Help-Seeking Behaviors for Gender-Based Violence among College Students at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV), which includes sexual assault and intimate partner violence, is a public health crisis that negatively impacts the well-being of individuals and communities. Many college-aged individuals are affected by GBV, with 13% of students reporting sexual violence (RAINN, 2026). At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), 18.5% of women and 4.2% of men reported sexual assault, and 18.7% of women and 10% of men reported partner violence (Bystrynski & Allen, 2019). Help-seeking following GBV is a complex process that is reported at lower rates. Consistent with national trends, low help-seeking rates were observed on the UIUC campus (57.1% of students did not report; Bystrynski & Allen, 2019). It is crucial researchers consider help-seeking trends to strengthen existing knowledge and improve access to services. Our study aims to examine help-seeking trends based on students' characteristics (e.g., year in college, residential accommodation). We use secondary data collected from two larger studies at UIUC (N = 561 first- and second-year students). We analyze help-seeking (e.g., reporting, telling a friend) responses by student characteristics among students with GBV experiences. Findings can support university leadership in identifying critical gaps in GBV support and services.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, help-seeking behaviors, college students, campus violence, informal and formal support systems, disclosure, racial disparities.

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INTRODUCTION

- Gender-based violence (GBV), which includes sexual assault and intimate partner violence, is a public health crisis that negatively impacts the well-being of individuals and communities.
- Many college-aged individuals are affected by GBV, with 13% of students reporting sexual violence (RAINN, 2025).
- Help-seeking following GBV is a complex process that is reported at lower rates.
- Students may choose to engage in disclosure through trusted peers (informal) and through institutional resources (formal) after a GBV experience.
- Low help-seeking rates were observed on the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) campus, and of those disclosures 91.4% of students disclosed their experience to friends (Bystrynski & Allen, 2019).

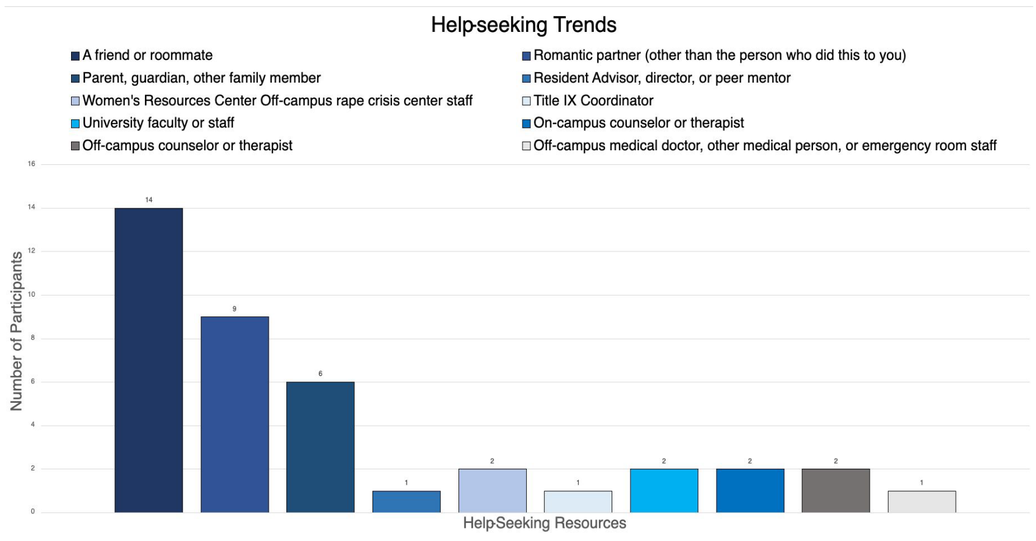
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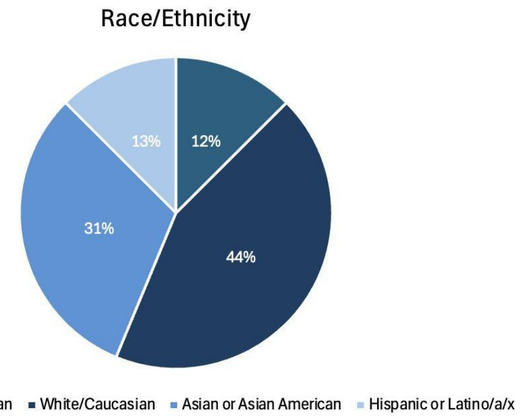
- The aim of our study is to examine help-seeking behaviors among college students who have experienced GBV.
- Specifically, secondary data showed racial diversity, which prompted our interest in examining how willingness to disclose experiences and engage in help-seeking behaviors may vary across student racial/ethnic identities.
- Additionally, our study aims to explore patterns in students' use of formal and informal support resources following experiences of GBV.

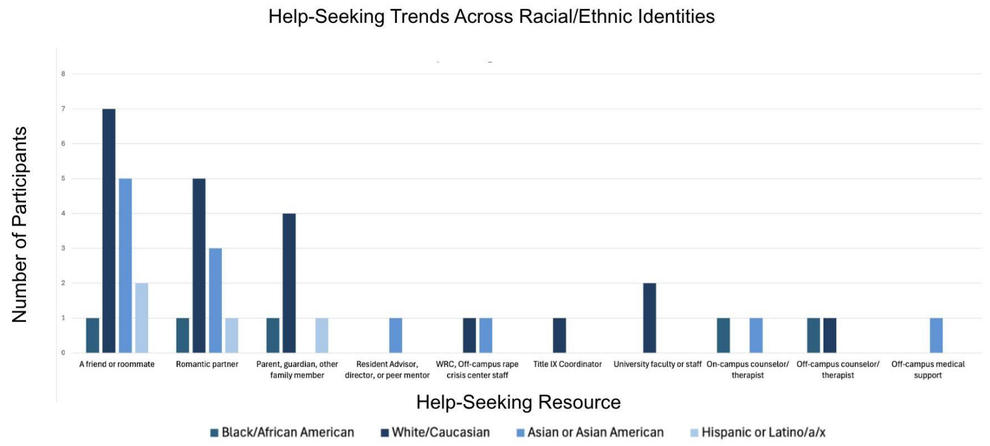
METHOD

- Secondary data were collected from 36 UIUC students (ages 18-38) who opted to participate in a study examining help-seeking behaviors.
- We excluded individuals who did not experience violence on campus and those who did not report help-seeking behaviors, resulting in a final sample of 18 participants.
- The sample consisted of 88% cisgender women, 6% transgender men, and 6% who preferred to self-describe. After providing informed consent, participants completed a 17-item survey assessing the frequency with which they experienced GBV.

RESULTS







CONCLUSIONS

- Findings highlight disparities in help-seeking behaviors across student racial/ethnic identities, suggesting that support needs and barriers are not experienced equally among students.
- Students appear less likely to access formal support services; therefore, university leadership should prioritize increasing awareness, revising existing programs, and strengthening outreach initiatives.
- Institutions should expand training opportunities for faculty, staff, and bystander training for peers to improve the quality and effectiveness of informal support systems.
- Providing students with tailored, culturally-responsive resources can improve inclusive services while addressing relevant, identity-based barriers.
- We hope that this information can support future research and guide prevention efforts, specifically prioritizing campus safety, equitable access and survivor well-being.

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ILLINOIS

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