Survey of Unwanted Sexual Attention in University Residences

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The Survey of Unwanted Sexual Attention in University Residences is an amalgamation of several previous instruments (see below) with the addition of demographic descriptions and site-specific questions. It was used to identify the types of sexual harassment and coercion problems that occurred in undergraduate residence halls on campus and to determine how student attitudes and beliefs about sexual harassment and coercion related to their occurrence. Specific outcomes of the study can be found in several published articles (Cairns, 1993a, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b). The narrative sections of the survey proved to be particularly valuable; qualitative analysis of the narratives confirmed and further developed the findings from the quantitative analyses.

Description

The final version of the survey contains 10 sections (only Sections D, G, H and I appear in the exhibit), each of which addresses a different set of issues relevant to sexual harassment and coercion. Each of these sections is outlined in this article.

Section A. This section contains a series of general questions intended to provide a demographic picture of the sample population. The specific items selected for this section were chosen to reflect characteristics that the literature on harassment suggests may be useful in understanding variation in individual responses (i.e., age, gender) as well as information about issues unique to the residences, which might also be expected to systematically affect responses (i.e., type of residence, floor activity level, gender composition of the floor, length of time the participant had lived in residence). Additional questions elaborate on participants’ backgrounds (i.e., length of time since leaving home, whether they had lived independently before moving into a university residence) and inquire about how content they were with their current living arrangements.

Section B. This section contains two standardized test instruments, the Sexual Harassment Attitude Scale (Lott, Reilly, & Howard, 1982) and the Attitudes Toward Sex, Dating and Rape Scale (Dull & Giacopassi, 1987). The items on these instruments include a range of beliefs about gender interaction and sex roles. Respondents indicate the extent of their agreement with each statement, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Section C. This section was a modified version of Muehlenhard and Cook (1988), which provided a series of 16 possible reasons for engaging in unwanted sexual activity. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had ever engaged in unwanted sexual activity for any of these reasons, and, if so, what type of sexual activity was involved.

Section D. Section D contains items asking specifically about a series of 10 behaviors that the research literature indicates may be widely considered to constitute sexual harassment. The 10 behaviors include the use of sexually obscene language; display of sexually explicit, offensive, or pornographic materials; putting down women as a group; putting down men as a group; discussion or spreading rumors about the sexual activities of other residents; unwanted, sexually suggestive looks or gestures; unwanted sexual teasing, jokes, comments, or questions; unwanted pressure for social contact; unwanted deliberate touching or physical closeness; and unwanted attempts to kiss or fondle (Reilly, Lott, & Gallogly, 1986). An additional question, added by residents’ focus groups prior to survey administration, asks about residents being exposed, against their wishes, to members of the opposite sex in states of undress.

For each problem behavior, residents were asked about whether and with what frequency the behavior had been observed, how offensive it was considered to be, and whether the respondent thought of it as sexual harassment. For Items 6 through 11, which were considered to be more problematic forms of harassment, an additional set of questions was asked concerning frequency of occurrence; maximum number of times any one resident behaved in this manner; how upsetting the incidents were; how the person responded to the incidents; how the person thought he or she would have responded were the person precipitating the incident not another resident; whether the responding person had ever engaged in the behavior him-or herself; and how often, why, and how upsetting the respondent thought the behavior was to the other person.

Section E. This section contains the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982). Items on this instrument ask for information about eight types of unwanted sexual activity personally experienced by residents. These activities range from unwanted fondling, kissing, or petting to sexual intercourse. The questions consider possible sexual coercion, the involvement of alcohol and drugs, and the use of physical force. Because the literature indicates that offenders in these more serious types of offense are overwhelmingly likely to be men, and that victims are almost exclusively women, the sections for each gender were written accordingly. Section E

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(Female) focuses on unwanted sexual activity as recipient, asking each woman whether she has had a particular experience, and, if so, how often, when and where it occurred, to whom (if anyone) it was reported, and whether she considered it sexual assault. Section E (Male) asks about unwanted sexual activity from the perspective of the offender, using a comparable set of questions.

Section F. Section F requests further details about the most severe incident reported by the respondent in Section E, including the number of offenders involved, the relationship of the victim to the offender, where the offense had occurred, whether drugs or alcohol were involved, and various aspects of victim and offender perceptions of the incident. Again, this section is worded differently for female and male respondents reflecting the predominance of male offenders and female victims.

Qualitative Sections G, H, and I. Section G asks for written descriptions of incidents that the respondent felt had not been addressed in the previous sections. Section H provides descriptions of incidents of physical abuse of a nonsexual nature occurring between men and women in the residence complex. Section I requests narrative descriptions of a particular incident of sexually inappropriate behavior that the respondents felt had affected them most or that they remember best. The specific wording of the qualitative sections is contained in the Exhibit.

Section J. The final section includes questions about the participants’ perceptions of the level of their personal knowledge about sexual harassment and sexual assault, their judgements about current levels of education about these issues in the residences, and their impressions of their own personal safety in residence.

References


