



Department of Psychology Colloquium Series



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What Can We Learn from Studying Sexual Violence in Students?

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Loeb C665

The strongest evidence contributing to our understanding of sexual violence is generally thought to come from studies examining people convicted of sexual offenses. At times, when access to convicted populations is not feasible, sexual violence is studied in students. Students tend to be seen as a 'less than ideal, but readily available' population that is utilized by academics in psychology as a (subpar) alternative to studying more difficult to access populations. Although one could likely identify a variety of characteristics that would differentiate students from people convicted of sexual offenses, more consideration should be given to the similarity in the types of sexual behaviours students report engaging in. More specifically, across a large number of campus sexual violence studies, engagement in sexual violence is reported by a substantial minority of students, as reported both by victims, and individuals who perpetrate the sexual violence. Such perpetration should not be dismissed as insignificant. This leads one to question how different students and convicted perpetrators are in reality. Results from several studies conducted in my lab will be presented comparing students with men convicted of sexual offenses on variables demonstrated to be related to perpetration of sexual violence; namely, offense supportive attitudes, substance use, and hostility will be considered. Although evidence suggests that these two seemingly disparate populations are engaging in many of the same sexually violent behaviours, and that they are similar in terms of some offense-related factors (e.g., offense supportive attitudes; Dadgardoust, Palermo, Harkins, Abracen & Looman, 2021), other factors likely contribute to whether individuals are convicted for said behaviour. Thus, additional data will be presented comparing students convicted of sexual offenses, with sexual offenses committed by non-students, matched for age. These findings highlight some of the similarities between the offenses committed by these two convicted populations, as well as differences, such as in criminal justice outcomes (e.g., students were found to be less likely to receive custodial sentences). The implications of these findings will be discussed in terms of the validity of studying sexual violence in students.