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MIT survey sheds light on sexual assaults on campus

Far-reaching survey, rare among colleges, called step for change

By **Matt Rocheleau**

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | OCTOBER 27, 2014



30 COMMENTS



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

MIT is one of the first colleges around the country to attempt to put a precise estimate on the prevalence of sexual violence on its campus.

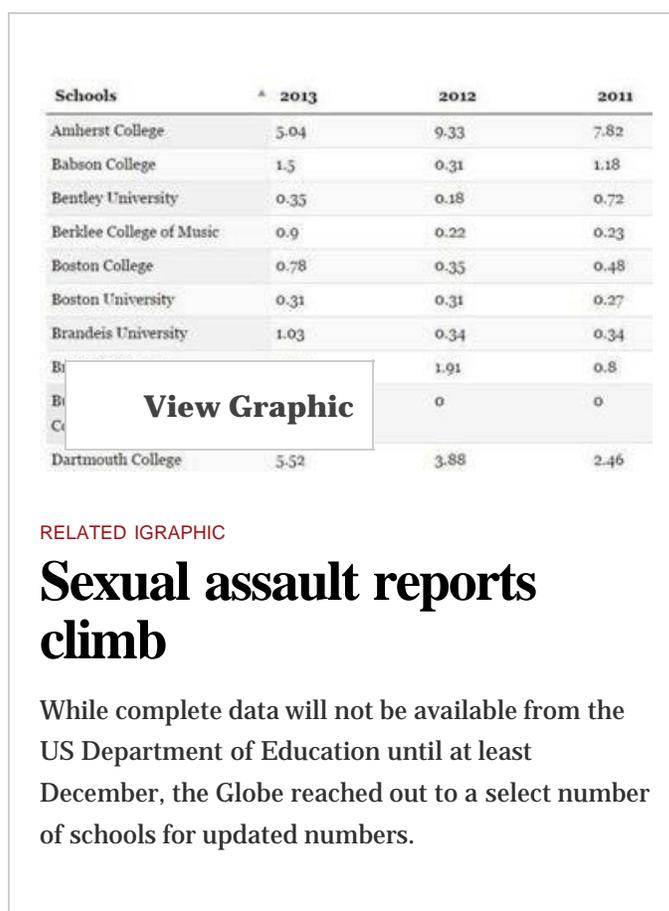
About one in six female undergraduates at MIT who responded to an anonymous survey said they had been sexually assaulted while enrolled at the university, but only 5 percent said they reported the crime, according to results released Monday by the school.

With its comprehensive survey, MIT became the highest-profile college to put such a specific estimate on the prevalence of sexual violence on campus, amid heightened national attention on the issue. Many schools have been hesitant to conduct such surveys, but advocates have urged colleges to do so because victims are more likely to reveal that they were assaulted if they can remain anonymous. Undergraduates, in particular, are viewed as most at risk.

In an e-mail to the MIT campus community, university president L. Rafael Reif said he was “disturbed by the extent and nature of the problem” reflected in the survey results.

“Sexual assault violates our core MIT values,” Reif wrote. “I am confident that, with this shared understanding and armed with this new data, the MIT community will find a path to significant positive change.”

About 3,800 students responded to the survey, which was launched in spring this year. In all, about 10,800 students were invited to participate.



The chief finding of the student climate survey — that 17 percent of female undergraduate respondents said they had been assaulted while enrolled at MIT — coincides approximately with a nationwide estimate of campus sexual assaults by the US Justice Department. That survey, released in 2007, found that about 19 percent of female students have been victims of sexual violence.

MIT said 5 percent of male undergraduates who replied reported they had been sexually assaulted.

The survey also highlighted sexual harassment on campus. When asked whether they had experienced unwanted sexual behavior, including harassment, the portion of female undergraduate respondents jumped to 35 percent.

Laura Schmitz, a fourth-year graduate student at MIT who is studying architecture, said she hopes the survey will help raise awareness of the issue. “A lot of what we’re up against at MIT is, people think, ‘We’re MIT, it can’t be happening here, we’re too smart for that,’ ” said Schmitz, who is a founding member of the group Students Advocating For Education on Respectful Relationships. “But now that we have this data, hopefully more people will understand that this is a problem here. That’s the first step: People need to realize it happens here.”

Several other colleges, including Harvard, Yale, Rutgers, Emerson, Dartmouth, and the University of Virginia, are planning to conduct similar surveys, according to media reports. The University of California administered a systemwide climate survey from the fall of 2012 to the spring of 2013. However, the survey covered a range of other topics, including questions about discrimination and diversity, and its questions about sexual assault were not as detailed as those in the MIT survey.

In February, after an MIT alumna wrote in the school newspaper about being raped as a student several years before, Reif declared sexual assault prevention a priority for the school.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology conducted the survey at the same time that chancellor Cynthia Barnhart announced other measures aimed at curbing sexual assault, including expanded training for students, faculty, and staff.

The MIT survey began with a warning that it could be upsetting to some and that it asked explicit questions.

About 17 percent of undergraduate women respondents said they had experienced unwanted behaviors that included the use of force, physical threat, or while they were incapacitated. The survey asked whether students had experienced one or more of the following: sexual touching or kissing; attempted oral sex; oral sex; attempted sexual penetration; sexual penetration.

Among students who indicated that they had experienced unwanted sexual behavior while at MIT, close to half said that they had been taken advantage of when they were impaired by drugs or alcohol or otherwise incapacitated; about 80 percent said that the acts occurred on campus; and about 72 percent said the acts were perpetrated by another student.

More than one in five undergraduate respondents said they know someone who is a perpetrator, and more than half of respondents who knew a perpetrator did not confront the person or take any other action. Meanwhile, a small number of student respondents, about 1.9 percent, said they had acted in a way that would be considered unwanted sexual behavior, and another 2.2 percent said they were unsure whether they had.

The survey included other compelling findings. About a third of victims said they were unable to work or complete assignments, unable to eat, or experienced a drop in grades. A majority of student respondents said they take steps to prevent assault, including leaving a party with people they arrived with or offering to walk a drunk friend home.

MIT officials said that the survey results may be subject to response bias, as is “expected in virtually any

voluntary survey, particularly one focused on a narrow topic.”

University administrators said they plan to use the survey data to guide their understanding of what needs to be improved at the school and how to do it.

MIT announced several steps Monday to try to address the issue, including increasing staffing to respond to victims; finding new ways to inform students about where to turn for help; removing barriers to reporting; launching a Sexual Assault Education and Prevention Task Force; and increasing education for students.

S. Daniel Carter, a national campus safety expert, said surveys like MIT's are vital to tackling the issue. “You cannot fully take on any challenge until you know the true scope of it, and campus climate surveys enable colleges and universities to do that for sexual violence,” Carter said.

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Matt Rocheleau

can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).



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