



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CAMPUS CRIME

Safety on campus? Absolutely

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The close timing of recent assaults at Regis College and Boston College is what defines the concept of coincidence. In any given year and at any given part of the country, two rarities like these violent campus crimes may occur within a short time span purely by chance. Nothing about these events should be interpreted as a trend or a harbinger of more bad things to come.

The numbers speak for themselves. Based on reports submitted to the U.S. Department of Education under the Clery Act, in 2008, there were 11 homicides, 2,418 forcible rapes, 1,390 robberies and 2,078 aggravated assaults reported by 2,677 four-year colleges (including satellite campuses) with a combined student enrollment of just over 12 million. Overall, as shown in the table below, the several thousand victims of campus violence among the millions of college students translates to a rate per 100,000 students that is a small fraction of the corresponding U.S. figure drawn from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports for the same year.

The comparative safety of campuses holds even after taking into consideration the fact that, with their lengthy winter and summer breaks, college students are typically on campus for not much more than half the year. In terms of relative risk, rape stands out as the largest among campus perils largely owing to the particular age range of college students and the extent of drinking and partying that characterizes many schools.

Offense	Colleges	Nation
Homicide	0.1	5.0
Forcible rape	20.1	28.7
Robbery	11.5	133.0
Aggravated Assault	17.3	262.8
Total	49.0	429.4

Not only do college campuses have remarkably low rates of violence, but the campus location (urban/suburban/rural), a factor that typically correlates with general crime rates, does not emerge as an important variable based on empirical analyses of campus crime. Contrary to the concerns of many parents (particularly those residing in comfortable and safe suburban communities) about sending their

children to college in some dangerous big city, □ campuses in urban centers do not tend to have higher rates of victimization than do those in remote, rural locations. This surprising fact points to the unattractiveness of a college campus as a potential crime target relative to its surrounding areas. In urban centers, at least in terms of robbery (as well as property crimes), there tend to be far more desirable crime targets off campus, where far greater wealth can be found.

The low prevalence of criminal activity on college campuses urban and rural also stems from the fact that most schools maintain their own campus police or public safety departments, which do much more than supplement whatever municipal, county or state law enforcement resources that exist. Moreover, schools in areas considered to be most at-risk for violence (based on neighborhood characteristics) typically maintain larger police and security forces to provide adequate protection for the campus community. For example, among the 100 largest colleges that responded to the 2004-05 Bureau of Justice Statistics Survey of Campus Law Enforcement, the 44 urban schools employed on average 3.2 officers per 1,000 students compared to an average of 2.6 per 1,000 students for the 56 schools in non-urban settings.

Aside from reasonable security measures (a well-trained campus police force, adequate lighting and access control for residential and non-residential buildings), excessive attention to the risk of campus crime can be counter-productive. Extended dialogue with students and their parents about safety rather than scholastics as well as extraordinary efforts to transform open campuses into locked fortresses send the wrong message. They advance the overblown image of students as walking targets, thereby reinforcing fears, rather than calming them.

By downplaying the risk of campus violence, I do not mean to minimize or overlook the pain and suffering of victims, including those harmed in the Regis College and Boston College attacks. Nevertheless, the real dangers on campus lie elsewhere. Each year, more than 1,000 college students commit suicide, most not so dramatically as the undergraduate who yesterday fired randomly and then killed himself in front of the infamous tower at the University of Texas at Austin. And at least as many students die annually in alcohol-related incidents such as binge drinking. In terms of prevention, therefore, colleges have much larger issues to confront.