

Review

Theorizing Campus Sexual Violence: Insights from the Evolution of Campus Responses

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Abstract

Campus sexual violence has been the subject of more than five decades of research, yet prevention on college campuses has repeatedly failed to reflect what feminist theory and scholarship offered as the causes of violence. This historically organized narrative review traces how feminist theory, empirical research, prevention programming, and institutional policy co-evolved from the 1970s to the early 2020s. We argue that a persistent pattern runs through this history. Feminist scholarship increasingly located sexual violence in power, patriarchy, intersectionality, and structural inequality, and empirical research increasingly examined perpetrators' attitudes and the rape-supportive beliefs that sustain violence alongside prevalence and individual risk. Yet campus prevention rarely built on this work. As prevention strategies shifted from women's self-defense to consent education, rape myth reduction, and bystander intervention, they continued to place responsibility on individual students rather than the beliefs and structural conditions that enable gendered violence. Given what both feminist theory and empirical research had already established, these represent missed opportunities for prevention capable of addressing the structural causes of campus sexual violence. We conclude by calling for a research and prevention agenda grounded in feminist criminology. This locates the causes of campus sexual violence in gendered power, institutional conditions, and structural inequality rather than in the behaviors of those most likely to be harmed.

Keywords: campus sexual assault; prevention; gender-based violence; criminology; feminist methodology



Academic Editors: Julia Jordan-Zachery, Gracia González-Gijón, Andrés Soriano-Díaz, Claudia Chiarolanza and Nazaret Martínez-Heredia

Received: 11 June 2026

Revised: 11 August 2026

Accepted: 8 September 2026

Published: 19 September 2026

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1. Introduction

Decades of findings converge on the rate that approximately one in five women will be assaulted during college (Koss et al. 1987; Banyard et al. 2007; Banyard 2011; Krebs et al. 2007). Estimates vary widely, from 6% to 44%, and campus figures are read alongside data from The National Crime Victimization Survey which often use different definitions and reference periods (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1994; Russell 1982; Kilpatrick et al. 1985; Koss and Oros 1982; Catalano 2004; Morgan and Thompson 2021; Hart 2003). These differences, however, largely reflect variation in measurement rather than the scope of or uncertainty of whether the problem exists (Fedina et al. 2018; Krebs 2014). Muehlenhard et al. (2017) evaluated the commonly cited “one in five” figure directly and found it defensible once definition and timeframe are specified. Given how substantially sexual

violence is underreported and contributes to the “dark figure of crime,” these estimates almost certainly understate the problem, rather than overstate it.

The impact of rape and sexual assault on victims/survivors is widely known and studied. The consequences of sexual violence can manifest in negative physical, mental, psychological, and emotional ways (Kessler et al. 1995). Research has assessed the unique impacts of assault on college students specifically, such that survivors are more likely to show a decline in academic performance and career success, and an increase in social ostracization (Baker et al. 2016; Jordan et al. 2014; Potter et al. 2018; Mengo and Black 2016). Given the prevalence and detrimental impacts of campus sexual violence on students and our society, understanding the history of research and policy surrounding campus sexual violence can inform prevention programming and policies.

This paper provides a historically organized narrative review of campus sexual violence research from the 1970s to the 2020s. Our purpose is not to provide an exhaustive or systematic accounting of all scholarship published in this period. Rather, we trace developments in feminist theory, empirical research, prevention programming, and institutional policy to examine how campus sexual violence has been conceptualized, studied, and addressed over time. We focus on the scholarship and institutional developments that shaped how campus sexual violence was conceptualized, measured, studied, and addressed through prevention efforts.

We organize the review around three broad historical periods: (1) the 1970s and 1980s, (2) the 1990s through the early 2000s, and (3) roughly the 2010s to the 2020s. These periods are intended as analytical guideposts rather than rigid boundaries. The 1970s provide a useful starting point because feminist reinterpretations of rape emerged alongside some of the earliest substantial academic research on campus sexual violence. The 1990s and early 2000s saw significant growth in federal research, campus-specific measurement, and institutional accountability, while the 2010s brought heightened regulatory attention and expanded use of prevention strategies such as consent education, rape myth education, and bystander intervention. Organizing the literature in this way allows us to examine whether developments in feminist theory and empirical knowledge were accompanied by corresponding changes in campus prevention and institutional responses.

Across these periods, we identify a persistent disconnect. Feminist scholarship increasingly shifted understandings of sexual violence away from victim-blaming and individual pathology and toward questions of gender, power, inequality, and institutional structure. Campus sexual violence research and prevention, however, often continued to emphasize prevalence, individual risk factors, behavioral correlates, and institutional compliance. Although prevention strategies changed considerably over time, they only partially incorporated these broader theoretical developments. We argue that this disconnect has limited both the theoretical development of campus sexual violence research and the ability of prevention efforts to address the structural and institutional conditions that sustain sexual violence.

This disconnect is also reflected in whose experiences were centered in the literature. Much of the historical research on campus sexual violence focused on heterosexual violence against women, with comparatively limited attention to LGBTQ+ students, transgender and gender-diverse individuals, and other sexual minority populations. Likewise, although feminist theory increasingly emphasized intersectionality and the experiences of Women of Color, empirical campus sexual violence research often continued to rely on predominately White, cisgender student populations. These limitations reflect the dominant assumptions of the field during each historical period and are themselves part of the development traced in this review. They further illustrate the uneven incorporation of feminist theoretical

advances into campus sexual violence research and prevention (Harris 2020; Shyrokonis et al. 2026).

2. Campus Sexual Violence in the 1970s and 1980s

Although feminist anti-rape activism had its roots in the late 1960s, the 1970s marked a turning point as the rape crisis movement reshaped public, legal, and academic understandings of sexual violence. Activists vocalized their experiences, protested, and raised awareness of their experiences; they made crisis hotlines, lobbied for legal change, and created organizations that administered support services. Universities were common spaces for feminist and activist groups to meet and where scholars had progressed the research on campus-specific sexual violence (Rose 1977).

This momentum also pushed the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments (1972)¹. Title IX was a civil rights law that guaranteed equitable access to educational services and protection from sex discrimination, including sexual violence. Two years later, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (1974)² established broad privacy protections over student educational records. Though enacted independently, the two statutes came to govern the same institutional terrain. The tension between these two laws was less of a formal legal conflict than a practical one: as reporting mandates expanded, institutions faced simultaneous pressure to disclose the scope of the problem while limiting the release of case-specific information to protect student privacy (Holland et al. 2018). Though the legal architecture of the period was well established and promised students protections, the campus research in this era was stuck in victimology frameworks and preventative approaches that narrowed our understanding of the problem that feminist activists and scholars had been explicitly mobilizing around.

2.1. From Stranger Danger to Acquaintance Rape

Early feminist scholarship differed from individualistic victim precipitation and psychopathological explanations of sexual violence. Weis and Borges (1973) argued that gender socialization and social structures operate to support the notion that women should be seen as “legitimate victims,” which directly opposed the victimology literature. In *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Brownmiller (1975) theorized rape as a systematic tool of patriarchal power while simultaneously perpetuating the era’s sentiment that all women ought to remain fearful of rape because of its prevalence and the potential for any man to be a rapist (see also Schmidt 1979). These also drew from the well-established sentiment and mythology about stranger rapists and racialized constructions of who commits rape, which far predates the anti-rape era (Freedman 2013). Scholars like Davis (1981) critiqued this line of thinking. The work of this time was also not entirely psychological; Russell’s work on marital rape included the structural account of gender and utilized qualitative research alongside quantitative data.

By the early 1980s, researchers adopted the term “date rape” as the more appropriate term to describe how rape occurs (Burt 1980; Russell 1982). Koss and Oros (1982) developed the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), a self-administered questionnaire designed to capture victimization that legal definitions and official statistics missed. The development and adoption of these surveys were not only technical innovations, but they also reflected feminist efforts to make experiences visible that conventional crime categories and women’s own understandings did not always identify as rape (Rutherford 2017). Building on this shift in measurement, Koss et al. (1987) soon administered the instrument to a sample of 6159 students across 32 institutions. Among the women in the sample, 53.7% endorsed at least one SES item, a continuum ranging from unwanted contact to rape; 27.5% reported an experience meeting the legal definition of rape or attempted rape. Subsequent schol-

ars found that perpetrators were most often people the victim/survivor knew, and not strangers, as was previously suggested (Koss et al. 1987; Levine-MacCombie and Koss 1986; Muehlenhard et al. 1985). This work was instrumental in providing researchers and the public with a new assessment of assault, and much of the acquaintance rape scholarship that followed in the early 1990s supported Koss et al.'s (1987) original findings. The period marks a departure from exclusive reliance on the Uniform Crime Report's measurement of rape toward a more holistic accounting of victims' and survivors' experiences. The adoption of centering victims' voices was, in and of itself, a feminist move (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2004). Although the research that soon emerged focused on college-student samples, it did not measure victimization occurring specifically on college campuses; nevertheless, it helped shift rape research away from exclusive reliance on Uniform Crime Report data and toward broader measures of victims' and survivors' experiences. Decades later, Koss et al. (2022) compared the original sample of college students to more recent data collected from students at 13 institutions. They found that rape victimization and perpetration had not declined but risen over the decades. This was driven largely by alcohol-incapacitated assault, which underscored the persistence of the problem despite major changes in measurement, policy, and prevention.

2.2. *The Emergence of Rape Myths, Attitudes, and Behavior*

Koss's work was part of a broader feminist scholarship which shifted focus on examining the cultural beliefs, gender norms, and sexual scripts that shaped understandings of rape, including what scholars came to describe as "rape myths" (Burt 1980; Bevacqua 2000; Freedman 2013). Burt (1980) defined these as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). Academics soon discovered specific rape myth beliefs and attitudes regarding gender roles, women, dating, and sex that contributed to a culture of rape. Specifically, adoption of these beliefs was thought to influence the sexually aggressive behaviors of men (Burt 1980; Briere and Malamuth 1983; Muehlenhard and Linton 1987). Rather than simply documenting attitudes, this body of research helped establish how rape-supportive beliefs function in practice. Muehlenhard et al. (1985) found that men were more likely to justify sexual coercion when they believed a woman had initiated sex or when they had paid for a meal. This shifted our understanding of how rape myth beliefs functioned in practice by illustrating that coercion is often framed through everyday dating scripts, where norms of reciprocity and perceived sexual access blur the line between consent and entitlement.

Work by Briere and Malamuth (1983) went further by demonstrating that rape-supportive attitudes and victim-blaming attitudes were not just opinions but predictors of self-reported likelihood to rape and the use of force. This contributed a key insight: patriarchal belief systems are not passive—they actively shape behavioral outcomes such as gendered violence. This was not an entirely novel insight. Feminist activists and scholars had already argued that rape culture was sustained through broader systems of gender inequality rather than isolated deviance (Bevacqua 2000). At the same time, legal feminist scholarship expanded this structural analysis beyond public attitudes. MacKinnon (1979) argued that sexual harassment constituted sex discrimination, demonstrating that gendered violence was embedded within institutional and legal structures rather than simply interpersonal interactions. Similarly, in *Real Rape*, Estrich (1987) showed how courts privileged "stranger rape" over acquaintance rape, illustrating that rape myths were reinforced not only through cultural beliefs but also through legal institutions that shaped whose victimization was recognized as legitimate. Despite these theoretical and legal advances, campus prevention efforts during this period rarely sought to challenge rape myth acceptance

(RMA) or other rape-supportive beliefs among men. This was a missed opportunity for interventions that could have targeted individual rape pathology.

Instead, universities continued to emphasize women's risk management and individual precaution, while programs designed to confront rape supportive attitudes would not emerge until much later. Collectively, these scholars helped reshape understandings of sexual violence from individual risk and victim-blaming to a structurally embedded framework, which was particularly useful in the campus environment. Title IX was already in force and had placed universities under a federal obligation to address sex discrimination, giving this structural analysis a direct institutional application. Campuses were lacking in these preventative practices that mirrored this feminist logic. University prevention programs continued to treat rape as an individual risk that women were responsible for managing, rather than as a collective campus problem requiring an equally comprehensive institutional response.

2.3. Preventing Rape Without Perpetrators: Early Interventions

In the 1970s and 1980s, efforts to prevent rape echoed the public sentiment of a rape crisis—that rape is an ever-looming experience and that women should prepare themselves for the reality of being assaulted. The earliest known sexual assault prevention programs explained to young women what rape was, how it was facilitated, and its commonality. They were informal sessions, with speakers, pamphlets, or role-playing, and they taught women about the 'risk signs' of a potential assaulter, and how to avoid 'entrapment' (MacGreene and Navarro 1998; Fischhoff et al. 1987; Medea and Thompson 1974). One notable example was Storaska's (1975) *How to Say No to a Rapist and Survive*, which instructed women in strategies to avoid, resist, and survive rape, reinforcing a prevention model that placed primary responsibility for avoiding sexual violence on women's awareness and behavior.

Even when research refuted the myth of stranger rape, programs that began to focus on date rape still endorsed rape avoidance tactics and talked about victimization as the responsibility of women to prevent their own assault (Bart and O'Brien 1984; Koss 1985; Parrot 1988). Women were told to walk home in pairs, to know of the nearest phone, etc. Some of the language used in these programs included words like "survival," "stopping rape," "rape completion," and "defense." These sorts of frames were unlikely to reduce the pervasive fear of rape that already was heightened in this era, whereby women's fears were higher than actual risk of victimization (Gordon and Riger 1989). Here the failure of universities is made visible, whereas feminist scholarship had—by this time—done well to reframe the ways in which gendered violence is a structural problem, yet prevention efforts did not translate that into programming. Instead, programs focused on individual burden and risk management of women. Furthermore, because these programs lacked consistency, measuring their success was rarely feasible. Yet the absence of evidence-based practice did not prevent their continued adoption. What went largely unexamined was whose experiences the underlying feminist analysis had centered and whose it had left out.

2.4. Whose Feminism? Early Silences and Exclusions

What was showcased in feminist activist and research spaces up to this point was the work of middle-class, educated, white women. The 80s, however, did show an increase in Black feminist thought that had not received its merited attention. Titles such as *Women, Race, and Class* (Davis 1981), *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism* (Davis 1985), and *Ain't I a Woman; Black Women and Feminism* (Hooks 1981) were published. Crenshaw's *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (Crenshaw 1991) brought awareness to the complexities and unique experi-

ences of Black women by pointing out how being Black and a woman was a vastly different experience than if she held only one identity. The exploration of the impact of overlapping identities was coined as “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1991). Though these women did not study rape on campus specifically, their research did push feminist scholars to think more deeply and critically about the sexual violence of Women of Color. Unfortunately, much of their important work was overshadowed by white scholars because their work did not easily reach a wide academic audience (Crenshaw 1991).

Although intersectionality became increasingly influential within feminist scholarship, its incorporation into campus violence research was comparatively uneven. Much of the empirical literature continued to rely on predominately White student samples or treated race as a demographic characteristic rather than examining how racism and sexism jointly shaped victimization experiences. Consequently, the experiences of Women of Color frequently remained peripheral to dominant campus sexual violence narratives despite the growing prominence of intersectional feminist scholarship (Harris 2020).

3. Campus Sexual Violence in the 1990s and Early 2000s

The 1990s through the early 2000s mark one of the most productive eras for broader institutional change, government-sponsored research, media coverage, and subsequent academic work about assaults on campus. This time showed clear connections between funding, public attention, and institutional accountability, which provided an opportunity for universities to measure and prevent sexual violence on their campuses.

Reporting mandates, beginning with the Jeanne Clery Act (1990)³ and enforced through the Department of Education, meant that universities had to take rape seriously, and that if they did not, the media would be there to publicize the mishandled cases. In addition, federally sponsored research boomed. The National Violence Against Women Survey, jointly sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, interviewed roughly 16,000 men and women between November 1995 and May 1996 about their experiences of rape, physical assault, and stalking (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Surveys of this kind established national reference points and shaped how sexual violence was measured, but because they sampled households rather than students, they could not speak to the campus context directly.

Campus-specific research flourished alongside the national studies. The National College Women Sexual Victimization Study was fielded in 1997 and surveyed a national sample of college women about their experiences with victimization and reporting (Fisher et al. 1999). Attention soon turned from measuring individual instances of victimization to evaluating how institutions were responding to it. Karjane et al. (2002) examined institutional practices under the Clery Act and documented substantial gaps in campus policy and response. The Campus Sexual Assault Study followed (Krebs et al. 2007), and the Campus Climate Survey Validation Study later sought to validate a standardized campus survey methodology after a decade of estimates that were difficult to compare (Krebs et al. 2016).

Scholars began to use decades of research to analyze the correlates of assault, and quantitative and predictive modeling were popularized (Ullman and Knight 1991). The primary predictive factors of interest were binge drinking, casual sex, and membership in Greek life or sports teams. These college-specific behaviors were widely studied, and the use of interview methods rose, as it provided scholars with a more detailed understanding of what was happening. Though the 1990s and early 2000s did mark a clear turning point towards research on men’s roles in committing sexual assaults, prevention programs that educated or interrupted the attitudinal beliefs and behaviors of men still did not proliferate until much later. Thus, universities upheld their process of adequately measuring sexual

assault, but failed to translate their understanding of the data and causes of sexual violence into programming. During this time, the most common programs included both women's self-defense and those that targeted campus drinking culture, both of which caused bigger feminist debates.

3.1. *Alcohol as Risk and Remedy: Binge Drinking and Educational Interventions*

The data consistently showed that drinking and assault were correlated; women who were victims were more likely to have reported consuming alcohol when they were assaulted, and men who drank were more likely to report committing assaults (Mohler-Kuo et al. 2004; Canan et al. 2018; Corbin et al. 2001; Ullman and Brecklin 2003; Koss and Gaines 1993). Harrington and Leitenberg (1994) found that 55% of acquaintance sexual assault victims reported being at least somewhat intoxicated at the time of the assault, a pattern that remains common in more recent research (McCauley et al. 2020). The work of Humphrey and Kahn (2000) shows that alcohol acts as a mediator to assault because it reduces judgment and awareness of social cues, which impacts the ability of all parties to receive or give consent. It also increases men's use of coercion and decreases their awareness of social cues. The research highlighted here on alcohol and sexual assault is primarily discussed in corollary or predictive terms and it is important to remember that correlation does not explain or imply causation. Drinking was also frequently discussed in the context of participation in Greek Life, which was separately found to correlate with a high rate of assaults.

Self-defense programs were often paired with educational programs on binge drinking. Alcohol programs aimed to educate individuals about the bodily harms of binge drinking; for women, they specifically emphasized the risks of being assaulted, and for men, they described the effects of intoxication on one's ability to pick up on non-verbal cues or obtain consent (Corbin et al. 2001; Mohler-Kuo et al. 2004; Messman-Moore et al. 2009). The solutions they offered students were to drink less and better manage peer pressure. This was a missed opportunity as while the programs acknowledged that men's intoxication affected their attention to consent, the programs intervened only in drinking moderation, leaving the root of gendered violence unaddressed. Yet, in some research, randomized control trials (RCT)—highly rigorous experimental research methods—were used with groups of women and showed significant impacts on drinking behaviors, and a reduction in attempted rapes (McCauley et al. 2010). It is important to note that this research may have shown support for altering attitudes about drinking, but there is less evidence to suggest that the programs impacted actual behaviors. Furthermore, there are few substantiated claims of the impacts of these programs on preventing alcohol-involved sexual assaults since this is very difficult to measure.

3.2. *Greek Life, Masculinity, and Rape-Supportive Cultures*

Because considerable amounts of college partying occur in Greek life spaces, researchers have consistently found correlations between fraternity/sorority involvement and both sexual offending and victimization (Copenhaver and Grauerholz 1991; Sanday 1990; Minow and Einolf 2009; Franklin 2016). Boswell and Spade (1996) identified high-risk features of fraternities, including familiarity between women and the men, the relationship status of members, peer pressure to drink or engage in casual sex, and RMA. Ethnographic work further highlighted less quantifiable factors such as hypermasculinity, spatial power dynamics, and gendered social interaction patterns (Bleecker and Murnen 2005; Armstrong et al. 2006).

Armstrong et al. (2006) similarly argued that campus sexual assault cannot be explained solely through individual behavior. Their multilevel analysis showed how fraternity-controlled party spaces, gendered status hierarchies, and institutional arrange-

ments concentrated social power among men and produced environments that support rape culture. These findings prompted debate over whether Greek organizations should be abolished, though institutional responses were uneven and often limited to relocating or re-constructing chapters. More broadly, scholars shifted attention toward men's beliefs about rape, particularly within male-dominated party spaces. Research on RMA—false beliefs that justify or minimize sexual assault—expanded alongside studies of Greek life. It seemed like the attention on men's role in perpetuating sexual violence was finally emerging.

By the 1990s and 2000s, scholarship increasingly centered on men's responsibility for sexual violence (Berkowitz 2002) using surveys and interviews to measure attitudes, self-reported behaviors, and likelihood of offending. Studies consistently linked RMA to sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviors (Boeringer 1999; Bleecker and Murnen 2005; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997). Subsequent research identified related risk factors, including hostility toward women, alcohol use in sexual contexts, antisocial traits, coercive behaviors, adherence to rigid gender norms, and fraternity membership (Abbey and McAuslan 2004; Kosson et al. 1997; Hunter et al. 2004; Senn et al. 2000; Laumann et al. 1999). Despite variation in measures, a meta-analysis of 88 studies found strong evidence that RMAs predict sexually aggressive behavior across contexts (Suarez and Gadalla 2010). Although RMA remains a central and unrefuted element in sexual violence research, its integration into campus prevention programming lagged the empirical evidence. Once more, the newest research findings had not supported a change in program development.

3.3. Women's Self-Defense and the Limits of Feminist Prevention

Though the popularity of self-defense had ebbed and flowed since the early 19th century, it gained popularity in the mid-60s and again later in feminist movements. Towards the end of the 1980s, informational programs subsided, and self-defense came to dominate campus prevention programming (Searles and Berger 1987; Quigley 1989; Searles and Follansbee 1984; Hollander 2004). These programs became popular among researchers because their measurable outcomes lent themselves to more quantitative forms of analysis such as randomized control trials (RCTs). However, these privileged interventions that could be readily evaluated over broader structural approaches.

In works such as *In Defense of Self-Defense* (Cahill 2009), *A Call for Women's Self-Defense* (Hasday 2001), and *Fighting Back: Women's Resistance to Rape* (Ullman and Knight 1991), the authors argued for requiring the programs because of their proven effectiveness at preventing rape. As was common, to capture these data, scholars used mixed-methods surveys and interviews and asked women to describe any almost or incomplete rapes they had experienced. Academics had found widespread support for the impact of the program on measures of attempted and completed rapes (Cummings 1992; Gidycz and Koss 1990; Ullman and Knight 1991, 1993; Brecklin and Ullman 2005; Gidycz et al. 2008).

Despite growing empirical evidence supporting empowerment-based self-defense as a means of reducing sexual victimization, some feminist scholars and advocates remained concerned that encouraging or requiring women to undertake such training could reproduce victim-blaming by shifting responsibility for rape prevention onto potential victims rather than onto perpetrators and the institutions that enable sexual violence (Hollander 2016; Jordan and Mossman 2021). Some scholars were rightfully concerned that violence could escalate if a woman engaged in self-defense tactics, though these claims were later found to be unsupported (McCaughey and Cermele 2017). To date, women's self-defense programming remains one of the most successful interventions, though it is seldom on campus radars. Given the heated debate and its politicization, even the US government has removed mentioning self-defense programs in their prevention campaigns, for fear of backlash by scholars and activists.

4. Campus Sexual Violence in the 2010s to 2020: Policy and Programmatic Shifts

Much has happened in the past decade on the legal and institutional front that has put the onus of responsibility for sexual assaults onto college campuses. In 2011, under the Obama Administration, the Department of Education (DOE) Office for Civil Rights issued a “Dear Colleague Letter,” which was a national mandate for universities to take seriously the issues of rape on campus (Ali 2011). The DOE also threatened to withhold federal funding for noncompliance and provided guidance on how to manage cases internally. The 2013 SaVE Act⁴ amended the Clery Act and required that universities focus on and report their rape prevention strategies to prevent assaults. In 2014, the White House issued the ‘Not Alone’ campaign and established the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault.

These developments also expanded campus responsibility for handling cases of sexual misconduct though the increase in governmental oversight from Title IX did not necessarily result in formal or punitive measures. Richards (2019) found that only a small portion of reports of campus sexual violence resulted in a finding of responsibility and that the most likely response from universities to a victim, was service provision. This gap between “law on the books” and “law in action” reflects a longer-standing problem in rape-law reform whereby formal legal change does not necessarily transform institutional practices, case processing, or outcomes (Caringella 2008; MacKinnon 2016; Renzetti and Follingstad 2020). Alongside this growth in federal oversight and campus adjudication, individual states also began to formalize the standards governing sexual conduct itself.

In 2014, the state of California passed a monumental law that amended the Education Code and required universities to add affirmative consent to their campus policies. Affirmative consent means, “. . .affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity.”⁵ During this period, affirmative consent education became increasingly institutionalized through campus workshops, orientation activities, and prevention training, as federal guidance and state policies placed greater pressure on universities to educate students about consent and sexual assault prevention (White House Task Force 2014; Malae 2022). Also pivotal during this time was the Association of American Universities Campus Climate Survey (AAU). This was an important study because it included over 150,000 students from 27 different colleges and asked them about their experiences of sexual assault and misconduct and their perceptions of campus climate (Cantor et al. 2015). These survey data helped researchers understand key social factors in the climate of campuses that encouraged rape, such as hook up culture and the silence of women who had been raped by student-athletes.

4.1. Hookup Culture and the Normalization of Sexual Risk

By the early 2000s, hookup culture had become a prominent feature of college social and sexual life, even as traditional dating persisted (Bogle 2007). As hookup culture became more visible on college campuses, scholars debated its implications for students’ well-being and vulnerability to sexual violence. Some researchers identified participation in casual sexual encounters as a context associated with increased vulnerability to sexual assault, promoting discussions about whether reducing participation in hookup culture could reduce victimization (Conley et al. 2017; Sutton and Simons 2015). Others interpreted hookup culture more broadly as evidence of changing collegiate sexual norms, questioning whether casual sexual encounters reflected declining intimacy, emotional connection, and relationship formation among young adults (Freitas 2013; King 2017).

Feminist scholars approached hookup culture from a different perspective, asking both whether hookups were good or bad, and how gendered social norms shaped students’

experiences within them. Drawing on longitudinal interviews and student journals, Wade (2017) argued that hookup culture produced contradictory but largely unequal outcomes: while a relatively small group of students experienced it as an opportunity for sexual exploration and self-definition, most encountered unequal sexual expectations, mixed messages surrounding consent and desire, and persistent gendered double standards. Similarly, Burkett and Hamilton (2012) argued that although changing sexual norms could expand women's sexual agency, hookup culture often continued to privilege masculine sexual scripts and reproduce longstanding gendered and racialized inequalities. Thus, feminist scholars did not uniformly celebrate hookup culture as sexually liberating, nor did they dismiss it as inherently harmful. Rather, they emphasized the gendered structures in which hookups occurred (Meenagh 2017).

These competing interpretations reflected a broader tension within campus sexual violence scholarship. While some researchers focused on modifying individual behaviors and reducing personal risk, feminist scholarship increasingly emphasized the gendered social structures that organized students' sexual relationships. Despite these theoretical developments, university prevention efforts largely continued to prioritize individual-level interventions rather than addressing the broader cultural and structural conditions identified by feminist scholars.

4.2. Athletics, Media Visibility, and Rape-Prone Subcultures

Sexual violence perpetrated by athletes was not a new field of research. Scholarship during the 1990s and early 2000s had already established that athletic participation was correlated with sexual aggression, and some researchers had contested the way in which this literature was interpreted, and raised concerns about policy implications (Koss and Gaines 1993; Crosset et al. 1995, 1996; Boeringer 1996, 1999; Crosset 1999, 2000). This work had also reached beyond the academy: Benedict's (1997) investigative account of athletes and crimes against women drew on the same judicial affairs research and was published for a general readership.

A notable shift occurred in the early 2010s; there were numerous high-profile university assault cases, mostly involving football players. Media coverage on the events at Baylor University (from 2012 to 2016), Florida State (2013), Vanderbilt (2013), Ramapo College (2014), and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (2015), described the ways in which the universities were found to have hidden or mishandled sexual assault allegations involving student-athletes. Thus, public salience was growing around the issue of athlete-perpetrated sexual violence, particularly focusing on institutional responses rather than individual perpetration.

These cases were so popularized they later inspired the book and documentary, *The Hunting Ground* (Dick 2015), as well as the book, *Missoula Rape and the Justice System in a College Town* (Krakauer 2015) published the same year. In response to these events, the general public took a heightened interest in the intersection of sexual violence and college life. Google Books Ngram data reflect this shift: terms like 'college rape,' 'football,' and 'rape' appear with increasing frequency, and consent- and prevention-related language became more visible in print over time. This suggests these ideas gained prominence in public and academic discourse, though not that they were uniformly adopted across campuses. Using survey data, academics found that athletic participation and assaults were correlated (Gage 2008; McMahon 2007). Navarro and Tewksbury (2017) proposed that this may be because RMA was higher among college athletes than nonathletes. Furthermore, Young et al. (2017) said that it was cultural beliefs about rape—not athletic membership—that mattered, and Crosset (2016) also described it as a subculture. Scholars were still faced with the need to do more than provide evidence of correlations or culture, and they

struggled to provide any concrete policy recommendations. No one was going to suggest ending college sports, but some programs, such as Fair Play tried to specifically intervene in the attitudinal beliefs of athletes, showing only marginal success (Pastore et al. 2015).

4.3. *Regulating Sexual Violence: Consent, Rape Myths, and Bystander Governance*

Campus responses to sexual violence in the early 2010s increasingly shifted toward preventive educational strategies that functioned as forms of governance. The proliferation of consent workshops coincided with the rise of the #MeToo movement and the passage of affirmative consent laws in 2014, collectively intensifying institutional pressure to regulate sexual behavior through formalized instruction. Programs such as Yes Means Yes, Real Consent, The Men's Program, and Consent Is Sexy framed sexual violence as a problem of misunderstanding or miscommunication, positioning students as rational actors capable of preventing harm through proper knowledge acquisition. These initiatives focused on defining consent, outlining appropriate sexual conduct, and identifying other factors—such as alcohol use or coercion—that invalidate consent. While research suggests that such programs can reduce RMA and negative beliefs about women, their effects on assault prevalence remain difficult to measure (Borges et al. 2008; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Jozkowski and Humphreys 2014; Salazar et al. 2019).

Substantial variation in program structure, duration, and audience further obscures evaluation, reinforcing prevention as a moral and educational obligation rather than an empirically verifiable outcome. Rape myth acceptance programs extend this logic by treating sexual violence as an attitudinal problem amenable to correction through education. Although rape myth research long predates their institutional uptake, these programs had finally gained prominence only in the late 2000s and early 2010s, reflecting a delayed policy response to feminist scholarship that we have highlighted throughout (Crooks et al. 2007). Rape myth programs typically assess baseline beliefs, provide targeted instruction, and measure post-intervention attitudinal change. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that these interventions can reduce rape myth beliefs (Trottier et al. 2021) though their effectiveness is uneven and constrained by factors such as religiosity, just-world beliefs, and political conservatism (Barnett et al. 2018; Hayes et al. 2013). Importantly, the reliance on attitudinal change as a proxy for behavioral transformation reflects a broader governance strategy that prioritizes measurable shifts in belief over structural determinants of sexual violence.

Bystander intervention programs further broaden responsibility of preventing rape by extending it beyond potential victims and perpetrators to third-party observers. Emerging in the early 2010s, these programs train students to identify risky situations and intervene through techniques such as distraction, monitoring, or escorting. Randomized controlled trials and meta-analyses indicate that participants report more pro-social attitudes toward sexual violence and greater stated willingness to intervene (Brown et al. 2014; Coker et al. 2011; Salazar et al. 2014; Jouriles et al. 2018). Programs such as Bringing in the Bystander have demonstrated increases in self-reported helping behaviors (Banyard et al. 2014). However, longitudinal research suggests that willingness to intervene may decline over time, and situational factors, including alcohol consumption, RMA, and group gender composition, can substantially limit real-world intervention (Leone et al. 2018; Young et al. 2017).

Feminist critiques suggest that the bystander frameworks risk reproducing narratives of female vulnerability and a need to be rescued, while obscuring institutional and cultural conditions that enable sexual violence. More recent scholarship has also argued that universal prevention approaches may insufficiently address the needs of marginalized student populations. For example, Black feminist scholars have emphasized how racism, institutional betrayal, and cultural betrayal shape campus sexual violence experience in ways that extend beyond traditional gender-based prevention models. These findings

suggest that prevention efforts informed by intersectionality require culturally responsive approaches rather than assuming a universal campus experience (Gómez 2022a, 2022b).

Taken together, consent education, rape myth programming, and bystander interventions reflect a broader shift toward governing sexual violence through individualized responsibility, risk management, and behavioral self-regulation. These approaches prioritize prevention through education and peer surveillance, while relying heavily on self-reported attitudes and hypothetical actions as indicators of success. As a result, campus sexual violence governance increasingly manages risk and liability without necessarily addressing the structural, cultural, or institutional dynamics that shape sexual harm. More recent campus programs therefore represent an expansion of institutional intervention, but one that often relocates responsibility for prevention onto individual students rather than transforming the organizational conditions that enable sexual violence.

The pattern across each period has remained consistent: feminist logic made appropriate interventions possible, academic research then often provided the necessary data to support the theory, yet preventative programs failed to build from the evidence. Research on rape and campus sexual violence has expanded substantially over the past five decades. Political pressures and federal policy mandates accelerated the development of campus prevention programs and the empirical research supporting them. Yet, despite significant advances in feminist theory, much of this research and the prevention efforts it informed remained largely undertheorized. Rather than grounding university interventions in feminist explanations of sexual violence, researchers frequently relied on empirically identified correlates and risk factors as proxies for causal theory, using them to justify both program content and the populations targeted for intervention. This concern parallels recent work by DeKeseredy et al. (2023) argument that campus sexual assault research has often focused on measuring prevalence and identifying risk factors without giving enough attention to theory or to the broader social conditions that produce violence.

Given that criminologists are interested in the causes and theories of crime, we might expect to see more criminological research on campus rape in the social sciences. The research on campus sexual assault, however, has largely been led by scholars in the fields of psychology, sociology, women's studies, and higher education. Social sciences are fully capable of bringing something to the table; we simply point out that the field has been slow to investigate assaults in the university context specifically.

Social science is headed in the right direction. Two works in the *Annual Review of Criminology* within the past five to six years both mention campus rape as a significant problem worth investigating (Khan et al. 2020; Uggen et al. 2021). Despite a growing body of research, criminological perspectives have been relatively underrepresented within the broader, interdisciplinary scholarship on campus sexual assault. Addressing this gap does not require centering criminology alone but rather integrating its insights—particularly those from feminist criminology—into a wider social science conversation.

Feminist criminology, while a relatively recent subfield compared to older schools of criminological thought, has developed some of the most relevant theoretical approaches for understanding sexual violence, especially against women. At the same time, its direct engagement with campus sexual assault remains limited. For instance, a review of the journal *Feminist Criminology* shows relatively few studies focused specifically on university settings, despite the scale and visibility of the issue. This suggests an opportunity not only for growth in criminology, but also for stronger connections across disciplines. Scholars in sociology, psychology, public health, gender studies, education, and related disciplines have made significant contributions to understanding campus sexual violence. However, the campus environment is shaped by intersecting peer cultures, institutional structures, gendered norms, and power hierarchies that cannot be fully understood through isolated

empirical findings alone. Addressing these complexities requires stronger integration between theoretical frameworks and empirical research.

Drawing on feminist criminology alongside these other perspectives can help deepen and connect existing lines of inquiry. Looking forward, a broader social science agenda might ask: How do campus environments and institutional structures produce and reinforce the power relations and social inequalities that contribute to gendered and racialized violence? How might institutional and social spaces be reconstructed to promote safer, more equitable relationships? In what ways does hookup culture both expand personal autonomy and potentially increase risk? What can be learned from individuals who self-report perpetration? And how do institutional policies, such as affirmative consent standards or disciplinary systems, shape behavior and outcomes?

Scholars must answer these questions in ways that neither continue to responsibilize women nor perpetuate rape myths. We propose increasing the use of qualitative methods to capture the perspectives of both survivors and those accused of perpetration. Qualitative approaches—including ethnographic fieldwork, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and life history narratives—may be particularly well-suited to feminist research on campus sexual violence. Participatory Action Research and community-based research offer additional opportunities to center the voices of those most directly impacted by sexual violence and to examine how campus cultures and institutional structures shape these experiences.

However, generating richer empirical evidence should not be an end. Future research must also be translated into prevention efforts that are explicitly grounded in feminist theory and informed by the lived experiences of campus communities. Rather than continuing to rely primarily on correlates and individual risk factors, prevention programs should address the institutional, cultural, and structural conditions that sustain gendered violence. Integrating theory with empirical research offers the potential to develop prevention strategies that move beyond risk management toward meaningful institutional and cultural change.

The policy implications of campus sexual assault should be self-evident, yet we reiterate that an estimated one in five women will experience sexual assault during their undergraduate careers. Rape has long been described as the “forgotten crime,” and campus sexual violence remains comparatively underexamined within criminology. As scholars, we must produce research that honors the experiences of survivors while informing the development of ethical, effective, and theoretically grounded prevention programs capable of addressing the structural conditions that enable sexual violence.

5. Conclusions

By tracing major developments of campus sexual violence scholarship across more than five decades, this historically organized narrative review identifies a persistent and consequential disconnect between advances in feminist thought, empirical research, and campus prevention efforts. While feminist scholarship increasingly moved toward explanations centered on gender, power, inequality, and institutional structure, campus-based research and prevention often remained focused on prevalence, individual risk factors, behavioral correlates, and institutional compliance. Although these areas of research have generated substantial knowledge about the scope and correlates of campus sexual violence, the uneven incorporation of feminist theory has limited the development of broader explanations for how campus environments and institutional structures contribute to sexual violence.

This disconnect has also shaped the prevention strategies institutions have relied upon. Approaches centered on risk management, attitudinal change, and behavioral regulation have expanded considerably over time, but they have not always been accompanied

by comparable attention to structural power, gendered and radicalized inequalities, or the institutional conditions that sustain sexual violence. This uneven incorporation of feminist theory is also reflected in whose experiences have been centered within the research and prevention. Despite the development of intersectionality and Black feminist thought, the experiences of Women of Color, LGBTQ+ students, transgender and gender-diverse students, and other marginalized populations have often remained comparatively underrepresented in both empirical research and institutional responses.

Bringing campus sexual violence more fully into the theoretical core of the social sciences is therefore overdue and necessary. This requires research that moves beyond documenting prevalence and individual risk to examine how campus environments organize opportunity, normalize coercion, and reproduce inequality. Feminist criminology, alongside sociology, psychology, public health, gender studies, and related fields, can contribute to this work by connecting empirical findings to theoretical explanations of power, deviance, inequality, and social control. Future scholarship should also continue integrating feminist, intersectional, and structurally informed perspectives so that theories of campus sexual violence better reflect the diversity of experiences represented across campus communities.

Methodologically, this agenda also requires approaches capable of capturing social context and lived experience. Ethnography, participatory research, qualitative interviews, and other contextually grounded methods can complement existing quantitative research by helping scholars understand how institutional practices, campus cultures, and interpersonal relationships shape experiences of sexual violence. Ultimately, the persistence of campus sexual violence and the limitations of existing responses suggest that this is not simply a problem of policy or programming, but also one of theory. Stronger integration between feminist theory, empirical research, and prevention can help move the field beyond identifying risk toward understanding—and ultimately changing—the institutional and social conditions that sustain sexual violence.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.R.Z.; investigation, K.R.Z. and G.A.; writing—original draft preparation, K.R.Z. and G.A.; writing—review and editing, K.R.Z. and G.A.; visualization, K.R.Z. and G.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1681–1688.
- ² Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, 20 U.S.C. § 1232g.
- ³ Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1092(f).
- ⁴ Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act, enacted as part of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, Pub. L. No. 113-4, § 304, 127 Stat. 54, and codified as amendments to 20 U.S.C. § 1092(f).
- ⁵ California Senate Bill No. 967, 2014 Cal. Stat. ch. 748, § 1 (codified at Cal. Educ. Code § 67386).

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