

Needed: A Fresh Perspective on Campus Violence

Anthony Bernier and Mike Males

Educational administrators take pride in promoting standards of scholarly rigor, systematic and evidence-based analysis, fairness to all groups, challenges to stereotypes, and critical thinking—and, of course, providing healthy, safe, and secure environments. Yet, when it comes to discussing violence on campuses, their failure to apply these principles is disturbing.

On the one hand, some administrations stand accused of downplaying and concealing cases of violence on their campuses. Pennsylvania State University and Baylor University are recent, prominent examples but are hardly alone; 21 schools were fined by the U.S. Department of Education from 2000 through mid-2014 under the Clery Act for failing to report campus crimes.¹ In this unfortunate regard, some administrators have behaved like leaders of other institutions such as the Catholic Church, the U.S. military, prisons, civic organizations, and corporations by prioritizing their public image over the well-being of victims.² On the other hand, campus leaders, journalists, and others often spotlight campuses and students, especially undergraduates, for supposedly suffering and perpetrating high and rising levels of lurid crimes, alcohol and drug overdoses, mental health crises, and suicides that together constitute a so-called culture of violence. Educators,

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administrators, counselors, and parents are urged to intervene to forestall alleged propensities of undergraduates to risks.³

That campuses suffer unacceptable levels of violence is undisputable; they are part of a larger American society in which family, community, and institutional violence far exceed levels found in comparable Western nations.⁴ And yet, amid the finger-pointing and scapegoating of students as violent, we note a critical lack of evidence-based analysis, which is the

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basis for reasoned solutions. Are our students in imminent danger on our campuses? Are our campuses dangerous places?

This investigation finds that, in fact, campus areas are considerably safer places for young adults than non-campus areas, although certain campus populations do suffer high rates of violence. This more complex profile of campus communities requires a new research perspective to better understand the simultane-

ously encouraging, troubling, and unexpected patterns of violence, crime, and risk today.

VIOLENT AND SELF-INFLICTED DEATHS ON AND AROUND CAMPUSES

For this analysis, violent death rates by age, race, gender, and cause are calculated for the 15 ZIP codes that include the 10 University of California residential campuses and campus-adjacent areas, with a total adult (ages 18 to 64) population of 488,000, for the five-year study period.⁵ These are divided into “campus” areas (that include six ZIP codes with an adult population of 158,000, of whom 62 percent are ages 18 to 24) with concentrated populations of undergraduate age, and “campus adjacent” areas (nine ZIP codes, adult population of 230,000, 28 percent ages 18 to 24). The remaining “non-campus” areas of the 10 counties (adult population, 13.3 million, 16 percent ages 18 to 24) are used for comparison.

What we discovered undermines the common perception of campuses as violent or dangerous places for young adults. (See Tables 1 and 2.) The higher the concentration of 18- to 24-year-olds, the lower the violent death rate of young people, we found. In fact, the violent and self-inflicted death rate of 18- to 24-year-olds on or near a university campus is just *one-ninth* the rate for 18- to 24-year-olds who live in non-campus areas. For those living in campus-adjacent areas, it's one-third. This holds true across all reported races and genders: young people are much safer in university environs from every category of violent death, including suicides, shooting deaths, and drug and alcohol overdoses. Among the different races and genders, some small variations of rates on and near campus exist; however, those rates are much more sharply different in non-campus areas.

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The safety umbrella of campus and campus-adjacent areas applies less to 25- to 44-year-olds and not at all to those 45 years and older. Overall, *younger adults are much safer* in campus and campus-adjacent areas than older adults, who suffer violent death at rates more than 20 times higher than 18- to 19-year-olds in campus settings. But, in non-campus settings, those 45- to 54-year-olds suffer violent death at only slightly higher rates. In fact, over the five-year study period, in campus areas with the most concentrated populations of young adults, more older adults ages 35 to 64 with advanced degrees died from violent or self-inflicted causes than all young people of undergraduate age. These findings are consistent with those of the “Big Ten Student Suicide Study,” which found suicide rates lower for campus than non-campus populations and, on campuses, considerably higher for older than younger students.⁶

We also examined violent death trends over time among adults ages 18 to 24 in the three counties most impacted by the growth of major University of California campuses: Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Yolo (home to University of California, Davis).⁷ Universities in these three areas have experienced a more than tripling of their student population

TABLE 1. VIOLENT DEATHS PER 100,000 POPULATION BY CAMPUS LOCATION, AGE, AND RACE IN CALIFORNIA

Age	Campus location	Asian	White	Latino	Black	Male	Female
18-24	Campus	4.1	9.4	6.1	7.7	8.8	4.3
18-24	Campus-adjacent	13.5	18.8	36.2	25.6	30.8	9.6
18-24	Non-campus	31.7	54.7	58.1	122.6	90.9	19.6
25-44	Campus	10.7	34.6	34.4	65.7*	42.0	18.7
25-44	Campus-adjacent	20.4	48.2	45.4	149.3	60.8	21.5
25-44	Non-campus	19.2	58.2	39.8	88.7	70.0	21.7
45-64	Campus	7.1	73.4	50.9	233.6*	76.5	50.8
45-64	Campus-adjacent	22.5	89.3	68.1	110.4	102.3	41.9
45-64	Non-campus	23.7	78.9	43.8	88.2	89.2	36.3

*Based on small population (<1,000).

Sources: Centers for Disease Control; Bureau of the Census.

from around 20,000 in the 1960s to more than 70,000 today. During the same time (from the early 1960s to 2014), the rate of young adults, ages 18 to 24, who died violently in these three counties fell by 85 percent overall (compared to a 52 percent decline statewide). This includes specific declines in suicide (down 52 percent, compared to seven percent statewide); homicide (down 33 percent, compared to a 71 percent increase statewide); and accidental deaths (down 89 percent, compared to a 70 percent decline statewide). Before the massive growth of their campuses, these cities were uniquely hazardous for 18- to 24-year-olds; today, they are notably safer.

VIOLENT CRIME IN AND AROUND CAMPUSES

The story is similar when we look at criminal arrests.⁸ Arrests understate actual incidence of crime, because many offenses go unreported (a caveat that applies to both campus and non-campus areas and to all ages and time periods) and should be used to *compare* various groups, areas, and eras rather than to establish absolute rates of crime.⁹ As with violent deaths, the problems do not lie with undergraduates. In Santa Cruz, Davis, and Berkeley, the three cities most dominated by the Universities of California, student populations comprise more than one-fourth of each city's total

Total	Deaths	Population
6.4	31	98,545
20.4	65	65,053
56.8	10,465	3,686,463
31.0	53	34,870
41.7	192	93,902
46.2	24,095	10,419,910
63.6	77	24,716
70.8	247	71,122
62.2	27,425	8,818,012

population and 18- to 29-year-olds comprise 47 percent of all adults.

As the number of undergraduate students in these areas doubled over the last three decades, we found that arrest rates for 18- and 19-year olds for violent crimes fell by 71 percent, while those ages 20- to 29 declined by 47 percent, and those of 30- to 39-year-olds fell by 40 percent. (See Tables 3 and 4.) Arrests for rape and other sex offenses, as well as drug/ alcohol offenses, also fell sharply among younger adults. However, violent crime arrest rates for 40- to 69-year-olds rose by 13 percent over the same period in these communities.

In 2015, in these three campus communities, where nearly half the adult population is under the age of 30, it's not young people who are often arrested. Rather, criminal suspects ages 30 and older comprised 55 percent of violent crime arrests, including seven in 10 arrests for rape or sexual assault, as well as six in 10 for drug and alcohol offenses. Overall, students under age 30 in campus areas have considerably lower arrest rates in campus areas than their peers living across California; ages 30 to 39 have somewhat lower rates; and ages 40 and older have higher arrest rates (see Table 4). Arrest levels peak among adults in their 30s in campus districts, with ages 40 to 69 showing higher arrest rates for all violent offenses (and especially for rape/sexual assault) than ages 18 to 19.

TABLE 2. VIOLENT DEATHS BY SUBTYPES PER 100,000 POPULATION BY CAMPUS LOCATION, AGE, AND RACE IN CALIFORNIA

Death subtypes and age groups	Violent deaths per 100,000 population			Ratio, non-campus vs. campus
	Campus	Campus-adjacent	Non-campus	
All violent deaths				
18-19	3.1	18.2	47.1	15.2
20-21	5.9	20.1	51.0	8.7
22-24	12.6	20.9	48.8	3.9
25-34	19.4	30.2	39.3	2.0
35-44	48.5	56.6	40.8	0.8
45-54	70.2	81.3	54.9	0.8
55-64	53.8	57.2	52.2	1.0
Suicides				
18-19	0.5	2.8	6.3	12.2
20-21	3.2	7.2	5.3	1.6
22-24	4.5	7.7	9.0	2.0
25-34	4.6	9.3	8.6	1.9
35-44	16.7	15.7	10.7	0.6
45-54	26.5	19.4	15.3	0.6
55-64	20.2	12.6	16.0	0.8
Gun deaths				
18-19	0.0	7.0	19.9	~
20-21	0.0	3.2	18.5	~
22-24	0.9	7.0	16.2	18.0
25-34	1.8	6.8	10.8	5.8
35-44	4.6	5.8	6.7	1.5
45-54	4.7	4.4	6.9	1.5
55-64	8.4	4.6	7.7	0.9
Drug/alcohol overdoses				
18-19	1.0	1.4	3.6	3.5
20-21	2.7	4.0	6.1	2.3
22-24	3.6	2.3	6.5	1.8
25-34	6.5	7.2	8.8	1.4
35-44	16.7	22.5	14.5	0.9
45-54	21.9	39.3	23.4	1.1
55-64	18.5	22.9	18.0	1.0
Population				
18-64	158,131	230,077	13,305,308	
Percent age				
18-24	62%	28%	16%	

Sources: Centers for Disease Control; Bureau of the Census.

TABLE 3. ARREST RATES FOR VIOLENT AND DRUG/ALCOHOL OFFENSES IN CAMPUS COMMUNITIES BY AGE, 2015 VS EARLY 1980S

	Annual arrest rate per 100,000 population			
	1980-84	2010-14	2015	Change
Violent crime				
18-19	1,469.4	526.5	421.0	-71%
20-29	1,215.9	695.1	647.7	-47%
30-39	1,540.0	1,238.3	930.2	-40%
40-69	477.0	503.7	536.8	+
Rape/sexual assault/other sex				
18-19	187.4	34.5	10.1	-95%
20-29	175.3	37.7	34.2	-80%
30-39	198.8	58.3	42.1	-79%
40-69	78.3	46.6	65.1	-17%
Drug/alcohol				
18-19	1,420.3	760.9	847.1	-40%
20-29	1,998.4	1,491.2	1,944.6	-3%
30-39	3,149.8	1,717.1	3,183.6	+
40-69	1,811.0	1,486.8	2,007.6	+

Sources: Criminal Justice Statistics Center; Bureau of the Census.

TABLE 4. ARREST RATES FOR VIOLENT CRIMES IN CAMPUS AREAS AND STATEWIDE PER 100,000 POPULATION BY AGE, 2015

University of California campus versus non-campus communities	age 18-19	20-29	30-39	40
Three most student-concentrated campus cities (Berkeley, Davis, Santa Cruz)	233.3	303.9	466.8	233.2
Statewide (all populations)	596.9	693.2	520.5	201.3

Sources: Criminal Justice Statistics Center; Bureau of the Census.

SAFE SPACES

These patterns of violent crime arrests, as well as of violent deaths, appear consistent with other communities that host large campuses.¹⁰ They also are consistent with Office of Justice Program’s (OJP) comparative victimization survey, which indicate campus women are safer than non-campus women from rape and assault.¹¹ However, the statistics, studies, and OJP survey are not consistent with the *impressions* of campus violence fostered by coverage of high profile incidents such as the recent stabbings at Ohio State University in November or 2015’s mass shooting at the Umpqua Community College in Oregon. Nor are they consistent

with the image of high levels of campus violence fostered by several surveys.¹² These inconsistencies appear to result from focusing on the victimization experiences of younger, undergraduate students on campus to the exclusion of higher rates of violence in non-campus settings and among older campus populations, and to the broader definitions of violence used in self-reporting surveys.

While the best comparative evidence suggests that campus and campus-adjacent violence levels are not

higher, and may be lower, than elsewhere in society, none of this analysis is intended to minimize the violence on campus that does occur, or that threatening behaviors can include actions other than rape and assault. To the contrary, the findings here argue for *broadening* discussion of campus violence and its solutions beyond today's narrow, limited perspective that fails to

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address the changing, larger, and more complex nature of the problem. University of California campus violence today—though much less frequent than UC campus violence in past decades or in non-campus areas—is mainly an issue involving older adults, not traditionally aged students. Even in UC campus areas, residents ages 35 to 64 (who account for less than one-fourth of the adult population) now account for 53 percent of traffic deaths, 57 percent of murders, 67 percent of drug/alcohol overdoses, 70 percent of suicides, 79 percent of gun fatalities, and half or more of all arrests for violent crimes, especially for rape and sex offenses.

This pattern is not unique to the UC system. The sharp increase in educational attainment among younger adults in recent decades has accompanied historic decreases in violence, criminal arrests, and related risks across the country. Meanwhile, older adults suffer rising rates of troubled behaviors.

In light of these trends, rather than the typical approach by faculty, staff, and other professionals, which generally singles out students for interventions, a much more comprehensive, integrated strategy is required

to address campus violence and risks.¹³ Such a strategy would begin at square one: rigorous analysis of why violent deaths and arrests have plunged among college-age students to historically low levels, the sources of older adults' problems, and how sustaining student trends may lead to expanded and sustained initiatives to encompass all ages.

THE LIBRARY'S ROLE MOVING FORWARD

Because the notion of "space" has emerged as an important feature in creating a healthy campus environment, one recommendation is to enhance the role of the college or university library as a location to house and organize current information, facilitate the difficult discussions necessary to grapple with the new thinking these issues provoke, and curate exhibits and other media to promote evidence-based information. Libraries define the center of university culture. They are the single most important location for one of the institution's core missions: to produce and disseminate knowledge.

The new research suggested here requires the collection, assessment, and distribution of original statistical and empirical research specific to violence and crime on and near that campus. University police and other evidence-based information sources, including qualified surveys, counseling reports, surveys, and program studies, could be collected, maintained, and housed at the university library and provided on its website. This information could be made readily accessible for the campus community's scrutiny, particularly that of faculty, students, and independent researchers to build studies and classroom assignments from diverse perspectives. What is most needed now is not repetition of prevailing ideas from interest groups and politicians, but syntheses of original information to create challenging new assessments of today's campus violence and risk realities.


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research provokes, the library also could host open community conversations informed by scholarship. An example from this paper, applicable to UC campuses and perhaps across the country: Why, contrary to public perception, are modern campus experiences so much safer for younger students than older adults? In this example, films and local speakers, along with the presentation of evidence emerging from scholarly information sources to personal narratives, could prompt conversations that challenge

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popular images and stereotypes. The library also is an ideal site for recording live webinars and other faculty and staff training opportunities that would focus discussion not on common moral panics and age-based, finger-pointing at undergraduates, but on the pertinent populations who, evidence shows, are both more at risk and more dangerous to the community.

Libraries also curate exhibits on issues of concern to their communities. Such an exhibit about community safety, beyond merely posting the phone number of the after-hours escort service, might offer a vital opportunity to raise the consciousness of library visitors, whether they're physically in the library or accessed remotely. Images, charts, and the promotion of publications and research findings could all play supportive roles in drawing the community's attention away from the harried headlines and bumper-sticker mentality, and toward evidence-based analysis of actual violence and crime on today's college campuses. Informing and challenging prevailing narratives are not easy tasks, but they are ones uniquely suited to the scholarly roles of universities, their faculties, staffs and students—and their libraries. 

END NOTES

1. Stratford, "Clery Fines: Proposed vs. Actual."
2. Center for Public Integrity, "Rape—News and Investigations."
3. White House Council on Women and Girls, "Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action."

4. Quealy and Sanger-Katz, “Compare These Gun Death Rates: The U.S. is in a Different World.”
5. Violence on campus can be assessed through various sources, with varying strengths and weaknesses. Murder, suicide, gun-related deaths, drug and alcohol poisonings, and other forms of violent death are reliably tabulated by the Centers for Disease Control under a death registration system that statistical models show captures more than 98 percent of all such mortality. Other forms of violence such as rape, sexual assault, robbery, and nonfatal assault are significantly undercounted in crime statistics compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and California’s Criminal Justice Statistics Center. Self-reporting surveys of victimization, such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey and various interest-group polls, are often cited but have weaknesses of their own. See also Center for Health Statistics, Death data files; and U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder.
6. Silverman, et al., “The Big Ten Student Suicide Study: A 10-year Study of Suicides on Midwestern University Campuses,” pp. 285-303
7. Centers for Disease Control, “Compressed Mortality File.”
8. Criminal Justice Statistics Center, *Criminal Justice Profiles*.
9. See the discussion in note 5.
10. FBI, *Crime in the United States*.
11. Office of Justice Programs, “Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization among College-age Females, 1995–2013.”
12. Claiborne, “2011 College Dating Violence and Abuse Poll.” See also American Association of Universities, “Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct.”
13. White House Council, *op cit*.

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