

# Violence Victimization on a College Campus: Impact on GPA and School Dropout

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## Abstract

Violence against university students has significant impact on their mental health. The impact of violence on students' academic performance has received little attention. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the impact of sexual and physical/verbal violence on the academic performance of college students. Data from 74 case files of service users of a campus-based Relationship and Sexual Violence Program were examined. Bivariate analysis was used to examine the impact of sexual and physical/verbal victimization on grade point average and leaving school. Students who experienced both physical/verbal and sexual violence experienced significant drop in their grade point average. Students who experienced sexual victimization were more likely to leave the university than students who experienced physical/verbal victimization. Findings indicate that universities would be well served by investing resources in violence prevention programming.

## Keywords

school dropout, sexual violence, physical violence, academic performance

## Introduction

Physical and sexual violence is a serious public health and social problem. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention(2011) reports that 33% of women in

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the United States experience physical abuse and 35.6% report sexual abuse. The prevalence rates of sexual and physical/verbal violence among college students are also staggering. Fass, Benson, and Leggett (2008) found that 32.4% of college-aged women reported at least one incident of physical violence during college and about 16% of college women experienced at least one form of sexual victimization; 47% were repeat victims during an academic year. Moreover, a campus sexual assault study by Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, and Martin (2009) found that one in five women is sexually assaulted while in college. The authors state that most often, it happens during the first and second year and in the great majority of cases (75–80%), the victim knows the attacker. Although fewer and harder to gauge, college men too are victimized. Krebs et al. (2007) found that 6.1% of college males were victims of either attempted or completed sexual assault.

Literature consistently finds that exposure to intimate partner violence and sexual violence poses significant physical and mental health risks (Barrick, Krebs, & Lindquist, 2013; World Health Organization [WHO], 2013). College students who experience sexual and physical/verbal violence may be particularly at risk for experiencing physical and mental health problems (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Herman, 1992; Jordan, Campell, & Follingstad, 2010). Research on sexual victimization on college campuses has identified shock, confusion, agitation, fear, and social withdrawal as the immediate aftermath of sexual victimization violence (Herman, 1992) and posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, acute fear, and suicidality among the long-term effects (Campbell et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2010). Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2000) reported that in about one in five rape and attempted rape incidents, victims reported injury, most often bruises, black eyes, cuts, scratches, swelling, or chipped teeth. Studies have found that college women who are victims of physical violence report injuries from physical assault such as swelling, cuts, scratches, bruises, and broken teeth (Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Kohn, Flood, Chase, & McMahon, 2000). Amar and Gennaro (2005), for example, found that victims of sexual and physical violence had significantly higher scores on depression, anxiety, somatization, and interpersonal sensitivity than nonvictims. The health and mental health risks of physical and sexual violence may be especially salient concerns for first-year college students who have many challenges in making adjustments to college life (Griffin & Read, 2012; Huerta, Cortina, Pang, Torges, & Magley, 2006).

Although the literature on physical and sexual victimization of college students documents its impact on physical and mental health, we know little about how physical and sexual victimization impacts academic performance of college students. In order to develop effective interventions to address the devastating consequences of physical and sexual abuse, it is essential to understand the full range of its consequences. This study examines how physical and sexual victimization relates to students' academic performance and remaining in school.

Few studies have examined how sexual and physical victimization relates to students' academic performance and school retention.

## Literature Review

Many studies have examined how the academic performance of college students relates to their retention in college (Astin, 1975; Hermanowicz, 2007; Tinto, 2007). Additionally, studies examine how the college environment relates to students' decisions to stay or leave an institution (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Student involvement and student engagement are often found to be key factors that influence college retention (Astin, 1975). Student engagement is especially critical during a student's first year of college (Hermanowicz, 2007).

Hermanowicz (2007) conducted in-depth interviews with 30 students leaving college to examine the reasons behind their decision to leave college. Students reported that their decisions were based on the school's social life, housing issues, financial aid, religious observance, and college life, in general. However, the impact of sexual and physical violence victimization as a factor for leaving college was not explored.

### *Sexual Violence and Academic Achievement*

Studies on the relationship between experiences with sexual violence and academic outcomes (e.g., grade point average [GPA], school attendance, and school liking) are limited and findings are somewhat inconsistent. Elliot, Alexander, Pierce, Aspelmeier, and Richmond (2009) found that childhood victimization was not associated with GPA. However, Huerta et al. (2006) found that psychological distress due to experiences with sexual violence was significantly associated with disordered eating, academic satisfaction, and academic disengagement. The study further reported that academic performance (i.e., lower grades) suffered as a function of disengagement from the academic environment. Moreover, academic performance was even lower when students experienced harassment by higher status individuals. Griffin and Read (2012) found that women's sexual victimization during their first year of college was significantly associated with college attrition in the second year of college.

Research on the impact of sexual harassment on academic performance shows similar results. Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald, and Waldo (1998) found that female undergraduate and graduate students who were harassed were less likely to consider returning to their universities if they were given an option compared with women who were not harassed. Sexual harassment even altered graduate women's evaluations of their own academic competence; as sexual harassment increased, so did women's doubts about their academic capability. Hill and Silva (2005) found that sexually harassed students on college campuses were more likely to skip a class, drop a course, participate less in class, and avoid particular

buildings or places on campus in comparison to the students who were not harassed. However, the authors found that only a handful of students actually changed colleges as a result of the harassment. When looking at high school students, Duffy, Wareham, and Walsh (2004) found a similar impact of sexual harassment among students who had recently been harassed and students who had not been harassed. High school students who experienced sexually harassing behavior made a lower grade on test or a paper than they thought they should have compared with students who had not been harassed. Additionally, the study reported that the harassed students thought about changing schools, stayed away from particular places in the school or school grounds, and avoided particular people.

In one of the few studies examining the impact of sexual violence on GPA, Jordan, Combs, Gregory, and Smith (2014) found that sexual violence affected students' GPAs. The authors found women who were sexually assaulted during their first semester of college had lower GPAs by the end of the semester than women who did not have a sexual assault experience during the first semester. They also found that women with prior sexual teen victimization experiences earned lower grades during their first year of college than did nonvictimized women. The authors further explored the impact of sexual assault (unwanted touch, intoxication prior to encountering an assailant, and coerced/forced attempted intercourse) versus rape (penetration of any orifice by any object) on victims' GPA. Rape was found to have a greater and significant impact on GPA than sexual assault; 14.3% of students who had experienced rape during their first semester had a GPA below 2.5 at the end of second semester compared with 5.9% of those who were not raped. Specifically, women who were raped during the first semester of college had lower GPAs both at the end of that semester and at the end of the second semester. Further, an experience with sexual assault since age 14 significantly predicted lower GPA at the end of the first semester and also at the end of second semester in college. However, experience of sexual assault in the first semester only predicted lower GPA at the end of the first semester but not at the end of second semester (Jordan et al., 2014).

### *Physical/Verbal Violence and Academic Achievement*

Scant studies examine impact of experiences of physical/verbal violence by an intimate partner on GPA among college women. The few studies looking at the impact of physical/verbal violence on academic achievement among college women find that violence impacts the victims' daily routines and behaviors and may lead to decreased class attendance, decreased quantity and quality of work, and dropping grades (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Smith's et al. (2003) longitudinal study on college women who experienced physical assault by a partner found that women who reported more psychological distress as a

result of physical victimization in both childhood and adolescence were more likely to drop out of college. Amar and Gennaro's (2005) study of victims of intimate partner or dating violence reported that victims felt abandoned by the institutions they attended because they perceived that their reports of abuse were not believed. Although Amar and Gennaro's study did not specifically address the impact of physical/verbal and sexual violence on students' GPA, the authors suggested that students' experiences with violence and associated changes in their routines and behaviors may lead to decreased class attendance and ultimately to college failure.

Findings from the limited research on the impact of sexual and physical/verbal violence on college women's academic achievement suggest that experiences with violence have the potential to derail students' integration into the college environment and negatively impact their academic achievement. However, we have very little knowledge about how the academic performance of college women may be differently impacted by their experiences with sexual violence and physical/verbal violence by an intimate partner. Thus, this study fills an important gap in the literature. It examines how physical/verbal violence by an intimate partner and sexual violence impacts the academic performance of college students.

### *A Conceptual Framework of Academic Performance*

Rumberger and Lim (2008) contend that academic performance relies on the theoretical construct of student engagement in schooling. Engagement is influenced by an individual student's background, as well as by the institutions (family, community, and school) within which the individual student is placed (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). A variety of factors may influence the student to begin a process of disengagement with schooling, a psychological process that generally manifests itself behaviorally in absenteeism, failure to complete assignments, and failure to pass courses (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2010). While many of the factors leading to student disengagement may not be school related, the behavioral indicators of student disengagement leading to a dropout outcome, such as attendance and course failure, manifest themselves directly at school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2010).

The theoretical perspective of student engagement by Rumberger and Lim (2008) defines four key domains that explain the process of student engagement which can lead to school dropout or graduation. These four domains are (a) social factors, (b) academic performance, (c) psychological factors, and (d) background factors. The first domain of social factors explores factors associated with poor academic performance, such as, misbehavior, drug and alcohol, negative peer influence, and sexual assault. The second domain posits that academic factors like persistence and achievement can influence student engagement (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Therefore, students whose schooling is

interrupted by dropping out or changing schools or those who have poor academic records are less likely to progress in school and graduate. The theory defines the third domain as psychological factors like perceived competence, perceived autonomy, and perceived sense of belonging. The fourth and last domain consists of student background factors that impact student engagement like health, prior performance in school, demographic characteristics, and past experiences, for example, child abuse. Drawing on Rumberger and Lim's theory that the social domain influences students' engagement and ultimately academic achievement, we hypothesize that students' experiences with sexual and physical victimization within the college context will be negatively associated with students' academic achievement.

### **Research Questions**

The study addresses the following research questions: (a) How do experiences with sexual violence and physical/verbal violence by an intimate partner impact students' GPA? (b) How do experiences with sexual violence and physical/verbal violence by an intimate partner impact students' leaving the university? (c) Are sociodemographic variables associated with changes in GPA and leaving the university?

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and Procedure***

This study received approval from the University review board for the protection of human subjects. The sample consisted of 145 service users of Relationship and Violence Sexual Assault Program at a large public university in the southwestern part of the country. The director of RSVP gathers data during the intake process when individuals report an incident of sexual and physical/verbal violence. The lead author of the article reviewed the case files of all service users between 2008 and 2014. Numbers were assigned to each case to ensure that no identifying information was entered in the database for analysis. Each case was reviewed to obtain data to determine whether the student experienced physical or sexual violence and whether the student was a victim or a perpetrator.

Although the study retrieved a sample of 145 service users, 74 individuals were included in the final sample because they had reported a GPA before and after the incident of physical or sexual violence. Information on students' GPA and students' dropout, academic levels, and demographic characteristics was accessed from the University's Institute of Research and Planning Effectiveness (IRPE).

## Measures

*Victimization variables.* Students were identified as having experienced sexual or physical/verbal violence based on the case file reports. Each case contained information on the type of incident, when the incident occurred, the date it was reported, and where it happened. Individuals were categorized as having experienced sexual or physical/verbal violence. Individuals were classified as having been verbally or physically assaulted if they indicated that they had experienced (a) verbal abuse; (b) verbal abuse online, verbally threatened to hit, or throw something at them or threw something at them; and (c) stalking. Victims of sexual violence included students who had reported experiences with sexual assault and rape.

*Demographic variables.* Demographic characteristics included age, ethnicity, marital status, gender, and academic level information. This information was obtained from the University IRPE. Age was included as a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 42 years. Age was also dummy coded into a categorical variable with different age-groups so as to assess its association with students dropout. Ethnicity was dummy coded into European American and minority. The category of minority was created because of the relatively small number of students in each group. Minorities included African Americans, Hispanic, Asian Americans, American Indian, Pacific Islander, International students, and multiple ethnicities. Due to small sample size in the category of separation and divorce, marital status was recoded and measured as being married, single, and unknown.

*Academic outcome variables.* Academic performance variables were obtained for students through the university's student record files maintained by IRPE. Two academic performance indices were used: (a) student status (i.e., graduated, currently enrolled, or left university) and (b) GPA was reported before and after the date of victimization for enrolled and nonenrolled participants. This group may have included students who simply left the university or transferred to other colleges and universities.

## Data Analysis

The data entered for each case file were checked for accuracy by the first author as well as the director of RSVP. We analyzed data using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 21.0 for Windows. First, we conducted descriptive analysis to understand the sample characteristics. Second, we tested the association between victimization variables, leaving, or staying at the university and socio-demographic variables using chi-square tests. Paired sample *t*-tests was used to compare the actual GPA before and after the incident of victimization based on

the type of victimization. In addition, we examined the factors that predicted college dropout after an experience with victimization using binary logistic regression.

## Results

### *Sociodemographic Characteristics*

As shown in Table 1, majority of the students were female (87.8%); 12.2% were males. Majority of the participants were also single (81.1%); 6% were married. Participant's age ranged from 19 to 42 years. Nearly 40.5% of the respondents were European American. Chi-square tests found that sociodemographics was not associated with the type of victimization a student experienced.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of Sample Population.

	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 74)	<i>M</i> (%)	<i>SD</i>
Age		25.69	5.0
Age-group			
<20	3	4.1	
20–24	35	47.3	
25–29	21	28.4	
≥30	15	20.3	
Ethnicity			
European American	30	40.5	
Minority	44	59.5	
Marital status			
Married	6	8.1	
Single	60	81.1	
Unknown	7	9.5	
Gender			
Female	65	87.8	
Male	9	12.2	
Type of victimization			
Physical/verbal	33	44.6	
Sexual	41	55.4	
Student status			
Graduated	21	28.4	
Dropout	18	24.3	

(continued)



**Table 1.** Continued.

	Frequency (n = 74)	M (%)	SD
Currently enrolled	35	47.3	
Academic level			
Freshman	11	14.9	
Sophomore	10	13.5	
Junior	11	14.9	
Senior	33	44.6	
Fifth year	3	4.1	
Graduate	6	8.1	

Note. SD = standard deviation.

**Table 2.** Difference in GPA Before and After Victimization and Type of Victimization.

Type of victimization	N	GPA before incident		GPA after incident		t
		M	SD	M	SD	
Overall victimization	67	2.85	0.79	2.62	0.90	2.25*
Physical/verbal victimization	33	3.0	.76	2.65	.76	2.76*
Sexual victimization	34	2.72	.81	2.60	.82	2.77*

Note. Participants include only those who had GPA before and after the incident.

GPA = grade point average.

\* $p < .05$ .

### Sexual and Physical/Verbal Violence and GPA

As shown in Table 2, there was an overall significant decline,  $t(67) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ , in students' mean GPA from before ( $N = 67$ ,  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) to after students' experiences with a violent incident ( $N = 67$ ,  $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = .90$ ). Students' GPA significantly declined,  $t(33) = 2.76$ ,  $p < .05$ , from before ( $N = 33$ ,  $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) to after they experienced physical/verbal violence from an intimate partner ( $N = 33$ ,  $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). Similarly, students' mean GPA significantly declined,  $t(34) = 2.77$ ,  $p < .05$ , from before ( $N = 34$ ,  $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) to after they experienced sexual violence victimization ( $N = 34$ ,  $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = .82$ ).

### Sexual and Physical/Verbal Violence and University Dropout

Table 3 shows the results of the association between overall victimization, sexual and physical victimization, and leaving the university. Eighteen of the 74 students

**Table 3.** Differences in Dropout Rates and Type of Victimization.

Type of victimization	% No dropout (n = 56)	% Dropout (n = 18)	Total (n = 74)	$\chi^2$
Overall victimization	75.7	24.3 (18)	100	.028*
Physical/verbal victimization	87.9	12.1 (4)	100	.014*
Sexual victimization	65.9	34.1 (14)	100	.028*

\* $p < .05$ .

(24.3%) who experienced violence left the university. This dropout rate based on overall victimization was significant  $\chi^2(1, n = 74) = 4.82, p < .05$ . Significantly more students who had experienced sexual violence  $\chi^2(1, n = 14) = 4.82, p < .05$  left the university compared with students who had experienced physical/verbal violence  $\chi^2(1, n = 4) = 6.00, p < .05$  from an intimate partner.

### *Association Between Sociodemographic Variables and GPA and School Dropout*

Sociodemographic factors were not found to be related to a decrease in GPA. The only sociodemographic variable found to relate to school dropout was academic level,  $\chi^2(5, n = 74) = 22.55, p < .05$ . First-year students were more likely to leave the university after experiencing violence than students at other academic levels.

### *Predictors of College Dropout and Decline in GPA as a Result of Victimization*

Table 4 shows the results of the logistic regression analysis to predict the impact of gender, academic level, age, GPA before the incident, and ethnicity on school dropout. Looking at the results on key factors for school dropout, the logistic analysis shows that GPA decline after the incident of victimization significantly increased the odds of a student dropping out of school by .29 times. Academic levels (first year, second year, third year, fourth year, fifth year, and graduate status) significantly increased the odds of school dropout by .32 times. However, it was not possible to determine the odds at each academic level due to the small sample size. Age, gender, and ethnicity were not significant predictors of school dropout.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how sexual and physical/verbal victimization impacted students' GPA and school dropout. Similar to other studies (Amar &

**Table 4.** Predictors of College Dropout and Change in GPA as a Result of Victimization.

Demographic variables	B	Exp(B)	p
GPA after victimization	-1.89	.29	.05
Academic level	-1.15	.32	.01
Age	-.18	1.19	.07
Gender	.37	1.45	.80
Ethnicity	-.14	.87	.88
IPV	-.91	.40	.32

Note. GPA after victimization is significant for the students who had dropped and had GPAs for before and after the incident.

GPA = grade point average; IPV = intimate partner violence.

Gennaro, 2005; Huerta et al., 2006; Jordan et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2003), this study finds that academic performance is impacted when students experience violence victimization. Specifically, this study found that both sexual and physical/verbal victimization negatively relates to students' GPA. The results suggest that there is a great need for universities to address sexual and physical victimization which interferes with the most fundamental goal of institutions of higher learning.

Sexual victimization appears to have a stronger negative impact on students' academic performance than physical/verbal victimization. Students who experienced sexual violence were more likely to leave school compared with students who experienced physical/verbal violence. The dropout rate for students who had been sexually victimized (34.1%) was higher than the overall university dropout rates (29.8%).

We also found that a decline in GPA was more strongly associated with sexual violence than physical/verbal violence. This finding is consistent with other studies that have examined impact of sexual violence on students' GPA (Jordan et al., 2014). A victim of sexual violence is likely to experience psychological distress, depression, fear, and self-destructive and disordered eating behaviors (Campbell et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2010). This is likely to negatively influence their concentration in coursework

The finding that demographic variables did not significantly influence leaving the university or change in GPA was not surprising. Other studies (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002) find that demographic factors do not efficiently predict which students will dropout. A more promising focus for developing early warning indicators for dropout relies on factors that lead to student disengagement in schooling which has guided much of the research on dropping out or leaving school.

One limitation of this study is that the sample size was small, and therefore, limited the analysis that could show significant results. Collecting data from case files limited the opportunity for a follow-up discussion with the abused students on items that were not clear in the files. Additionally, this study looked at census data of students who reported sexual and physical/verbal violence. Clearly, many students do not report sexual and physical/verbal victimization. Hence, these results cannot be generalized to other settings. Comparing academic performance data for students who have and have not experienced sexual and physical/verbal violence may have provided a clear picture of the impact of victimization. In addition, it is possible that the impact on GPA and leaving the university might have been a result of other factors that were not examined for in this study, such as immigration status, language background, and unwanted pregnancy (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

The retention literature theorizes that student engagement influences student retention. Consequently, this study suggests that experiences with violence victimization, an aspect of one of the four key domains explaining student engagement (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), have an effect on GPA and eventually school dropout. Further research should test an integrated or comprehensive model that includes other domains of student engagement, such as psychological and background factors as defined in the theory (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). However, such a model should take into consideration the impact of victimization across a continuum from when victimization occurs until when a student drops out of college. This may help to create programs that enhance an individual's resilience and persistence, and hence, reduce the chances of dropping out of school.

It is noteworthy that previous studies have found that violence victimization effects GPA across the first and second year of college (Jordan et al., 2014). However, our sample size may have precluded us from finding significance at each academic level. Future studies should consider using a larger sample size to determine the impact of victimization at each academic level. The finding that sexual and physical/verbal victimization related to a decline in GPA in this study suggests that future studies should be conducted with larger samples to further assess the distinction that physical and verbal abuse has on academic outcome. More information on how various forms of violence impact academic performance may provide important information for intervention programming with specific forms of victimization.

## **Conclusion**

Sexual and physical/verbal victimization remains a persistent problem in universities. The current study finds that sexual and physical/verbal victimization is associated with decreases in GPA. Students' GPA influences their retention. These findings are troubling and suggest that universities must do more to

address sexual and physical violence. Universities must provide services to help students who have been victimized to still attend classes and complete assignments. Engagement, identified as a key construct in academic performance (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), is likely to be particularly difficult for those students who have been victimized by violence.

Universities seeking way to increase retention would be well served to increase their violence prevention programs and intervention services for students who have been victimized by sexual and physical/verbal violence. University officials with physical and sexual knowledge and experience need to work closely with faculty and staff to address the needs of students. Policies, protocols, and interventions should also be designed to meet individual needs of the students. However, most importantly, universities need to engage in prevention programming. Prevention programming needs to be ongoing, not limited to first-year orientations. Universities need to create norms that make it clear that physical and sexual violence will be not tolerated. Only when universities truly begin to address the physical and sexual violence occurring will they address one of the key factors influencing student retention.

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