



**Review of data on prevalence of SVH in  
third level institutions in the UK and Scotland**

**Kathryn Dawson**

**Rape Crisis Scotland**

17<sup>th</sup> March 2017



The Project is funded  
by the European Union

## Introduction

We undertook a review of UK and Scottish data which relates to the prevalence and nature of sexual violence and harassment (SVH) in UK and Scottish universities, as well as national data disaggregated by gender and age. We included quantitative and qualitative data in our review and the oldest research we have included dates from 2010, as we did not find reference to any earlier relevant data in the reports we reviewed.

We reviewed the following sources, liaising with the University of Glasgow, a partner to this project, to ensure all relevant sources were identified:

- National data on reported crime and court proceedings
- National crime surveys
- National data on university attendance
- Research focused on students and universities
- Rape Crisis helpline statistics

There was very little national-level data on prevalence of SVH in universities, with only one governmental statistical bulletin including data on student status. The most relevant research was conducted by the National Union of Students (NUS), and this is cited in a recent report by Universities UK (UUK), a universities umbrella organisation, which has formed a taskforce on gender based violence (GBV.)<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that while there is little directly relevant prevalence data, the UUK report gathered significant evidence that increasing numbers of students and universities across the UK are undertaking programmes of action to prevent and respond to SVH and GBV more widely, and the report identifies key recommendations to which we refer at the end of this review.

---

<sup>1</sup> Universities UK. (2016). *Changing the culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students.*

## Prevalence of SVH in third level education

We identified a range of relevant sources for the UK and for Scotland. Of this, only a small proportion was specifically relevant to SVH in third level education, with only one national governmental statistical bulletin including data on student status. The majority of relevant research comes from the NUS who undertook three pieces of research between 2010 and 2014: a survey of women's students' experiences of SVH<sup>2</sup>, a piece of qualitative research into women students' perceptions and experiences of 'lad culture'<sup>3</sup> and further research with students of all genders in relation to experiences of 'lad culture,' harassment and attitudes to reporting<sup>4</sup>. Further, in 2015 the UUK formed a taskforce to examine violence against women, harassment and hate crime and makes recommendations in response to the evidence. The taskforce produced a report<sup>5</sup> which includes a review of the available evidence base relating to prevalence of SVH, as well as hate crime, islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Data cited in the UUK report has been reviewed directly and attributed in this report to its original source.

### Data and research specifically relating to SVH in third level education

The only national data we found addressing students' experience of SVH comes from a bulletin by the Office for National Statistics for England and Wales from 2013<sup>6</sup>. Based on the three most recent surveys it found that female, full-time students showed an increased risk of victimisation for sexual offences at 6.8%. Subsequent bulletins have not given statistics for student victimisation.

The first of the NUS reports<sup>7</sup> surveyed 2058 current women students about their experiences whilst at university, and found the following indications of prevalence:

- 68 % had experienced some kind of verbal or non-verbal harassment in and around their institution, including groping, flashing and unwanted sexual comments. For some this had become almost 'everyday'.
- 12 % reported being subject to stalking.
- 16 % had experienced unwanted kissing, touching or molesting, the majority of which had taken place in public.
- 7 % had been subject to a serious sexual assault, the majority of which occurred in somebody's home.
- 9% victims of serious sexual assault were given alcohol or drugs against their will before the attack.

The survey asked about respondents' relationship to perpetrators and found that 81% of those subjected to serious sexual assault, and 53% of those subjected to less serious sexual assault, knew

---

<sup>2</sup> NUS. (2010)

<sup>3</sup> NUS. (2012)

<sup>4</sup> NUS. (2014)

<sup>5</sup> Universities UK. (2016)

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics. (2013)

<sup>7</sup> NUS. (2010)

their attacker. The majority of perpetrators were students, and of these the majority were studying at the same institution.

The survey collected data on participant ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability and the report states that analysis of this data will be addressed in subsequent reports. However the only further analysis available on the NUS website is contained in a presentation by the NUS LGBT Campaign of responses by lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) respondents. This found that 35.6% of LBT respondents had experienced sexual assault as compared with 22% hetero- and cis-gender women.

Further NUS research was conducted addressing students' experiences of 'lad culture' and sexism and its impact on student communities<sup>8</sup>. This research constituted qualitative research with 40 women students in 2012, and a survey in 2014 of 2156 university students of all genders of their experience of sexism and lad culture whilst at university.

The qualitative research found that 'lad culture' was particularly influential in the social side of university life and associated with sport, heavy alcohol consumption, and 'banter' which was often sexist, misogynist and homophobic. It was seen as crossing class boundaries and the particular preserve of the privileged.

Participants viewed it as linked to a sexualised culture which involved objectification of women and rape-supportive attitudes, and occasionally spilled over into sexual harassment and violence. Many participants related experiences of sexual molestation in 'Nightlife' and identified pressure to engage in a high frequency of sexual activity with different partners. 'Lad culture' in social settings had caused many participants to alter or limit their activity, confirming interpretations of 'laddism' as a means by which privileged men police and preserve territory.

The research found some evidence of particularly problematic impacts for minority ethnic students for example the normalisation of particular types and/or frequencies of sexual activity and links to alcohol consumption, and speculated that this was likely to impact those with religious beliefs or faiths that emphasise modesty or do not allow alcohol consumption. It also speculates that 'lad culture' raises concerns for the treatment of disabled students, who (depending on their disability) may not conform to 'lad culture's' prescriptive expectations of physical appearance and ways of being.'

The 2014 survey<sup>9</sup> found that a quarter of respondents had experienced unwelcome sexual advances, with women significantly more likely than men to say they had experienced it, almost two thirds said they heard jokes about rape or sexual assault being made on campus, and more than one third of respondents were aware of promotional materials around university using sexualised images of women, with over two in five individuals agreeing that these images make them feel uncomfortable.

#### **Whole population data on prevalence of SVH disaggregated by age and gender**

---

<sup>8</sup> NUS. (2012)

<sup>9</sup> NUS. (2014)

Various sources of national data for Scotland, and England and Wales, demonstrate that young women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, and that a significant proportion of university students are young women.

A statistics bulletin for England and Wales<sup>10</sup> found that females aged between 16 and 19 faced the highest risk of being a victim of a sexual offence (8.2 per cent) and as age increased the risk of victimisation reduced.

A Scottish Crime and Justice Survey<sup>11</sup> found that:

- Young people, particularly young women, experienced a higher than average level of stalking and harassment. Around one-in-ten (9.7%) 16 to 24 year olds had experienced at least one type of SCJS stalking and harassment in the last 12 months. This figure increased to 12.7% for 16 to 24 year old women. (p16)
- More than half of respondents (52.8%) said that they had experienced their first (or only) incident of serious sexual assault between the ages of 16 and 20. (p29)

A report on recorded crime in Scotland<sup>12</sup> notes that:

*whilst the specific age of the victim cannot generally be determined from the data supplied by Police Scotland, many of the sexual crime codes used by the Police to record crime make it clear when the victim was aged under 18 ... By adding up all these crime codes, we know that at least 43% of the 10,273 sexual crimes recorded in 2015-16 by the police related to a victim under the age of 18. This proportion is unchanged on the previous year. (p27)*

Moreover, young men are overrepresented as perpetrators; in 2015-16 39% of males convicted for sexual offences in Scotland were aged 30 and under.<sup>13</sup>

The UUK report notes that nearly half of young people attend university by age 30 (48%, based on English domiciled first-time participants in HE at UK HE Institutions, and at English, Welsh and Scottish Further Education Colleges<sup>14</sup>) and that in 2014 45% of all students were under 21<sup>15</sup>. Institutions across the UK also have increasingly female populations; the latest figures for 2014–15 show that the higher education student population is 56% female and 44% male, and that there are over one million female students enrolled in higher education.<sup>16</sup>

### **Research relating to ethnicity, disability and experience of SVH**

The NUS Black Students' Campaign stated that '72% of Muslim women have experienced verbal abuse and threatening behaviour relating directly to their visible Muslim presence'<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics. (2013)

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government. A National Statistics publication for Scotland. (2016a)

<sup>12</sup> Scottish Government. A National Statistics publication for Scotland. (2016b)

<sup>13</sup> Scottish Government. A National Statistics publication for Scotland. (2017)

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education. (2016)

<sup>15</sup> Equality Challenge Unit (2014)

<sup>16</sup> HESA. (2016)

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Universities UK. (2016)

A report on anti-muslim hate crime in the UK<sup>18</sup> found that the largest proportion of reported incidents involved Muslim women, usually wearing Islamic garments, facing attacks from white men. 11% of all incidents reported to Tell MAMA took place in an educational establishment (this is not broken down by type of establishment.)

Call data from a national helpline for survivors of sexual violence in England and Wales<sup>19</sup> shows over-representation of both these groups; black and minority ethnic callers constituted 27% and disabled callers 23%, where this information was given.

Crime survey data from England and Wales<sup>20</sup> notes an increased risk of victimisation for females with limiting disabilities or illnesses (3.4 per cent), and service users who identified as disabled represented 23% of callers.

### **Research relating to the reporting of SVH**

National crime statistics from England and Wales<sup>21</sup> include data on levels of and reasons behind reporting behaviours (whole population data only, not disaggregated by student status). 15 per cent of victims of the most serious sexual offences said that they had reported the incident to the police. Scottish crime survey data<sup>22</sup> found that 18.9% of those who experienced at least one type of stalking and harassment in the last 12 months said that the police came to know about the most recent incident, and of those who had experienced serious sexual assault since the age of 16, between 8.9% and 16.8 % (depending on the type of assault) had informed the police about the most recent (or only) incident. The most common reasons given were similar to those in the first NUS survey: 'embarrassing', they 'didn't think the police could do much to help', 'too trivial or not worth reporting', 'private/family matter and not police business'.

The first NUS survey<sup>23</sup> collected data on reporting levels and to whom students reported. Reporting levels were low across all forms of SVH, and respondents were more likely to report or discuss what had happened to them with friends or family. More than four in ten victims of serious sexual assault had told nobody, and students who had been subjected to a 'less serious' sexual assault were least likely to report either to the police or to the institution (two per cent). Respondents were most likely to report stalking to somebody at the institution (21 per cent).

The survey probed students' reasons for deciding whether to report. The most common reasons were that students did not feel that what had happened was serious enough to report, and in the case of sexual assault specifically that the victim felt ashamed or embarrassed, thought they would be blamed for what had happened, or that they would not be believed.

A subsequent NUS survey on 'lad culture and harassment'<sup>24</sup> explored students' likelihood of reporting sexual harassment. Over half of respondents said they would report sexual comments to

---

<sup>18</sup> Tell MAMA. (2015)

<sup>19</sup> Rape Crisis England and Wales. (2017)

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics. (2013)

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics. (2013). *An Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales* (Statistics bulletin). Retrieved from [www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk).

<sup>22</sup> Scottish Government. A National Statistics publication for Scotland. (2016a).

<sup>23</sup> NUS. (2010)

<sup>24</sup> NUS (2014)

the relevant services at their university, and just under a third said they would report it to their students' union. These levels are surprisingly high by comparison with the first NUS survey, and it should be noted that the first survey relates to actual reporting behaviours, whilst the latter survey asks how likely respondents think they would be to report. In common with the first survey findings, women students were more likely to say they wouldn't report sexual comments and unwanted sexual advances as they feel no one would take them seriously. Male students were more likely to say they didn't think they would need to be reported.

The survey also asked about students' awareness of channels for reporting. Three fifths said they were not aware of any reporting procedures at their university regarding sexual conversations, sexual comments, unwelcomed sexual advances, group intimidation and verbal harassment and over half said they were not aware of any codes of conduct implemented by their university that prohibit or tackle sexual conversations, sexual comments, unwelcomed sexual advances, group intimidation and verbal harassment.

## **Implications for the Ending Sexual Harassment and Violence in Third Level Education (ESHTE) project**

It is clear from the data that young women face disproportionately high levels of SVH, and that the given a significant segment of the population attends university and that the vast majority of university students are young people, women students face high levels of SVH. There is insufficient data to ascertain whether women students are more likely to face SVH than young women who are not students. Research by the NUS is particularly helpful in indicating the levels and nature of SVH experienced by women students, students' experience of university culture and the links to SVH and barriers to reporting. These reports are likely to be the most valuable points of reference during the development of ESHTE training modules and campaigning and awareness-raising tools.

Further, the UUK report<sup>25</sup> makes a series of recommendations which will be of interest in orientating the ESHTE project. The recommendations cover several areas including senior leadership, adopting an institution-wide approach, encouraging positive behaviours, working with the students' union and having effective governance, data collection and staff training.

---

<sup>25</sup> Universities UK. (2016)



## References

- Department for Education. (2016). *Participation Rates In Higher Education: Academic Years 2006/2007 - 2014/2015 (Provisional)*. Retrieved from [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).
- Equality Challenge Unit (2014) *Equality in higher education: statistical report 2014: Part 2: students*. Retrieved from [www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk).
- HESA. (2016). *HE student enrolments by mode of study, sex, level of study and domicile*. (Data table) Retrieved from [www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk).
- Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics. (2013). *An Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales* (Statistics bulletin). Retrieved from [www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk).
- NUS. (2010). *Hidden Marks: A study of women students' experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault*. Retrieved from [www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk).
- NUS. (2011). *Hidden Marks LBT: A report on LBT female students' experiences of harassment, violence and sexual assault*. [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017 from <http://www.slideshare.net/trpresearch/hidden-marks-lbt-8727930>.
- NUS. (2012). *That's what she said: Women students' experiences of 'lad culture' in higher education*. Retrieved from [www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk).
- NUS. (2014). *Lad Culture & Sexism Survey: August-September 2014*. [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> February 2017 from [www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk).
- Rape Crisis England and Wales. (2017). *Rape Crisis England & Wales headline statistics 2015-16*. Retrieved 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017 from [www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk).
- Scottish Government. A National Statistics publication for Scotland. (2016a). *Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2014/15: Sexual Victimization & Stalking*. Retrieved from [www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot).
- Scottish Government. A National Statistics publication for Scotland. (2016b). *Recorded Crime in Scotland 2015-16*. Retrieved from [www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot).
- Scottish Government. A National Statistics publication for Scotland. (2017). *Criminal Proceedings in Scotland 2015-16*. Retrieved from [www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot).
- Tell MAMA. (2015). *Tell MAMA Annual Report 2015: The Geography of Anti-Muslim Hatred*. Retrieved from [www.tellmamauk.org](http://www.tellmamauk.org).
- Universities UK. (2016). *Changing the culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students*. Retrieved from [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk).