

You See (UC) Lavender: ***Assessing Sexual Violence and Harassment*** ***Among Sexual and Gender Minority*** ***Students at UCLA***

BACKGROUND

Sexual and gender minority students (SGMS) include those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, transgender, gender diverse, or nonbinary (19). Although they make up only approximately 6-10% of college students in the United States (US), **SGMS disproportionately experience sexual violence and sexual harassment (SVSH), and intimate partner violence (IPV) compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers** (2, 5, 7, 8, 26).

Overwhelmingly, SGMS face unique risk factors, including homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, minimal peer and family support, and other social determinants that make them vulnerable to experiencing one-off or ongoing IPV, SVSH, and other forms of gender- and sexual orientation-based discrimination. SGMS who experience these abuses are **less likely (than heterosexual and cisgender student-survivors)** to access campus-based and/or local community resources for psychosocial support, post-rape physical and mental health care. They are also **less likely to formally report incidents of violence, harassment or discrimination**, let alone pursue any form of legal justice, either through the civil or criminal justice system or the Title IX Office on their college or university campus (15). Student-survivors unexposed to such services are at significantly increased risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, chronic disease, and mental illness, and may concurrently endure social isolation, stigma, and shame (16). Disconcertingly, **SGM student-survivors are also commonly harmed when they DO access and use resources following an incident of SVSH, IPV or other gender- or sexual orientation-based discrimination**. Specifically, they are at increased risk for experiencing retraumatization, and ultimately revictimization, due to the large number of counselors, health providers and other post-assault professionals who are not aware of, or competent about, the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, and other social identities intersect to produce disparate experiences with SVSH and IPV (17). For example, personnel may be unaware of the ways in which power dynamics exist and present in SGM partnerships, may hold biases pertaining to what SVSH “looks” like (that exclude SGM people), and/or may have homophobic/transphobic beliefs.

Further, and of key relevance to the proposed work, research from the US has found that SGMS are significantly **more likely to experience institutional betrayal after experiencing sexual assault, relative to cisgender, heterosexual undergraduate students** (20). Institutional betrayal refers to “wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g. sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution” (22). As such, poor response following reports of sexual violence against SGMS is common on college and university campuses, which has serious, negative implications for student-survivors who should be able to rely on their institution for support due to trauma. Such institutional betrayal exacerbates the adverse health and social consequences of violence, noted above, and perpetuates a campus culture that tolerates violence and discrimination against SGMS, staff and faculty (20).

BACKGROUND CONT.

In contrast to institutional betrayal, research has found that **strong community engagement and outreach programs that cultivate a supportive environment for SVSH survivors can significantly reduce adverse mental health and increase access to, and engagement with, institutional and social support systems** (16). Furthermore, students who perceive higher campus readiness to address SVSH and IPV experience a more positive campus climate and a greater sense of community, overall (7). SGMS who interact with affirming and inclusive providers and counselors additionally report feeling acknowledged, safer, and more welcomed, and students that feel represented and affirmed by the campus community, generally, are more likely to utilize service (16, 7). Where does this leave UCLA? The answer is that we don't really know.

Per system-level policy (<https://policy.ucop.edu/doc/4000385/SVSH>), the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) implements a multicomponent approach to addressing SVSH. This includes, but is not limited to, mandatory education and training on sexual violence issues and prevention for new students, a campus-based Campus Assault Resources & Education (CARE) Office, and a Title IX Office where neutral investigation and adjudication services are offered to both parties throughout the entire process. **Despite availability of these services, our previous research at UCLA, UC San Diego, and UC Santa Barbara suggests only half of undergraduate students were aware that CARE and Title IX exist** (3). Among students who *did* know of the SVSH services, two of the most commonly reported barriers for using them were a belief they were not tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups (including SGMS) and past negative experiences (13). Further, apart from students in Greek life and athletics (who receive ongoing harm reduction training), most students did not remember much about (or that they participated in) SVSH prevention education (3, 13).

Students who *did* recall these trainings felt that the curricula was mostly or entirely created on a gender binary and thus felt the teachings were ineffective for understanding sexual and intimate relationships or preventing related harms among SGMS (13). Especially given that IPV, already experienced by SGMS to a greater degree than heterosexual individuals, has increased during COVID-19 stay at home orders, it is vital to understand the extent to which students are aware of campus SVSH resources, feel represented in campus-based prevention and survivor services, and feel heard and included in conversations that aim to improve such resources (11).



To respond to gaps in ensuring the safety and well-being of all students and members of the UCLA community, **we propose an innovative 12-month study to assess SGMS' experiences of SVSH, including the process of reporting incidents to on-campus services. We will examine the extent to which UCLA provides accessible, gender affirming, and inclusive SVSH resources and services for the SGMS community.**

Findings will inform recommendations for improved SVSH prevention and response policies and programs that holistically protect and promote the well-being of SGMS students and student-survivors.

WHY LAVENDER?

The color lavender holds historical significance for resistance and empowerment in the LGBTQ+ community, and the community's fight for visibility, representation, justice, and equity. While it is a contemporary symbol for authenticity in the US and on the University of California's (UCLA's) campus (Lavender Graduation, Lavender Health Alliance, etc.), lavender also represents how the history of hatred and violence—stemming from the pink triangles that gay men were forced to wear in the concentration camps and the black triangles signifying lesbians as political prisoners in Nazi Germany—has been reclaimed as a symbol for pride and community.

In seeing lavender, we are also witnessing a reminder of how discrimination, violence, and hatred fortified modern LGBTQ+ communities, which places violence central to our understanding of reclamation, pride, and community building. In other words, **while you may just see the color lavender, we see a history of empowerment and resilience in the face of violence, and opportunities for growth.** In this study, we hope to articulate the experiences of the UCLA LGBTQ+ community and produce more trauma-informed, survivor-centered policies and programs to create a safe, inclusive, and affirming campus for all students.

PROPOSED APPROACH

The proposed study will leverage the infrastructure of the *UC Speaks Up* study which assessed the climate for SVSH prevention at UCLA, UC San Diego, and UC Santa Barbara (23). We will also draw on other emerging scholarship on college-level SVSH prevention and response efforts.

Our research methods are informed by **intersectional, community-led frameworks and guided by trauma-informed and survivor-centered principles.** By design, we will follow a sequential, mixed-methods approach, beginning with a study preparation and planning phase, followed by a quantitative survey (findings from which will be used to refine qualitative guides to be used) for in-depth interviews.

Quantitative Survey: We will conduct an online survey with 250 undergraduate SGMS to assess general perceptions of and experiences with discrimination and SVSH at UCLA; inclusivity of UCLA services and resources, generally; perceived SGMS-specific SVSH risk and protective factors; and attitudes surrounding violence and institutional betrayal.

In-depth Qualitative Interviews: We propose to conduct up to 30 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with SGMS who have experienced SVSH during their time at UCLA, stratified by class year. IDIs will be done in-person using semi-structured guides with open-ended questions that allow for conversational inquiry about the research questions. Participants will be asked about their knowledge of, experience(s) with, and perceptions surrounding campus-based reporting and counseling services. Additionally, these interviews will explore SGMS' decision to, and experiences with, reporting to on-campus services, such as Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), CARE, and Title IX, if applicable. Probes will be used to elicit additional information or clarify responses. All participants will receive a \$50 Visa gift card in compensation for their time. IDIs typically last 60-90 minutes and allow for one-on-one discussion, providing space for participants to share personal perspectives and experiences. All IDIs will be audio recorded with written consent from all participants.

OPPORTUNITY AND RELEVANCE

UCLA has sponsored research in LGBTQ+ studies for more than 50 years and is home to over 20 LGBTQ+ organizations that work together to organize, build community, and advocate for SGM students (25). While UCLA is a leader in these respects, SGMS still face significant and disproportionate rates of SVSH on university campuses, as compared to their peers who are heterosexual and cisgender. Additionally, SGM university students in the U.S. who remained in hostile home environments during the pandemic reported greater feelings of isolation, poorer mental health outcomes, lower academic performance, and greater feelings of rejection (11). **As UCLA students return to campus, it is vital to understand the extent to which students are aware of campus SVSH resources, feel represented in campus-based prevention and survivor services, and feel heard and included in conversations that aim to improve such resources.** UCLA has the unique opportunity to listen to the needs of LGBTQ+ students in order to address potential gaps in sexual violence prevention and reporting. This will ensure that SGMS experience a positive and affirming school and learning environment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. *In what ways do UCLA students and recent graduates who identify as SGM experience discrimination and SVSH during their time at UCLA?*
2. *To what extent do SGMS know and trust campus reporting services and survivor resources? Do experiences engaging with campus-based services reveal institutional betrayal (e.g. are they perceived to be inclusive, competent, and supportive of SGMS)?*
3. *How does race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and other social determinants intersect with sexual orientation and gender identity and influence reporting and help-seeking behaviors following an incident of SVSH?*
4. *What recommendations do SGMS survivors and allies have for improving prevention education; SVSH health, safety and survivor programs/policies/resources; and Title IX reporting procedures at UCLA?*

POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF FINDINGS

Findings will be utilized to generate research and policy briefs and recommendations regarding:

1. The acceptability of Title IX as a reporting service among SGM student-survivor at UCLA
2. The feasibility and desire for other forms of support and informal reporting among student-survivors, including peer-to-peer healing spaces
3. The ways in which competency trainings can be strengthened to centralize SGM student needs and experiences
4. Methods to strengthen cross-campus collaborations (e.g. integrating LGBTQ Centers across UCs and other LGBTQ+ centered spaces) in increasing the inclusivity and competence of existing student support networks.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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