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CAMPUS CRIME

Breaking silence on campus sexual assault

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April is designated as "Sexual Assault Awareness Month," giving the Boston City Council and Ayanna Pressley and Felix Arroyo, in particular the opportunity to address the problem as it applies to college students and the schools in which they are enrolled. Given the more than 100,000 students attending colleges and universities in Boston, the issue is of special concern in this mecca for higher education.

It is also a significant personal issue for Councilor Pressley, who recently revealed that she was herself a sexual assault survivor years ago while attending one of the city's renowned educational institutions. The trauma from that event derailed her academic pursuits, but not her resolve. And for her courage and candor, she was praised even many years after the fact by Councilor Arroyo and others at last Tuesday's hearing on campus sexual assault prevention and reporting.

It is difficult to assess to any degree of certainty the prevalence of sexual assault among college students. The best and most often-cited estimate that nearly 20 percent of college women are victims of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault during her college years is based on a survey at just two large public universities (one in the Midwest and one in South) in which 1,072 of 5,446 female respondents reported that they had been sexually assaulted. Whether or not these results can be generalized to other schools small as well as large, private as well as public, and in all areas of the country, the problem is undeniably serious.

We know very little about the scope of campus sexual assault because, unfortunately, so few victims feel comfortable coming forward to disclose the incident to the authorities. In fact, based on the same two-school prevalence study, only 5 percent of victims informed campus security or the police of what had happened to them.

Many student victims of sexual assault are afraid of retaliation, particularly since the overwhelming majority of cases involves classmates, friends or dating relationships. Some are too embarrassed or ashamed to report, since a majority of cases involve drinking. At worst, other victims remain silent because they blame themselves, fear that their peers will fault them, feel that their assailant's denials will be believed, expect nothing will be done about it, or wish to avoid public humiliation should the incident result in a criminal prosecution. And so the courageous ones are not only those survivors who, like Pressley, come forward long after the fact when emotions are not so raw and the stakes are not so high, but those women who boldly seek justice despite the myriad of personal risks.

Based on comments from several victim-advocates who attended the City Council hearing, colleges and universities may be reluctant to disseminate statistical reports of sexual assaults, notwithstanding Federal requirements, out of concern that it would tarnish a school's reputation and scare away potential students. This blemishing effect would be especially salient to private institutions that are heavily tuition-dependent.

To whatever extent this cover-up practice does occur, the truth is that the published sexual assault data mandated by the Clery Act are exceptionally unreliable and misleading, hardly worth the admissions brochure paper that they're printed on. Moreover, it is curious and important to note that a high incidence of sexual assault can actually reflect a supportive campus climate and a responsive administration, rather than a dangerous and hostile setting.

Therefore, perhaps we should not focus so heavily on the dubious crime figures and data reporting compliance. This is not, of course, a recommendation that schools disregard the problem or attempt to sweep it under the rug. To the contrary, colleges and universities would be better off investing their time, attention, and resources in prevention efforts and in upgrading their responsiveness to allegations when they occur. Schools need to educate students about the nature and consequences of sexual assault, ensure that support services are available for victims, and establish adequate procedures for investigating allegations. Without these critical steps, the silence will never be broken.