

WE WORTHY WOMEN

# SAFER SCHOOLS SURVEY

2021 REPORT

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Funded by the  
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# Executive Summary

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*Content Warning: This report discusses, and includes quotations referencing, sexual harassment, sexual assault, mental health, consent, and safety. You will find additional content warnings at the beginning of certain sections.*

The Safer Schools Survey, and subsequent 2021 report, is a We Worthy Women initiative to better understand student and alumni experiences with sexual violence, and consent education and resources at Canadian post-secondary institutions.

We received responses from 212 students and alumni across Canada, with representation from every province and territory. The majority of respondents (66.7%) shared that they had experienced sexual harassment while attending post-secondary, and almost half (47.4%) had experienced sexual assault while attending post-secondary. Almost all participants (72%) said that they knew of someone who had experienced sexual violence while attending post-secondary.

Sexual violence can have many long-lasting impacts on survivors, but there were a few key themes that were present throughout the responses. Participants shared that experiencing sexual violence had negative impacts on their mental health and their relationship with sex and intimacy, caused them to feel fearful and experience a loss of trust in others, as well as negatively impacted their education and ability to focus on school.

Participants were asked what they felt were the biggest issues related to sexual violence at their post-secondary institution, a question that garnered hundreds of responses. The most frequent response was the lack of adequate and accessible resources, support, and education around sexual violence. Many also noted that rape culture, and a lack of accountability and action from their institutions were important issues.

Participants were then asked what they felt needed to change to prevent sexual violence and better support survivors at their institution, which prompted five key themes. Students and alumni emphasized the need for additional mandatory and consistent training and education at post-secondary institutions, and increased accessibility of resources and support for students. They noted the need to normalize consent culture and uplift the voices of survivors, as well as develop better reporting mechanisms for those who experience sexual violence. They emphasized the need for more serious consequences for perpetrators and called on their institutions to take greater accountability and action around sexual violence prevention.

The Safer Schools Survey brought in hundreds of thoughtful responses to the questions we posed, and it was reassuring to see that there are so many passionate young people calling for change. While there is a lot of work that needs to be done in this area, we hope that this report can act as a catalyst for individuals and institutions to take action and create real change in their communities.

# Introduction

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The Safer Schools Survey is a We Worthy Women initiative to **better understand student and alumni experiences with sexual violence, and consent education & resources at Canadian post-secondary institutions.** Our aim in collecting student stories and experiences is to identify the current gaps, see what needs to change to end sexual violence at post-secondary, and better support survivors. The findings from the survey have been used to develop this report, as well as calls to action for post-secondary institutions and other relevant organizations. We also intend to use these findings to inform our future campaigns and programming.

We Worthy Women is a Canadian youth-led non-profit organization dedicated to the prevention and elimination of sexual and gender-based violence through education, advocacy, and community-based initiatives. Our work is focused on addressing gender inequality for all people who have experienced discrimination or oppression because of their gender expression or identity in Canada through cultural and systematic change.

This report addresses the prevalence and impacts of sexual violence, outlines the key issues, and shares what needs to change at post-secondary institutions, based on student and alumni experiences and opinions. Ultimately, we want school to be a place where everyone is safe and can focus on the things that matter most to them. We hope to use our findings to be part of that change, encourage others to take action, and promote a culture of consent at post-secondary institutions across Canada.

# Acknowledgements

The Safer Schools Survey would not have been possible without the generous support of a number of organizations and individuals. Special thanks to TakingITGlobal, the Government of Canada, and Canada Service Corps for their financial support of this project through the Rising Youth Grants. We appreciate the support of the many organizations and individuals who shared and promoted the survey, which allowed us to reach as many people as we did. We are incredibly thankful to the over 200 participants who took the time and energy to share their stories and experiences, without which this report would not have been possible.

We would also like to acknowledge the We Worthy Women team, Holly Foxall, Madeline Whittaker, and Emma Kuzmyk, for their tireless work on the development of the Safer Schools Survey and this report. Without collaboration and community, this report and the subsequent calls to action would not have been possible. We are thankful to everyone who contributed their time, energy, and effort towards this project.

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# Land Acknowledgement

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We respectfully acknowledge that this report was written on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. This territory is covered by the "Treaties of Peace and Friendship," which Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) People first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with the surrender of lands and resources, but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) titles and established the rules for what was meant to be an ongoing relationship between nations. The answers collected for this report come from many different territories across the settler state of Canada, whose sovereignty relies on continued exploitation and violence.

Given the subject matter of this report, we must also acknowledge the disproportionately high rates of physical and sexualized violence faced by Indigenous peoples – particularly by women, girls, and two-spirit individuals. This violence is part of the historical and ongoing genocide of Indigenous people.

As a team of anti-sexualized violence advocates made up of settlers, we are responsible for learning the ways in which our behaviours, actions, research, and practices affect Indigenous peoples and land, and working to ensure that our advocacy is inclusive, holistic, and aimed at dismantling the broader systems that create and perpetuate violence rather than simply working within them. We understand that our practices must evolve as we continue to listen and learn as guests in this territory, and we commit ourselves to doing the work necessary for meaningful change.

# BACKGROUND

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Sexual harassment can be defined as:

“Any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another.”

(United Nations Secretariat, 2008)

Sexual assault refers to “any unwanted sexual act done by one person to another or sexual activity without one person’s consent or voluntary agreement,” according to the Canadian Department of Justice (University of Lethbridge, 2018). When referencing sexual violence, we are referring to either or both sexual harassment and sexual assault.

University is meant to be a time of learning and growth, but sadly for many young people it is a time when they come face to face with sexual violence - either through their own experiences, or the experiences of their friends and peers. According to the Canadian Federation of Students (2015), “one in five women experience sexual assault while attending a post-secondary institution” (p.1), and the perpetrators of sexual violence at post-secondary institutions are disproportionately men; Canadian Crime Statistics found that 98% of perpetrators of sexual violence are men (Black, 2018).

It's also important to note that individuals with diverse identities are disproportionately impacted by sexual violence, yet are frequently underrepresented in reports, media, policies, and other spheres within post-secondary education aimed at tackling sexual violence because they have been constructed (either knowingly or unknowingly) to primarily “protect white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight cisgender women,” consequently silencing/minimizing the voices of other marginalized populations (Garvey et al., 2017).

“Women from marginalized backgrounds and identities are especially at risk of sexual assault and acts of sexual violence disproportionately target Aboriginal women, women of colour, queer and trans women, women with disabilities, and women who are new to Canada.”

(Canadian Federation of Students, 2015)

**71% of Canadian post-secondary school students have "witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviour in a post-secondary setting."**

The majority (71%) of Canadian post-secondary school students have “witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours,” yet of the students who experienced sexual violence, very few (roughly 7%) disclosed the assault to a school representative, while only 3% reported it to police (Burczycka, 2020).



Some students shared that they were unaware that reporting was an option, and a study by Maclean's found that “31% of students said they were given no information on how to report a sexual assault, and 25% said they were given no information on services for students who are sexually assaulted” (Schwartz, 2018).

These experiences can often lead to feelings of distrust in students towards their post-secondary institution and its efforts to protect them against sexual violence – “23% of students who had been sexually assaulted said they disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school does a good job of trying to prevent harassment and sexual assault” (Statistics Canada, 2020). In a Sexual Violence Climate Survey Report from StFX University, less than half of the students believed that university officials do enough to protect the safety of their students (O’Handley et al., 2018). These statistics point to a need for a greater focus on prevention education, and resource distribution at post-secondary institutions, which we found to be core issues in our survey responses.

# DEMOGRAPHICS

Overall, the Safer Schools Survey received 212 responses from students and alumni across Canada on their thoughts and experiences around sexual violence and consent education and resources at post-secondary. The survey was made up of 29 open and close-ended questions, and all participants provided informed and written consent for their findings and quotations to be used.

## IDENTITY

Participants were asked to self-identify with one or more of the following terms - Black, East/Southeast Asian, Indigenous, Latin American, Middle Eastern, South Asian, White, Other, or Prefer not to say. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of participants identified as White (68.7%), followed by East/Southeast Asian (7.6%), Black (7.1%), Indigenous (3.8%), South Asian (3.8%), Latin American (2.8%), and Middle Eastern (1.4%). The final 4.8% of respondents identified as a combination of these categories.

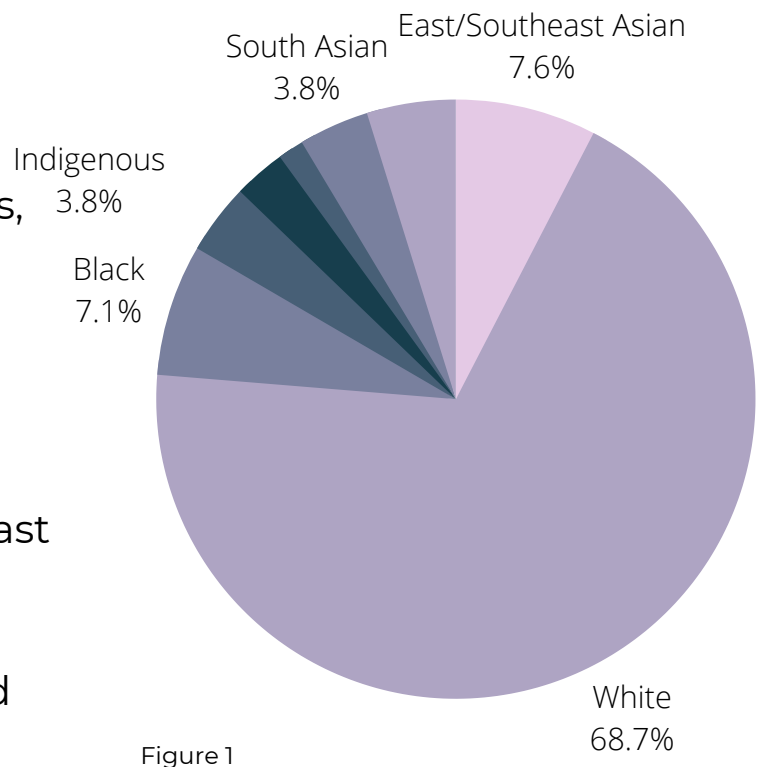


Figure 1

In our survey we asked individuals to self-identify with one or more of the following terms – Female, Male, Trans, Non-binary, 2 Spirit, Genderqueer, Agender, Other, or Prefer not to say. Of respondents, 78.3% identified as female, 17.9% as male, and 1.9% as non-binary. One participant identified as a trans man, and three responded with “other.”

## AGE

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of participants by age, with most respondents being 20-24 years old (47%), followed by 25-29 years old (27%), 16-19 years old (18%), and finally over 30 years old (8%).

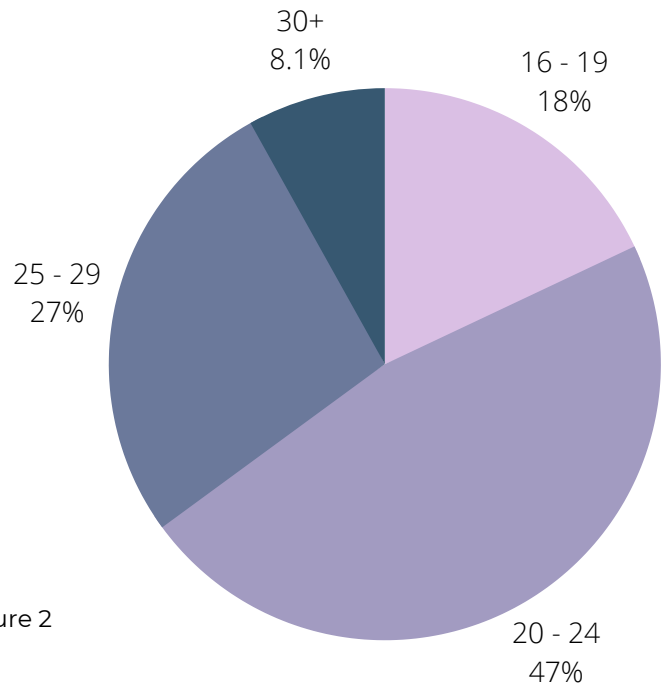


Figure 2

## GEOGRAPHY

We received responses from 212 individuals from across Canada, with representation from every Province and Territory. The majority of participants attended post-secondary education in Ontario (42.8%), Nova Scotia (8.7%), and British Columbia (8.7%); followed by Manitoba (7.2%), Alberta (5.8%), New Brunswick (4.8%), Newfoundland & Labrador (3.8%), Quebec (2.9%), Saskatchewan (2.4%), Northwest Territories (2.4%), Nunavut (1.4%), Prince Edward Island (1.4%), and the Yukon Territories (1%). The remaining respondents noted having attended post-secondary institutions in multiple Provinces and Territories.

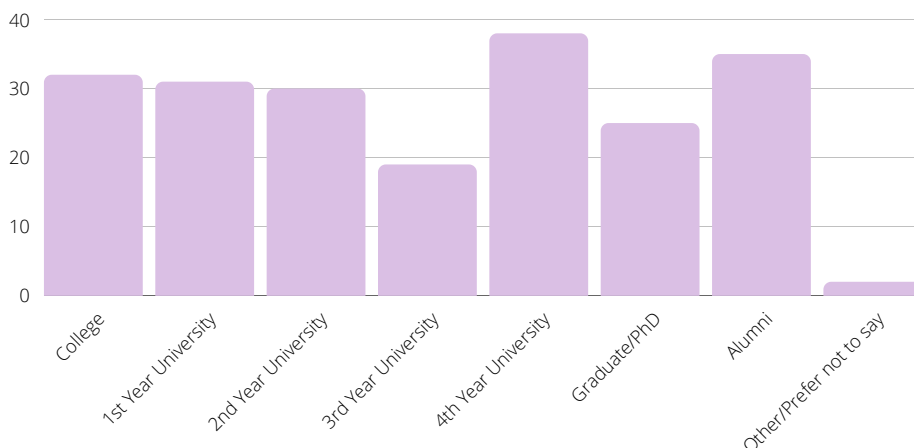


Figure 3

## EDUCATION

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of participants by education level.

# FINDINGS

The findings of this report have been broken down into three sections: 1) the prevalence of sexual violence at post-secondary and the impacts it has on survivors, 2) the core issues around sexual violence and consent education and resources at post-secondary, and 3) what needs to change to prevent sexual violence and better support survivors.

## PREVALENCE

Of the 212 participants, the majority (66.7%) said that they had experienced sexual harassment while attending post-secondary, only 25.7% said they had not experienced sexual harassment, while 6.7% were unsure, and 1% responded “prefer not to say.” Of those who experienced sexual harassment, 31% had experienced it solely off campus, 26% had experienced it solely on campus, and 42% had experienced it both on and off campus, while 1% were unsure.

# 47.4%

**of respondents said that they had experienced sexual assault while attending post-secondary.**

Of the participants, 47.4% said that they had experienced sexual assault while attending a post-secondary institution, 40.2% said they had not experienced sexual assault while attending a post-secondary institution, 10% were unsure, and 2.4% preferred not to say. Of those who experienced sexual assault while attending post-secondary, 47% had been assaulted off-campus, 29% had been assaulted on campus, and 24% had been assaulted both on and off campus.

The vast majority of respondents (72%) noted that someone they knew had experienced sexual harassment or assault while attending post-secondary, while 28% said “no, not that I know of.”

# 72%

**of respondents knew someone who had experienced sexual violence while attending post-secondary.**

## THE IMPACTS

For those who experienced sexual violence while attending post-secondary, there were many different, and long-lasting impacts, but a few key themes were present throughout.

Mental health

Relationship with intimacy

Fear & loss of trust

Negative impact on education

## MENTAL HEALTH

*Content Warning: The following section contains descriptions of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and loss of trust. To skip to the following section, go to page 13.*

For many of the survey respondents, the first and most noticeable impact of sexual violence was the negative **impacts on mental health**. Respondents noted that experiencing sexual violence greatly impacted their mental health, with many sharing that it caused them anxiety, depression, PTSD, low self-esteem, and more. One survey respondent shared the following:

“I still haven't fully recovered from my experiences with sexual assault; all of which were at the hands of other students at my school. Flashbacks will hit me at seemingly random moments and send me reeling. At these times I find it so difficult to eat, sleep, get up, and just generally function - let alone stay focused and motivated with my courses.”

For some, experiencing sexual harassment or assault had an **impact on their relationship with sex and intimacy**. Their experiences often made them hesitant to engage in future sexual activities, and closed off in relationships. Many noted that they now had difficulty with physical intimacy as a result of their experiences with sexual violence.

“It has made me extremely untrusting in relationships and hesitant about sex.”

“It made me feel like sex was something that happened to me for the pleasure of someone else, not something I should be an active participant in.”

“It affected my ability to be intimate with men, it made me feel unworthy, I was incredibly depressed, I require weekly therapy to deal with trauma still to this day. It has also made me an advocate for survivors.”

- Safer Schools Survey participants

## **FEAR & LOSS OF TRUST**

A very important theme that was present for many respondents was that experiencing sexual violence made them to feel ongoing **fear for their safety** in their day to day lives, and caused them to feel a **loss of trust in others**.

Some participants noted that they were afraid to walk alone at night--many also felt that fear at any time of day. The lack of trust in others, and fear for their safety was the most frequent response from participants, with over 30 participants mentioning this theme. Many shared the precautions they now take for their safety, which included only going out at night in groups, checking in on friends' locations, and constantly monitoring their surroundings when walking alone.

**“My experiences with sexual assault have made it so difficult to assume the best in others, something that's changed the whole way I interact with the world around me.”**

**“It has made me very fearful of being alone, not just at night but anytime of day. I had to go through intense EMDR therapy and really fight to take my life back. After I was assaulted I stopped caring about everything including school, and it caused my grades to drop a lot.”**

**“Makes me constantly monitor my surroundings, be careful when walking alone and ensure I stick together with friends at bars.”**

**“I don't like walking alone at night, especially in poorly lit areas. My friends and I keep our Find My Friends on and always travel in pairs, especially at bars.”**

## NEGATIVE IMPACT ON EDUCATION

For some respondents, their experience also had a significantly **negative impact on their education**, with many noting that it affected their studies and ability to focus on school. One respondent shared that they had to drop to part time studies, and take a leave of absence following their experience with sexual violence. They also shared that it negatively impacted their mental and physical health.

An interesting finding throughout the survey responses was that, for many individuals, they **didn't know that what they had experienced was sexual harassment or assault at the outset**. While, for some, the realization was delayed, many respondents noted that they experienced long lasting impacts in coming to terms with what they had been through.

**“I didn't know that it was assault or harassment at first, I didn't know what these things truly were. After I learned years later what happened to me was harassment and assault, it affected me by being insecure about myself sexually and becoming much more guarded and careful.”**

**“It's definitely something that affected me in a very delayed manner. When it first happened, I felt incredibly guilty - like I had done something wrong, and then I didn't process my emotions about it until something else triggered an outpouring of emotions. I did not want to put myself in a sexual position and felt highly vulnerable. I was able to work through it through talk therapy and my own emotional processing, and now feel passionate about having open discussions about it.”**



The quotes we have shared so far are a select few of over one hundred we received from one question regarding the impact that sexual violence has on survivors. We pulled out the key themes from our responses, but there are no doubt countless other ways that sexual violence impacts survivors every day. Students deserve to feel safe on campus, and we believe that understanding their experiences and opinions on the key issues in this space is an important first step to making schools a safer place for everyone.

## THE KEY ISSUES

Another question in our survey asked participants what they felt were the main issues around sexual violence at post-secondary. This question garnered hundreds of responses, with three main themes throughout: 1) the lack of accessible resources, support, and education from institutions, 2) the prevalent rape culture on and off campus, and 3) the lack of accountability and action from institutions.

Resources, support,  
& education

Rape culture

Lack of  
accountability &  
action

### LACK OF ACCESSIBLE RESOURCES, EDUCATION, & SUPPORT

The first, and most frequently mentioned theme (with over 100 responses on the topic) addressed the **lack of accessible and appropriate resources, support and education** for sexual violence prevention at post-secondary institutions. Many participants noted that while their institution may have had resources for sexual violence prevention and response, those resources were not widely known, or accessible to the students who needed them most.

For those who experienced sexual violence, many noted having to dig to find the resources they needed, and that those resources were often for general support, rather than specific sexual violence response.

**“I think that my university had the bare minimum in terms of resources and that they really aren’t that accessible. There wasn’t any real campus wide event targeted at teaching all students about consent which I think is so important because many students don’t learn about it in high school. The resources that are available are almost hidden and you would only know about them if you really needed support.”**

**“To me it comes down to this ... even if the university claims to have resources and helplines, support etc, if your own student body doesn’t even know they exist then they have no relevance except to look good on paper.”**

**“I didn’t feel like the resources were accessible. I also didn’t feel comfortable to ask that question while I was on campus. There wasn’t a designated place to go that felt safe and trustworthy.”**

Along with a lack of adequate and accessible resources, many respondents noted the **lack of appropriate education around sexual violence and consent** as a key issue at their institution. Participants shared that while there often were educational presentations available they were almost always optional, and were usually one-off events during orientation week, without follow up.

When asked what they believed was the biggest issue related to sexual violence at their institution, one participant said:

“Lack of education for the student body. I’m not sure of what the policy is for the abuser if they are a student either and I think that there should be a mandate around this so survivors can feel supported by the institution. Overall though I think that the university is willing to have resources and support for survivors but they aren’t communicated well and they aren’t specialized for SA survivors. I think many individuals also experience SA but write it off if it isn’t rape because stories about sexual assault are often attached to those that include rape when SA is a wide range of experiences.”

A number of participants noted that while institutions were getting better in some respects, there was a **lack of prevention focused activities and education** to ensure that sexual violence doesn’t take place in the first place. This is an important issue, and an opportunity to make changes for all institutions.

“While my institution is getting better, there are still gaps in areas of prevention and education. This work needs to continue and make it normalized.”

## **RAPE CULTURE**

The second main issue identified by participants was the prevalent rape culture that exists at their institutions.

Many felt that there was a toxic rape culture on their campus that greatly contributed to the normalization and acceptance of sexual violence as inevitable. Participants cited fraternity culture and toxic masculinity as contributing factors to this culture, and noted a serious need for cultural change on and off campus.

The following are two quotes from survey participants:

“Rape culture is incredibly present and widely accepted on campus. Many women are assaulted, drugged and otherwise taken advantage of every year and there are no obvious steps in place to prevent this. Instead, female students are acutely aware that they need to be wary of male students, to never go to frat parties, and are always on high alert while walking on campus at night.”

“Party culture, male entitlement, hookup culture, objectification of women, lack of accountability (social, institutional, legal, and otherwise) for attackers. Sexual violence prevention is aimed at women ("don't walk alone" "don't drink too much" "cover your drink" "don't trust the men around you" "stay in a group" "don't show too much skin" etc) when it should be focused on future perpetrators. Men need to be taught not to assault, it shouldn't be the responsibility of women to stop men from attacking them - it is the sole responsibility of men to NEVER commit acts of sexual violence. Rape jokes, cat calling, lewd comments, and all other forms of sexual harassment need to stop at the source.”

## LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The final key theme in the responses for the main issues around sexual violence at post-secondary was the **lack of support from post-secondary institutions**. Many of the respondents did not feel that their institutions are doing enough to prevent sexual violence, or support survivors. Many participants noted that they felt that their institution cared more about their reputation than their students, and only acknowledged the issue of sexual violence after a publicized incident had occurred on their campus. Many also shared that they, or someone they knew, had gone to their institution for support after experiencing sexual violence, and were not taken seriously. A number of respondents shared that they didn't go to their institution for support for fear of being re-victimized in the process, and feeling that their institution would value the perpetrator over the survivor. Many participants felt that their post-secondary institutions often made empty claims on the topic of sexual violence prevention, and took no real action on these issues.

When asked if they felt their post-secondary institution does enough to prevent sexual violence and support survivors respondents were split, with 40.5% saying yes, 40.5% saying no, and 19% responding as "unsure."

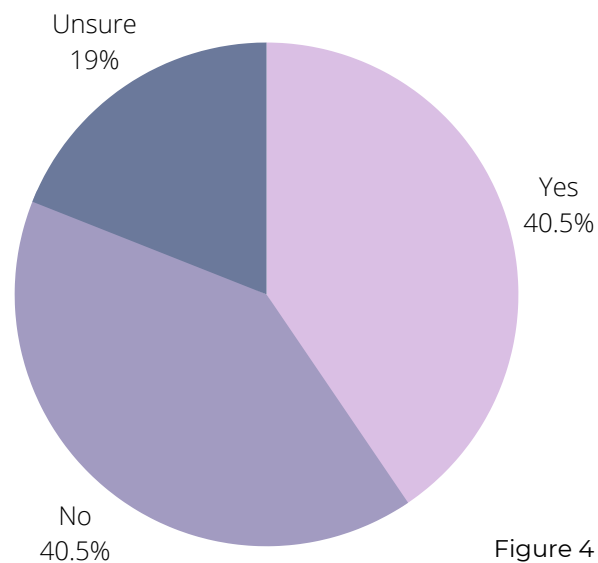


Figure 4

# 56%

**of individuals who experienced sexual harassment or assault while attending post-secondary did not feel that they had the support they needed from their institution.**

The following are just a few of the responses from survey participants on this topic:

“Whenever there is an assault, institutions are more concerned with salvaging their reputation than ensuring the survivor gets justice and has the proper resources to deal with the lifetime of trauma ahead of them.”

“Every time something happens it feels like they are more interested in their reputation than their students.”

“Victim blaming is still part of their response. The issue is not that we don't know how to protect ourselves. It's that people continue to harass and assault others.”

“I have heard accounts from survivors of sexual assault who tried to get support from the university and ended up going through a painfully long process with little justice in the end. It seems to me that universities protect the perpetrators and try to 'smooth things over' rather than get justice on behalf of the victim.”

These responses addressing the main issues with sexual violence at post-secondary show that there is still a long way to go in making schools a safe place for everyone.

## WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

One of the final questions we asked participants was “what needs to change to end sexual violence and better support survivors?” With hundreds of responses, there were five consistent themes throughout: 1) more mandatory training and education around consent, and better distribution of resources and support for students, 2) the need to normalize consent culture and uplift the voices of survivors, 3) better reporting mechanisms and processes, 4) serious consequences for perpetrators, and 5) greater accountability and action from post-secondary institutions.



### MANDATORY EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND MORE ACCESSIBLE RESOURCES

The most frequent response to this question was the need for **mandatory education and training around consent and sexual violence prevention, as well as better distribution of resources and support for students.** One survey participant said that institutions must “make seminars mandatory for all students every single year so there is a refresher on proper consent. Also makes it clear what resources are available and what the process of reporting looks like.”

**“They need to be reaching students in first year right when they arrive and educating them on consent and sexual violence prevention. People need to know for themselves what is okay, and what shouldn't happen, and everyone needs the training to be able to intervene in a situation that looks like it could be an issue. There needs to be more money and resources put into these issues, and school leadership needs to take action, rather than just responding to bad press when situations happen at their school.”**

## **NORMALIZE CONSENT CULTURE AND UPLIFT SURVIVOR VOICES**

Many also noted the need to **normalize consent culture** and discussions about sexual violence. Students and alumni want to talk about these issues freely and without stigma or shame. Participants called for the need to normalize consent culture by talking about the issues, and **uplifting the voices of survivors** through story-telling.

The following are responses from two survey participants:

“[We need] more open conversations surrounding sexual violence.”

“My institution needs to stop treating students like kids. We need to start welcoming students as adults and emphasizing their responsibility to the community and to society. Conversations about problematic gender norms need to be open and proactive. We need to change the culture on campus. This includes not only students but also faculty.”



## BETTER REPORTING MECHANISMS

Throughout the survey respondents noted that the process for reporting sexual violence at their institution was not accessible, and often caused more harm than good. Students and alumni cited the need for **better reporting mechanisms and processes** that do not re-victimize survivors in the process.

**“They need to make reporting easier for those who have endured sexual assault / harassment. They need to demonstrate that good will come from reporting, and that the re-traumatizing that occurs when reporting is worth the accountability and justice that will result. This will also help demonstrate to future offenders that those who commit such crimes will face appropriate punishments. They need to hold mandatory workshops (not just guest speakers!) to educate people on what to do in bystander situations, if they find themselves being harassed / assaulted and to reiterate the importance of consent and the effects sexual harassment and assault can have on the community.”**

## SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR PERPETRATORS

An important recommendation from students and alumni is that there needs to be **serious consequences for perpetrators**. Many respondents shared stories where those who were accused of sexual violence faced little to no consequences for their actions, and were not appropriately investigated for the claims against them. Creating a zero-tolerance policy for perpetrators would not only make folks aware of the serious consequences, and be less likely to commit offences, it would also encourage survivors to come forward if they believed there would be actual repercussions from their claims. Respondents noted a number of instances where students who were repeatedly accused of sexual violence had just been moved to different residences, rather than facing suspension or expulsion.

# "The university should have a no tolerance policy for gender-based sexual violence and suspend or expel students who do so."

"There needs to be drastic changes with regards to the punitive system. Survivors need to see that justice can and will be served should they feel comfortable enough to come forward."

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND ACTION FROM INSTITUTIONS

The final theme around 'what needs to change' was that students and alumni want to see **greater accountability and action from their post-secondary institutions**. They want serious action, money, and resources put in place to prevent sexual violence, and better support survivors. Empty promises will no longer be accepted. Young people are stepping up and demanding more from their educational institutions.

"There needs to be more money and resources put into these issues, and school leadership needs to take action, rather than just responding to bad press when situations happen at their school."

"They operate on a reactionary basis instead of a proactively. They made false claims that they offered an extensive education on sexual and gender based violence."

"They write an action plan but never see through to any action."

# DISCUSSION

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Throughout this report we have shared statistics, quotations, and themes that came from the responses to our Safer Schools Survey. The discussion portion of this report will be used to dive deeper into those findings and themes, and discuss the intersecting perspectives and experiences that are present in this work.

## **EVERYONE KNOWS SOMEONE**

An important theme present throughout the survey responses was that almost everyone knows someone who has been impacted by sexual violence. Of the 212 respondents, 72% said that they knew of someone who had experienced sexual harassment or assault while attending post-secondary. This is consistent with other research findings - a report by Statistics Canada found that 71% of students have either “witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviour in a post-secondary setting” (Burczycka, 2020).

Participants shared both that they were aware of the magnitude of the problem, and that they know something must change, with one participant stating, “**I felt unsafe a lot in undergrad. Every woman I know has at least one story similar to mine. I’ve been roofied at a frat party, touched and grabbed on the street, catcalled in a harassing way, sexually assaulted by a beloved athlete, and taken advantage of when I was far too drunk. That’s way too long a list of experiences to have at the age of 23. Everything needs to change.**”

Other participants cite lack of education and an absence of consent culture: “How has every woman I know been assaulted but not a single guy I know knows someone who has committed sexual assault. There is not enough information out there about what is appropriate and what is not, that’s extremely clear.”

Improving and increasing the access and dissemination of sexual violence prevention and consent education and training has been an ongoing effort across Canadian post-secondary institutions, but we know that broader systemic change is necessary to make substantial change. Though there is much focus on consent education, the reality is that the majority of perpetrators are repeat perpetrators, committing multiple assaults and targeting or choosing their victims. Further, “75% of sexual assaults involve some planning in advance. Most perpetrators engage in multiple forms of sexual violence from sexual harassment to inappropriate jokes,” and most people “have very good understandings about what constitutes consent and what doesn’t” (Black, 2018).

While consent education and other education-based models aimed at addressing sexualized violence may be a good place to start, they often focus “primarily and exclusively on individual responsibility, usually that of the victim and now increasingly that of the bystander,” which inadvertently takes the responsibility off of the institution itself to make the systemic changes necessary for lasting change (Hong, 2017). Education-based prevention models can have significant impact, but for that to happen they “must be sustained overtime and be multifaceted, leaning in to the complexity of how and why sexual violence occurs” (Hong, 2017).

## INTERSECTIONALITY

*Content Warning: The following section contains statistics and descriptions about sexism, genderism, racism, homo/queerphobia, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of identity-based oppression. To skip to the following section continue on page 31.*

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as

“the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.”

(Merriam-Webster, 2021)

When discussing sexual and gender-based violence it's important to acknowledge that members of marginalized communities experience discrimination and instances of harassment and/or assault at increased rates. In the following section we will share more of the results of our survey, discuss the existing research in this area, and highlight areas where further research is needed.

## WHY WE SAY GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

It is essential to acknowledge that sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence—violence that is directed towards someone because of their perceived gender, gender expression, or gender identity. According to a Statistics Canada Report on criminal victimization in Canada, women are five times more likely than men to experience sexual assault (Cotter, 2021A).

Another report from Statistics Canada (Cotter and Savage, 2019) found that a man who is a stranger acting alone is most often responsible for unwanted sexual behaviour in public. In that same study, 88% of women said that in the most serious instances they had experienced, a man was the person responsible, while for men 62% said that a man was responsible for their most serious experience (Cotter and Savage, 2019).

In 2015, the Association of American Universities conducted a major study which indicated that “college students who identify as trans, genderqueer, questioning their gender identity, or gender nonconforming experience sexual violence on campus at greater rates than cisgender women” (Marine, 2017). Gender expression is also significant, and “trans women and those who do not identify as women but who express their gender on the feminine end of the gender spectrum are at significantly greater risk of experiencing gender-based violence and abuse, including sexual violence” (Marine, 2017). While trans individuals are at greater risk for experiencing sexual violence, supports, services, and reporting mechanisms are often exclusionary or geared towards cis individuals, and unable to meet the needs of trans individuals. In documentation of their experiences, “trans survivors rarely seek formal services after an assault, citing perceived lack of credibility, and when doing so, they often wait years to seek this support” (Marine, 2017). It is clear that post-secondary institutions have significant work to do in ensuring that their programs, policies, and services are inclusive and address the needs of students of all genders.

In our survey, 70% of cis women and girls who responded said that they had experienced sexual harassment while attending post-secondary, while 50% said that they had experienced sexual assault.

Of the cis men and boys who responded, 51% said that they had experienced sexual harassment, and 40% said that they had experienced sexual assault while attending post-secondary. 80% of trans and non-binary individuals who responded said they had experienced sexual harassment while attending post-secondary, while 20% said that they had experienced sexual assault while attending post-secondary. Please note that our small sample size is not an accurate representation of the experiences of individuals of all backgrounds, which we will discuss further in the **Limitations** section of this report.

### **QUEER-SPECTRUM INDIVIDUALS**

Often, conversations about sexual violence at post-secondary institutions are centred on heteronormative contexts, ignoring the fact that queer-spectrum students face concerning rates of sexual violence. A report from Statistics Canada found that 76% of bisexual women and 51% of lesbian women experienced unwanted sexual behaviour in public, while gay (38%) and bisexual (41%) men experienced unwanted sexual behaviour in public at three times the rate of heterosexual men (12%) (Cotter and Savage, 2019). Additionally, “people of all genders who identify as bisexual, pansexual, polysexual, fluid, or another all-gender-loving identity are at a significantly higher risk than any other population to be survivors of sexual violence” (Garvey et. al., 2017).

In addition to facing increased rates of sexual violence, queer-spectrum students also face additional barriers when it comes to reporting or disclosing violence.



In particular, the experiences of queer-spectrum students may involve “unique factors related to homo/queerphobia and other forms of oppression, as well as heterosexist assumptions in service availability reporting structures,” all of which can lead to “poor access to services for sexual violence survivors and poor responses to disclosure” (Garvey et. al., 2017).

While we did not collect demographic information relating to sexuality, it is a topic that came up in a number of the written survey responses. One participant shared that sexual violence on campus greatly impacted her relationship, saying:

“It’s made my girlfriend and I very weary of being seen as a ‘couple’ in public. I won’t even hold her hand or kiss her most of the time because I don’t want to deal with the harassment and sexualization.”

## **RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES**

According to Statistics Canada, three in ten visible minority women have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime, with Arab, Black, and Latin American women experiencing the highest rates of IPV (Cotter, 2021B). The study also found that “visible minority women and non-visible minority women [are] equally likely to experience physical and sexual IPV in the past 12 months” (Cotter, 2021B). According to another study by Statistics Canada, Indigenous women are murdered at almost seven times the rate of non-Indigenous women, and six in ten Indigenous women have experienced some form of IPV in their lifetime (Heidinger, 2021).



Despite these staggering statistics, white women are often foregrounded in prevention and response efforts for sexual violence, and “minimal scholarship is dedicated to women of colour and sexual violence” in post-secondary institutions (Harris, 2017). According to the Canadian Federation of Students (2015), “racialized women are less likely to report incidents of sexual assault or seek help due to previous community experiences of racism from the police.” It is important to note, as well, that “the history of sexual violence against women of colour, specifically rape, is about economic, political, and cultural colonization and power,” and this historical context must be taken into account by post-secondary institutions in order for them to effectively address the issue of violence against women of colour (Harris, 2017).

Within our study, 65% of racialized participants stated that they had experienced sexual harassment while attending post-secondary, while 41% said that they had experience sexual assault while attending post-secondary. As with other sections, it is important to note that due to the small sample size of our survey, we cannot provide an in-depth representation of the experiences and perspectives of individuals from all backgrounds.

## **DISABILITY & SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Unfortunately we did not collect demographic data around disability, which is a limitation of this survey. Previous research shows that women with a disability are almost twice as likely to have been sexually assaulted in the past twelve months than a woman without a disability (Cotter, 2018).

The study found that “the rate of violent victimization among women and men with a cognitive disability or mental health-related disability was approximately four times higher than among those who did not have a disability” (Cotter, 2018). It was also found that men and women with a disability experience “emotional, financial, physical or sexual violence or abuse committed by a current partner” at a rate of two times that of those without a disability (Cotter, 2018), and, according to the Canadian Federation of Students (2015), “83% of women with disabilities will experience some form of violence in their lifetime and are three times more likely to be forced into sexual activity by use of threat or force.”

Throughout this section we have discussed sexual violence with respect to specific groups, but it is important to acknowledge that individuals from more than one marginalized community experience even greater rates of discrimination and sexual violence. For example, trans women of colour experience increasingly high rates of sexual violence compared to their white, cisgender counterparts (Ussher et al., 2020).

### **SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS MORE THAN RAPE**

A prevailing theme examined in this report, and highlighted by respondents, is the harmful rape culture that exists at post-secondary institutions. Oftentimes, people equate sexual violence to rape, but it is more than that. Rape culture itself is about more than solely rape, it starts with the so called “locker-room” talk, toxic gender-norms, and harmful societal expectations that lead to a culture where consent is not respected, and sexual violence is viewed as inevitable. Sexual violence starts as these “smaller” things, and can lead to instances of sexual harassment and assault. One participant stated that:

**“Sexual violence is about more than harassment and assault. Most women that I know have experienced some form of pressure or coerced sexual activity. Taboo surrounding conversations about sex combined with male entitlement and a culture of feminine subservience create a situation in which women understand themselves as sexual objects for male pleasure. Intervention requires empowering femmes to own their bodies and sexuality and empowering men to choose non-toxic masculinity.”**

Sexual harassment and assault need to be addressed, and in order to drive impactful change the culture that perpetuates and allows sexual violence, which often consists of more “passive” and “acceptable” issues, must also be addressed. Additionally, in order to properly address sexual violence we must acknowledge its roots and understand that sexual violence is not, and never has been, about sex. Rather, it is rooted in “power, privilege, and determined injustices” (Hong, 2017). Sexual violence has been, and continues to be, used as a tool to uphold patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and other forms of oppression. For significant headway to be made in the battle of ending sexual violence, we must critically examine, and, ultimately, rewrite the systems that allow and perpetuate this violence in the first place. We know that this is a daunting task, but, in the meantime, there are still smaller steps that we can take. These steps include addressing the toxic culture that leads to sexual violence, creating and engaging with comprehensive sexuality education models, and increasing mandatory education around consent and healthy relationships. This education and training needs to start at a younger age, and be consistent, so that young people have an understanding of consent and healthy relationships as they grow up, prior to undertaking higher education.

## **BETTER EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

As we've discussed throughout the report, young people want to see more mandatory training and education around sexual violence and consent from their institutions. They want more than just the single optional presentation at orientation week - they want material that is mandatory for all students and builds off previous sessions.

There seems to be a mismatch between the education and training provided by institutions, and the actual impact that they have. The majority of survey participants (56%) said that they learned about consent and sexual violence prevention from their institutions, and 45% said that they were aware of the resources available at their institution to prevent sexual violence and support survivors; however the most frequent response around the main issues and what needs to change, was the need for better education, training and resources on campus. This tells us that while the universities do have resources and educational material, it seems as though they are not accessible, and are not creating the desired impact. This points to a need for serious changes in the institutional approach to address and prevent sexual violence at post-secondary. We believe that through collaboration with different organizations, especially student-led organizations such as Student Unions, Pride Organizations/Societies, athletic teams, etc., there is a path to provide effective education and training to those within post-secondary institutions. It is a challenge, as university sexual violence prevention offices are often over-worked and under-staffed, sometimes having only one person responsible for sexual violence prevention for the entire university.

Many sexual violence prevention programs have adopted a peer-facilitated training approach, which may be a good option for universities looking to scale the reach of their educational initiatives.

While there are different challenges and benefits when it comes to peer-facilitated training (Levenson, 2017), having student leaders teaching other students would allow for a greater reach of educational materials, and likely put less pressure on the sexual violence prevention offices. Within these education programs, it is essential that educators “focus on aspects of prevention education that are common to all acts of sexual violence,” and ensure that programs are inclusive of all people and include diverse examples, such as “examples of students of non-binary genders who experience sexual violence” (Marine, 2017), working towards the ultimate goal of “facilitating the inclusion of marginalized groups for whom it can be said: ‘When they enter, we all enter.’” (Crenshaw, 1989).

## **CONCLUSION**

While the findings of this report are a good starting point, and provided some much-needed insights from students and alumni around the impacts of sexual violence, the main issues at post-secondary institutions, and what needs to change, there is undoubtedly much more work and research needed to be done on this topic. When undertaking this work it is essential to take a holistic approach, and ensure that we are including the diverse perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds and groups. This is something that we will work to prioritize in the future, and in our upcoming initiatives and campaigns.

The following section includes calls to action for post-secondary institutions and the government, which we have developed based on the lived experiences and suggestions of students and alumni who participated in the Safer Schools Survey. We hope that they will be helpful to individuals and institutions looking to make change around sexual violence prevention in their communities.

# CALLS TO ACTION

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- 1. Post-secondary institutions need to provide mandatory and consistent training and education around consent and sexual violence prevention to all students, faculty and staff.**
- 2. Current resources and support must be amplified and more accessible, so that they can be accessed and utilized by the students who need them most.**
- 3. Institutions must develop better reporting mechanisms for student survivors that are accessible, free from stigma, result in consequences for perpetrators, and support survivors in the process.**
- 4. Post-secondary institutions must amplify the voices of student survivors and include them in the development and roll-out of their sexual violence prevention initiatives.**
- 5. Schools must take action, and develop a zero-tolerance policy for perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence at their institutions.**
- 6. Institutions must take greater accountability and action towards ongoing sexual violence prevention. Responding to events that occur on their campus is not sufficient, post-secondary institutions must take a proactive approach to prevention.**
- 7. Governments must support post-secondary institutions in the development and funding of their sexual violence prevention work. They must be receptive to the specific needs of individual institutions, as those doing the work on each campus are most aware of the gaps and current needs.**

# LIMITATIONS

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As with any survey or report of this nature, the Safer Schools Survey had a number of limitations. The first being that the survey took place online, so it was only accessible to individuals with access to the internet and an electronic device. The survey was in English, and targeted at students and alumni in Canada, which also limited the representation of individuals who were able to participate and share their experiences.

While we did offer the chance to win one of five \$25 gift cards as incentive for the survey, the majority of individuals participated on a voluntary basis. The survey took 15 - 20 minutes to complete, which may have been a limitation to participation. The survey was also only open for 3 weeks, which limited the number of individuals who could take part.

It is important to acknowledge the stigma around sexual violence, which may have prevented some individuals from taking the survey and sharing their experiences.

Another limitation to this survey is that it was likely reaching individuals who had a vested interest in sexual violence prevention, because of the nature of the survey and our reach as an organization. While we made efforts to distribute the survey to as many folks as possible, it is not unlikely that we surveyed individuals who were already passionate about prevention, rather than a broader sampling of the general public.



# CONCLUSION

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The aim of the Safer Schools Survey was to better understand student and alumni experiences with sexual violence, and consent education and resources at Canadian post-secondary institutions. This report addressed the prevalence and impacts of sexual violence, outlined the key issues, and shared what needs to change at post-secondary institutions based on student and alumni experiences and opinions.

Throughout this report we shared quotes from students and alumni – we believe that there is a lot of power to be found in the voices and stories of those who have experienced sexual violence and have seen the issues first-hand at their institutions. We will continue to share their stories and the findings of this report and will use these findings to inform our future campaigns and programming. We are thankful to everyone who contributed their time and energy towards this project, and we will continue to uplift survivors' voices as we fight for change.



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