulted the first week of school but her friends wanted

to keep going out . . . so they just dropped her as a person because they thought she was going to make everything not fun. There's an idea that what houses you go to are your status, and when your friend group values that, then they are more likely to drop you than stop going there. Maybe not in our chapter, but in other chapters my friends are in, who buy into the whole system, the mindset is very much alive.

Overall, victimized sorority females do not want to be the reason their friends cannot go to a certain fraternity and therefore they decide to not report. Many victims report experiencing real pressures from other female members not to report. In some cases, victims also seemed unsure whether their sorority sisters would prioritize their well-being after victimization more so than the standing of the sorority organization and their overall access to social events with fraternities. In summary, fear of impacting their larger Greek community equilibrium is of serious concern for some survivors and appears impactful when weighing out the pros and cons of reporting.

Another prominent theme influencing the decision to report sexual victimization was one of general distrust of the police. Many interviewees indicated feeling that the local police department was more concerned with handing out citations than keeping their community safe. An alarming number of negative stories were shared, many of them about police harassment.

They're the worst . . . I will never forget my Freshman year when they gave us an illegal MIP [Minor in Possession citation] that they shouldn't have given us . . . called me an idiot for not having my ID on me . . . tried to get everyone to leave us . . . when we reported it to the police department the next day they didn't do anything about it, didn't take it seriously, didn't call us back, and then he [the officer on call] sexually assaulted a student months later doing the same thing he tried to do to us.

\* \* \*

I will walk down the street and literally cross because even if I maybe had one drink or like hit a joint once . . . because sometimes the police are just searching to hand out MIP's and MIC's [Minor in Consumption citation] rather than making sure people are safe on campus.

This general distrust in the police appears to impact victimized sorority females in their decision to report or not to law enforcement:

Many of our functions on the weekends have alcohol and lots of people are underage, and I think that also deters people from going to the police because they think they are going to get in trouble. You know, if a 19-year-old is assaulted and she was drunk she might think they will ask 'why were you drinking' and not believe her. That's what one of the girls

said to me, that she thought she was going to get in trouble for drinking. She ended up not reporting.

A more positive tone was noted about the role of the police in cases where an officer was called to the scene or had helped an assaultive situation without handing out citations. For example, one participant noted a positive experience with a police officer who was taking down her friend's statement after she had been raped.

My friend got sexually assaulted last year. . . . And we went to the hospital the next day and we got a rape kit done and everything and one of the [city redacted] police officers came and took her statement and took my statement. And he was really nice about it, I think it was also probably because it was about a really sensitive thing that was happening . . . but he was really nice to her and didn't want to put her in any situation, gave her all of her options and was really nice. And that's one of the only experiences I've had with like [city redacted] police officer . . . I've heard a lot of more negative experiences that other people have had but like it was a really serious situation and like, it was a male officer that took her statement and my statement, and he was just really nice about it . . . really supportive, kind, and helpful with her.

Another participant told a story of when a police officer intervened right before a potential attacker approached her late at night:

I had headphones in and then all of a sudden I heard a man scream "Hey!" and then I turn around and I see a police officer and then I see a guy standing right behind me about to put his arm on me and the police officer was the one who screamed "Hey!" And the guy bolted.

Another woman shared an experience in which the local police had intervened when they believed two fraternity men were carrying an intoxicated friend away from her group. She explained:

They didn't see the big [friend] walking in front of them, so it looked like it was two frat guys carrying an unconscious girl down the street. They pulled over and were yelling 'put her down' 'what are you doing', so the big [friend] turned around and explained everything. They breathalyzed the girl and ended up sending her to the hospital, but there were no tickets, no citations.

Still, it remains that many interviewees remained unconvinced of the effectiveness of reporting to the police, characterizing it as ultimately harmful to the victim. For example, an interviewee reported regretting having convinced a friend to report her victimization:

I was like maybe we should go report it . . . and honestly I wish I didn't say that to her because it made it so much worse and nothing came from it.

Many others echoed this sentiment when discussing the apparent ineffectiveness of reporting sexual victimization to the police.

I had a friend who was sexually assaulted [by a Greek-affiliated male] and she reported it to the police and the fraternity president and they didn't do anything about it . . . he's still in the house. So I feel like some people don't want to report because then it's still there and keeps being brought up and oftentimes nothing can be done so you're just reliving the trauma rather than letting it go.

She was sexually assaulted by someone she knew and it took a while to have it set in. The person [a Greek-affiliated male] was not a good person and so she reported it to the police and the campus and . . . got a restraining order in place with the [city redacted for confidentiality] police department and the courts system but like that was only to be like this person is not a good person, they never did anything about the sexual assault.

Themes of friendship preservation within the Greek community and of police harassment, excessive citations, and ineffectiveness were present in discussions of sexual victimization during focus groups. They indicate the range of factors considered by Greek females deciding whether to report or not their sexual victimization to law enforcement, with many apparently concluding that not reporting is their best option.

### **Police Interviews**

Generally, the individual interviews conducted with local law enforcement indicated a negative overview of outcomes for most campus sexual assault cases processed through the criminal justice system. For example, when asked about the success rate of women obtaining justice after being sexually victimized, the Detective admitted that success in a case happened "almost never," adding:

This is what pains me. Like, it has been so hard to listen to what has happened to these people time after time, and not be able to do anything. Like there is . . . not a lot of justice when it comes to sexual assault.

They reported being acutely aware of the impact of alcohol consumption on sexual assault processing, ultimately indicating that when alcohol or drugs are involved, there is little that can be done to help a sexual assault victim

obtain justice. This is especially important because, based on both their personal experiences, the victim, perpetrator, or both usually consume drugs or alcohol before or during the assault and sometimes have difficulty remembering details of the event:

Do you think that if I took a victim with a .08 blood alcohol and basically explained she was incapacitated by alcohol, that anybody would believe her . . . or me?

When asked specifically about victims in sororities, members of law enforcement saw their Greek affiliation as an additional impediment to obtaining justice. They noted specifically the lack of confidentiality and overall preparedness of the perpetrator and witnesses as problematic, both occurring before the police had been called, taken statements and gathered evidence:

In the cases where I have seen it as Freshman in the Greek system, they trust the women in their organizations to be there, to stand by them . . . and then the women in their organization take it upon themselves to try and police, and that's not their job. And, you know, women have gone home and then call and are wanting justice and by then it's just way too late because already so many rumors have been spread.

\* \* \*

I've had sexual assaults that involve, were very connected with the Greek system, and before it was ever reported to me . . . both chapters, both the sorority and fraternity, had already dealt with it.

When asked what the Greek community can do to help remedy this issue, the detective talked about the importance of letting the investigative process happen. Local law enforcement believes rumors are a strong impediment to a victim's likelihood of obtaining justice, one they stated "almost never" occurs to begin with.

I really want to see organizations learn to shut their mouths.

\* \* \*

The biggest part though is confidentiality, like keeping their confidentiality, even within the organization. Like not everybody needs to know somebody's business, um, and not everybody needs to hear the rumor about "did you hear what so and so did."

When asked what the local police were doing to combat issues of sexual assault on campus and low reporting, the officer discussed existing

programming sessions. With Greek-affiliated men, the local police advise to “take her [the Greek-affiliated woman] to coffee in the morning” or “ask her out after.” Unfortunately, this advice confuses rape and regret, giving credence to the idea that women report rape not because a sexual assault occurred but because she regrets sex the next day. In programming with Greek-affiliated women, the officer emphasized the need to “get his [the Greek-affiliated man] social media handles, his friends’ names, and where he lives.” While undoubtedly this would make the jobs of local law enforcement easier, it puts a burden on the victim to proactively gather evidence with the anticipation that she could be sexually assaulted. If the victim is unable to recall or provide this information, it would shift the situation into one where victim-blaming could occur.

Themes of the inevitability of sexual assaults on college campuses and the added difficulties of investigating sexual assault perpetrated against a sorority female by a fraternity male transpired from police interviews, indicating a level of helplessness in obtaining justice for victims through the criminal justice process:

Unfortunately, sexual assault is a part of reality. Like, it happens and it happens everywhere . . . It’s just unfortunately part of life right now.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Overall, the survey results showed higher rates of sexual victimization in Panhellenic female undergraduate students compared to non-members. In addition, qualitative results demonstrate a dichotomic reality in which sorority members perceived high potential social costs for reporting their victimization to law enforcement, an agency they distrust, and law enforcement members reported feeling helpless from an investigative and criminal justice perspective in cases involving Greek-affiliated students. This creates a reality in which sexual assault frequently goes unpunished, ultimately benefitting the perpetrators. These findings yield two areas of discussion and implications.

First is the need to improve relations between local police and Panhellenic organizations specifically. A prevalent theme emerging from interviews was that of distrust and lack of faith by students in law enforcement efforts. Interviewees told multiple stories of incidents with law enforcement, shedding light on larger culture issues. In addition, it appears that sorority females are reluctant to report their sexual victimization to officers who also frequently cite them for alcohol-related incidents. Specifically, we suggest the usefulness of a more benevolent use of police discretion which redirects focus from enforcing rules about minors in possession or consumption of alcohol to more worthy sexual assault prevention activities. In addition, the quality of programming given to the Greek community should also be the target of intervention, given the presence of rape myths.

Second is the notion of “organizational socialization” referred to by Franklin (2016). Sororities are social organizations with formal and informal rules. In the context of dating violence, Anderson and Danis (2007) noted that “violence is largely omitted from the formal agendas of sororities” (p. 87); the current study extends this finding to sexual violence. In addition, at the campus level, an Interfraternity and/or Panhellenic council will exist if they have more than one Greek organization, along with a university-managed Greek life center. At the national level, organizations such as the National Panhellenic Conference and the North American Interfraternity Conference also regulate the experiences of those involved. All these organizations can better formally regulate the issue of sexual perpetration and victimization within the Greek system. They also need to pay close attention to informal regulation. It clearly emerges from current findings that social learning occurs in these organizations in which sorority females are socialized not to report their sexual victimization. It is time for all levels of these organizations to take a hard look at the various aspects of the Greek life experience allowing the victimization of sorority females by fraternity males. Various ideas include extensive and targeted educational classes especially for incoming members, stricter rules regulating events with alcohol including using private security or a committee of sober sisters and brothers, situational crime prevention measures applied to social gatherings (specifically relative to the use of space in Chapter housing during social events), and development of written national rules designed specifically for sexual assault prevention and victim support purposes.

Sorority females are often thought of as being in a position of power due to the monetary requirements to join and social status conferred by such affiliation. Current findings moderate this statement by also pointing to their vulnerability in the existing Greek system, characterized by pressures not to report from both female and male members. When coupled with a feeling of distrust of local police, this informal organizational socialization leads many victims to simply decide against reporting. In the few cases where they report, they encounter members of a police force who feel that little can be done via the traditional criminal justice process and who give prevention advice drawing upon rape myths. These deterrents to reporting must be challenged in order to begin the process of adequately addressing the sexual trauma of victimized sorority females and create a safer campus experience for all undergraduate students.

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