

# SEXUAL ASSAULT REPORT™

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## “It Made Me Feel Safe”: Residence Hall Informational Bulletin Boards

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In recent years, the problem of sexual assault (SA) has gained increasing awareness in the United States. Roughly 21% of women and 7% of men report experiencing sexual assault after entering college, with the highest risk during the first few months of the first and second semesters (Kimble, Neacsiu, Flack & Homer, 2008; Krebs, Lindquist, Berzofsky, Shook-Sa & Peterson, 2016). A host of negative outcomes have been documented in the aftermath of SA, including mental and physical health problems (e.g., anxiety, reproductive issues), post-traumatic stress, and academic failure (e.g., high rate of dropout) (Banyard, et al., 2017; Gidycz, Orchowski, King & Rich, 2008; Potter, Howard, Murphy & Moynihan, 2018). As a result, recent work has focused on implementing resources to aid victim survivors, both on and off college campuses. In fact, as of 2014, federal law requires colleges and universities to provide SA prevention and awareness programs (*Not Alone*, 2014). However, many institutions are not fulfilling this obligation, which highlights the need for easily accessible resources for college students (Howard, Potter,

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## Police Sexual Violence: Exploring the Contexts of Victimization

Philip Matthew Stinson, John Liederbach and Robert W. Taylor

The notorious 2015 case of former Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw has in many ways become the embodiment of the problem of police sexual violence. The case attracted headlines and the scrutiny of concerned citizens, criminal justice professionals, and the BlackLivesMatter movement. After one victim survivor filed a police report, Officer Holtzclaw was identified as a sexual predator who victimized at least 13 women. The charges against him included eight counts of rape, 10 counts of sexual battery, and seven counts of forcible sodomy. Holtzclaw attacked mostly older women of color as he encountered them on the street during traffic stops or while he patrolled some of the city's most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. The victims were specifically targeted for their perceived vulnerability: poor, sex workers, addicts, or criminals. Holtzclaw was convicted on 18 criminal charges including four counts of forcible rape. He was sentenced to 263 years in prison (Silverstein 2016; Stinson 2020).

The Holtzclaw case is among the most egregious examples of what scholars refer to as police sexual violence, or situations in which “a citizen experiences a sexually degrading, humiliating, violating, damaging, or threatening act committed by a police officer through the use of force or police authority” (Kraska & Kappeler, 1995). This type of criminal activity by police officers

has been a historical phenomenon; however, we believe more recent—and increasingly abundant—evidence amplifies police sexual violence as an important socio-legal concern that has become impossible to downplay or ignore.

Police work is in many ways conducive to sexual misconduct. This view demonstrates how occupational culture, sexism, and the highly masculine organizational hierarchy of the police organization promotes sex discrimination, harassment, and violence against women (Kraska & Kappeler, 1995; see also Christopher Commission, 1991; Harris, 1973). The job provides easy opportunities for the perpetration of sex crimes. Police routinely work alone and free of direct supervision. They interact with citizens who are vulnerable. Police also encounter citizens during late night hours that provide low public visibility and clear opportunities for the perpetration of sexual violence.

Some studies of sex-related police misconduct focus on nonviolent consensual acts rather than the perpetration of acts involving sexual violence (Barker, 1978; Sapp, 1994). The focus on consensual and/or less serious forms of sexual misconduct, however, seems inadequate and misguided, particularly within the context of cases involving rape and/or violent sexual assault. Large-scale data on cases that involve

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Guedj & Moynihan, 2018). Developments in technology (e.g., mobile applications, online websites) have made it easier for colleges to disseminate information and resources to their students. Yet, little is known about how students become exposed to and aware of these resources. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of residence hall informational bulletin boards on relaying information to college students about a mobile application (or app) to prevent and respond to campus sexual assault, uSafeUS.

Despite the high rates of sexual assault among college populations, many students are unaware of the resources that their colleges provide to prevent and respond to SA. For instance, Katz and Davison (2014) found that only 60% of students received information on SA prevention and Hayes-Smith and Levitt (2010) documented that only 54% of students received information about SA resources from their college. Providing resource information (e.g., mental and physical services) to SA victims can promote well-being, reduce posttraumatic stress symptoms, and lower college dropout rates (Eisenberg, Goldrick-Rab, Ketchen-Lipson & Broton, 2016; Sabina & Ho 2014). Resource information is also beneficial for disclosure recipients, such as friends and roommates. Nearly 50% of students receive a disclosure of sexual or dating violence during their time in college; however, two-thirds of college students who received a disclosure did not think they did a good job helping their friend, and 40% stated they were unsure how to help (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000; Banyard, Moynihan, Walsh, Cohn & Ward, 2010; Edwards & Neal, 2015). These findings highlight the need for easily accessible resources for victims of SA and their supporters.

In addition, adolescents and young adults are often reluctant to seek help or ask questions about private matters, particularly from parents, physicians, and even peers, for confidentiality reasons. One study documented that youth are more likely to search for and utilize online information in order to avoid face-to-face interactions (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). Young people may appreciate the privacy and anonymity that technology affords, especially when it involves their health (Pretorius, Rowlands, Ringwood & Schmidt, 2010). These findings suggest that technology (e.g., online

websites, mobile applications) may be a promising avenue to provide information related to SA to young adult populations, like college students, as technology allows survivors of SA to quickly access resources (e.g., reporting protocols, victim-centered services) while remaining anonymous (Lim, Greathouse & Yeung, 2014). In recent years, researchers and practitioners have developed mobile apps to disseminate messages and information about sexual assault, relationship violence, and health education (Lilley & Moras, 2017; Lindsay, et al., 2013; Merrow, 2017; Miller, Chandler & Mouttapa, 2015; Potter, Moschella, Ludecke, Smith & Draper, in press).

However, little is known about how college students become exposed to and

remember the content of the messages and identify agency-recommended practices. Results suggested that participants gained a significant increase in knowledge following the exposure to these messages (Cole, et al., 1997). A more recent study by Potter and colleagues (2015) used a social marketing campaign (e.g., posters, bookmarks, video screens) to engage community members in order to increase bystander behavior in situations involving sexual and relationship violence and stalking. Campaign images modeled behavior that potential bystanders could use to intervene in situations of SA, dating violence, and stalking (Potter, et al., 2015). Participants exposed to the campaign images showed a significant increase in their knowledge

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***The uSafeUS app provides college students, both victim survivors and their supporters (e.g., disclosure recipients), with current and accurate information on campus SA, resources, and services.***

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aware of these online and mobile applications. Thus, the present paper adds to the existing literature by assessing how informational bulletin boards are effective in relaying information to college students living in a campus residence hall about a recently developed sexual violence prevention and response mobile app, uSafeUS. The uSafeUS app provides college students, both victim survivors and their supporters (e.g., disclosure recipients), with current and accurate information on campus SA, resources, and services. The app includes both interactive prevention features (e.g., help students leave uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situations by sending a fake call or text) and research-informed response features (e.g., provide contact information for hospitals, crisis centers, etc. and guidance for victims and their friends and family).

Previous research finds that exposing people to prevention messages can increase their awareness and knowledge of a particular topic (Cole, Hammond & McCool, 1997; Potter, Stapleton, Mansager & Nies, 2015). For example, Cole and colleagues (1997) posted bulletin boards containing environmental protection messages (e.g., encouraging low-impact practices) in a national wilderness area. They evaluated participants' ability to

about bystander behaviors compared to those who had not been exposed. Participants who reported more exposure to the images also demonstrated an increase in the amount of information retained and in their sense of involvement and responsibility for becoming an active bystander. Thus, these findings highlight the effectiveness that public health campaign exposure have on raising awareness and involvement of the public.

### **The Current Study**

Previous research highlights the need for colleges to provide easily accessible resources to their students (especially victims of SA), who may be more reluctant to seek face-to-face assistance. This study was exploratory in nature and implemented informational bulletin boards in one residence hall at a New England university to raise awareness about the uSafeUS app. The study aimed to understand the perspectives of resident assistants (RAs) regarding uSafeUS informational bulletin boards (e.g., feedback on bulletin board implementation, suggestions for improvements, and reactions from their residents). The researchers also identified information that

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residents recalled after seeing the bulletin board and examined whether the bulletin board prompted them to download the uSafeUS app.

## Study

The study population included students enrolled at a New England university who resided in one of the on-campus residence halls. Resident assistants (RAs) from this residence hall ( $n=5$ ) and residents ( $n=47$ ) participated in this study. Given the small sample size of the RA and resident populations, demographic information was not collected.

**Resident Assistant Sample.** Following approval from the university's Institutional

Review Board, the campus housing department, and the director of the on-campus residence hall, the research team attended a residence hall staff meeting in Fall 2018. During this meeting, the researchers gave a PowerPoint presentation that summarized the purpose of the uSafeUS app (e.g., features, resources). RAs ( $n=8$ ) were presented with an overview of the research project and agreed to put up a pre-designed informational bulletin board on their floor for two to three weeks. After a three-week period, the research team conducted one focus group (~45 minutes) with RAs ( $n=5$ ) to obtain their feedback on the implementation of the uSafeUS app informational bulletin boards, suggestions for improvements, and reactions they observed from their residents. A member of the research team transcribed participants' responses. One of the eight RAs was unable to attend the focus group, and two no longer held an RA position; therefore, three participants were excluded from the focus group.

**Resident Sample.** Surveys were administered to residents at two timepoints. The first survey administration took place at a residence hall social event, where RAs supplied hot chocolate and desserts. Participants ( $n=23$ ) completed a 10-question written survey about their knowledge, awareness, and opinions concerning the uSafeUS informational board, as well as

## Results

**Resident Assistants.** To understand the perspectives of resident assistants regarding

about the app itself. Informed consent was obtained before students participated in the survey. The second survey administration took place several days later for residents who were not able to attend the social event. Participants ( $n=24$ ) completed a consent form and the 10-question survey. Pizza was provided to residents following the completion of the survey. After data collection, each survey was assigned an anonymous number and entered into Qualtrics, an online survey database. Once data was entered into Qualtrics, written surveys were stored in a locked file cabinet in a research office. Qualtrics data was then downloaded and stored in Box.

one RA suggested adding a small scene or "comic strip" on the informational board to display how uSafeUS could be used in a real-life situation.

**Residents.** Of the 47 residents who participated in the survey, approximately 86.1% of the residents reported that they saw the bulletin board. When asked what they remembered most about the uSafeUS informational bulletin board, the most common response was the SA victimization statistics and information on SA (53.8%), followed by uSafeUS app's features (20.5%), the purpose of the uSafeUS app (i.e., to keep people safe and provide aid in uncomfortable or dangerous situations) (10.3%), and lastly, the design (e.g., phone image) (10.3%). When asked what they liked most about the uSafeUS informational bulletin board, the most common responses were the victimization statistics and information on sexual assault (30.8%), followed by the design (28.2%), the description of the uSafeUS app's features (e.g., "Angel Drink") (15.4%), and the purpose of the uSafeUS app (7.7%), specifically noting that "it [uSafeUS] made me feel safe" and "it [uSafeUS] can save people."

Residents were asked for suggestions on how to improve the bulletin board design. The most common responses were to make the bulletin board less wordy/use larger font (20.0%) and make a more creative and eye-catching design (20.0%), followed by moving the bulletin board to a more visible location for increased awareness (14.3%) and other suggestions to improve the board (8.6%). Further, participants offered several ways to encourage students to download the app. Specifically, residents suggested posting flyers around campus (36.4%) in high-traffic areas (e.g., dining halls, student union building, bathrooms), holding information sessions (15.2%) about the uSafeUS app (e.g., giving a presentation during freshmen orientation), and advertising uSafeUS at a sporting event or club/organization meeting (15.2%).

**Downloading: Reasons Pro and Con.** Three residents (6.4%) reported that they downloaded the uSafeUS app. Of those who downloaded uSafeUS, only one participant (33.3%) reported that they downloaded the app because they saw the uSafeUS informational bulletin board. One resident reported that they downloaded uSafeUS because their resident assistant told them to and another reported that they downloaded the app after learning about uSafeUS at a university event. Participants ( $n=3$ ) then

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answered one “check-all-apply” question regarding what motivated them to download uSafeUS (Note: This question allowed for multiple responses; therefore, percentages add up to more than 100%.) Two participants (66.7%) reported that they downloaded the uSafeUS app to help keep themselves safe on campus. Two participants reported that they downloaded because they liked the features and resources (e.g., “Time to Leave,” “Angel Drink,” “FAQ’s”). Another participant downloaded the app because they liked that they could learn how to help a friend.

Of the 93.6% ( $n=44$ ) who reported that they did not download the uSafeUS app, half ( $n=22$ ) reported that they “did not feel like it or forgot about it.” Fourteen of the 44 participants (31.8%) reported that they did not download the uSafeUS app because they did not know about the app (i.e., did not see the uSafeUS informational bulletin board). Eight participants (18.2%) reported they did not download because they were not interested in uSafeUS or did not think it was relevant to them and six (13.6%) reported that they did not have enough storage on their phone. In addition, participants were asked if they would download the uSafeUS app after taking the survey and learning about uSafeUS. Of the 44 participants who answered this question, 72.7% reported that they would download the app.

### Concluding Remarks

The present study was exploratory in nature and provided useful feedback about the impact of an informational bulletin board implemented in a residence hall at a New England university. The focus group conducted with resident assistants provided extensive suggestions on how to improve the uSafeUS bulletin board to engage more students. These suggestions are particularly important, as all RAs stated that no students approached them about the board *after* it was set up. The majority of residents saw the uSafeUS informational bulletin board, but only three downloaded the uSafeUS app. Overall, the findings suggest that students were able to successfully recall information from the informational bulletin board, such as rates of sexual assault. However, few students reported that they downloaded the app because they saw the bulletin board. Therefore, there is a need to improve the bulletin board to increase the number of uSafeUS downloads.

The majority of residents recalled statistics concerning the rates of SA and the different uSafeUS features (e.g., Expect Me). Others remembered that the general purpose of the app was to keep people safe. Even though most residents did not download the uSafeUS app, they still gained information about SA and became aware of the uSafeUS app and its features. Awareness of sexual assault and available resources is important, considering the high rates of SA victimization and disclosure on college campuses (Krebs et al., 2016; Edwards & Neal, 2015). Given that only half of college students receive information regarding SA from their schools, students can benefit from being provided with this information (Hayes-Smith & Levitt, 2010).

Of those who downloaded the uSafeUS app, the most common reasons for downloading were safety and the prevention

shows that, while the informational bulletin board clearly presented the prevalence of SA on college campuses, more needs to be done to address the myths and misconceptions about students’ risk for sexual assault. Fortunately, when asked if they would download the uSafeUS app after having learned more about it and taken the survey, almost 75% of responders reported that they would download the app.

Approximately 25% of residents reported that they would not download the uSafeUS app after taking the survey and learning more about the app. Most of these participants reported that they would not download because they could do the same things that uSafeUS offered. For example, several participants believed they could text their friend to help them leave an uncomfortable situation, instead of using the app to send them a fake text message or phone

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### *Of those who did not download uSafeUS, the most common reason for not downloading was not feeling like it or forgetting about it.*

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features/resources. The fact that residents would download the app for safety reasons makes sense, as the purpose of the app is to promote safety among its users. The prevention features can also help to keep users safe by helping them to leave uncomfortable situations (e.g., sending a fake text message or phone call). Researchers and practitioners can use these finding to increase downloads by promoting the safety-focus of the uSafeUS app. One participant also reported downloading uSafeUS to help a friend who had experienced SA. Given the high rates of disclosure among college students, it is crucial to provide students with resources to be able to help a friend (Edwards & Neal, 2015). This is increasingly important, as 40% of disclosure recipients are unsure how to help someone who has experienced SA (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). More work is needed to emphasize the importance of helping a friend in the aftermath of sexual assault.

Of those who did not download uSafeUS, the most common reason for not downloading was not feeling like it or forgetting about it. Even though the majority of residents recalled the high rates of SA among college students, almost 20% reported that they did not download the app because they were not interested in uSafeUS or did not think it was relevant to them. This finding

call. Other participants reported that they did not have a reason to download the app because they could handle uncomfortable or dangerous situations on their own, without the aid of uSafeUS. These students may be more likely to download the app to help a friend, as opposed to keeping themselves safe. Researchers and practitioners should incorporate the importance of supporting or helping a friend to increase downloads.

In addition, resident assistants reported very little discussion or inquiries about the uSafeUS informational bulletin board, the uSafeUS app, or sexual assault. RAs reported that most students expressed interest while they were setting up the bulletin board, but no residents approached them after the board was posted. Adding a note to the bottom of the bulletin board that directs students to their RA if they have questions may be beneficial. However, previous research suggests that adolescents and young adults are reluctant to discuss personal issues with others because of confidentiality concerns (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). Therefore, it may be better to add a note to the bulletin board directing students to the Frequently Asked Questions section of uSafeUS if they have any questions. Future research should consider RAs’ suggestions

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on how to improve the uSafeUS informational bulletin board to engage their residents, as they have frequent interactions with these students.

The current study has a number of limitations. First, the sample size for both the RA and student sample was extremely small (RAs  $n=5$ ; residents  $n=47$ ). This study was exploratory in nature; therefore, more research is needed to further examine the impact of bulletin boards in residence halls, including pre-and post-tests examining students' knowledge of SA and uSafeUS. In addition, given the small sample size, demographic information was not collected to ensure anonymity. Future research should replicate this study with more diverse samples and campuses. Finally, there were two different sessions in which resident surveys were administered (*i.e.*, a pre-scheduled social event and a designated session to administer surveys). The response rate at the pre-scheduled social was slightly lower than the designated survey period and took residents longer to complete.

This exploratory study was the first to examine the impact of residence hall bulletin boards in relaying information to students about sexual assault and a violence prevention and response app, uSafeUS. In recent years, researchers and practitioners have addressed the issue of sexual assault and highlighted the need to provide resources to victims of SA. Advances in technology, such as mobile apps, have provided new avenues to disseminate information and resources to SA victims. The findings of this study suggest that displaying an informational bulletin board in a college residence hall can relay information to students about sexual assault and the uSafeUS app. Future research is needed to examine alternative ways to disseminate information about SA and the uSafeUS app to aid college communities in preventing and responding to sexual assault.

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