

Learning from our survey on sexual assault

October 27, 2014

To the members of the MIT community,

In response to President Reif's [charge](#) that we take action to combat sexual assault at MIT, last spring my office conducted an online survey to understand the extent and effects of sexual misconduct in our community. I write now to share what we have learned so far and explain the first round of actions we are taking in response.

The survey we created is the first of its kind for our community: we sent it to all undergraduate and graduate students (10,831 people), and we asked extensive, detailed questions designed to bring clarity to a subject that is inherently sensitive and difficult. We launched the survey on April 27, 2014, two days before the White House Task Force called on all US colleges and universities to survey their students on these matters.

We received survey replies from 3,844 – or 35% – of our students. Because the survey was not a random sample and was voluntary, and the topic of unwanted sexual behaviors is focused, we know the results reflect a degree of self-selection. Since it is impossible to tell how this may have altered the results, it would be a mistake to use these numbers to generalize about the prevalence of unwanted sexual behavior in the lives of all MIT students.

Nevertheless, the survey clearly tells us that, like many other colleges and universities, we face a serious problem:

- The national conversation has focused on the widely cited statistic that 19% of undergraduate women, or one in five, experience rape or sexual assault under conditions of force, threat or incapacitation¹. At MIT, for those female undergraduates who responded to the survey, the comparable figure is nearly 17%.
- Our survey asked questions designed to capture not only sexual assault by force, threat of harm, or incapacitation due to alcohol or drugs, but also to uncover a broader picture of unwanted sexual behavior in our community. Of all the students who responded to the survey -- graduate and undergraduate, of all genders – 539 indicated that, while at MIT, they had experienced some type of unwanted sexual behavior, ranging from unwelcome verbal sexual conduct to rape, usually committed by someone they knew. Of those 539 respondents, 284 were undergraduate women.
- Based on the survey responses, unwanted sexual behavior often occurs when students are in vulnerable states. Of all the students who indicated that they had experienced unwanted sexual behavior while at MIT, close to half said that they had been taken advantage of when they were incapacitated.

You can find a summary of the survey findings and the text of the survey questions on web.mit.edu/surveys/health/.

Overall, the results suggest that the problem of sexual assault in our community is comparable to that on other residential campuses. These are painful facts, and we must take action.

¹ Krebs, C.P., Lindquist, C.H., Warner, T.D., Fisher, B.S., & Martin, S.L. (2007). The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice.

Next steps

MIT is a community of problem solvers. As we have demonstrated in the past, we are not afraid of self-examination and are very good at learning from data and facts, even unpleasant ones. Ultimately, we will arrive at a serious solution only if we draw on ideas generated by the MIT community at large. To this end, I will host a community forum, the details of which will be released soon, to discuss the initial survey results and next steps.

And I invite MIT students, faculty and staff to send questions that they would like addressed to stop-assault@mit.edu. We will work together to answer these questions and mine the survey data for new insights. Results will be posted [online](#).

In the meantime, we have begun taking action based on what we know so far:

1. We are increasing staff to respond to those who experience sexual assault, and finding new ways to let students know where they can turn for help.

Survey respondents who had used our confidential resources, such as MIT's Violence Prevention Response (VPR) team, were very positive about their experiences, saying that VPR made them feel supported and cared for and helped them understand their options. However, many of the students surveyed were unaware of the range of services and options available; for instance, more than half of survey respondents didn't know enough about VPR to use it as a resource if they were assaulted in the future.

This was especially true for graduate student respondents, who tend to live off campus and whose MIT experience centers on their particular research group. So we are pursuing two strategies: First, we are expanding outreach so that our information sessions extend beyond student living groups and clubs to reach students in their academic departments and labs. Second, given the number of victims revealed through our survey, we will increase the number of staff members who provide these education and advocacy services.

2. To remove barriers that may prevent people from seeking help, we are revamping both procedures for reporting complaints and processes for addressing reported complaints.

Of those students who indicated that they had experienced unwanted sexual behavior, only 5% reported their experience through official MIT channels. To help reduce the barriers to reporting, we have clarified the policies and procedures, updated the [website](#) dedicated to sexual assault and misconduct, hired new staff, increased training of the Committee on Discipline, made significant changes to the Committee on Discipline processes for handling sexual misconduct cases, and charged a task force that will soon recommend additional changes to the disciplinary process.

3. We are committed to building additional options for peer involvement in education.

Of the survey respondents who reported experiencing unwanted sexual behavior, 63% told someone about it; 90% of those students sought support from a friend. Building on this natural impulse, we are working to develop a peer-to-peer program, in the tradition of other successful MIT peer mentoring efforts such as MedLinks and Active Minds.

4. We have launched a Sexual Assault Education and Prevention Task Force.

Composed of students, staff and faculty, this team has been charged with reviewing current education and prevention outreach efforts to identify gaps, exploring best practices at other institutions, developing recommendations to address identified gaps and proposing a plan for their implementation. They will begin by engaging the community in dialogue about what constitutes sexual assault and consent, developing new programs for residence halls and other MIT living and learning groups, coordinating the student-run "It's on Us, MIT" campaign, and engaging faculty, staff and students in the invention of new technologies to help prevent these dangerous behaviors.

5. We are doing more to teach students about effective “bystander intervention.”

Respondents were nearly unanimous in agreeing that most MIT students would respect someone who did something to prevent a sexual assault, and more than 80% stated that they “always or usually” took steps to protect their friends, such as making sure to leave a party with the same people they came with or walking an intoxicated friend home. These findings suggest that we are on the right track in our recent efforts to make sure that all MIT students are trained in the skills of “bystander intervention.” But we can do more to encourage community members to routinely and systematically take responsibility for each other.

6. We need to help students understand and handle the complex, sometimes unpredictable psychological impact of unwanted sexual behavior.

The survey asked students whether they had been sexually assaulted, and then separately asked them if they had experienced a range of specific unwanted sexual behaviors. From this, we learned something important: Many students who had experienced unwanted sexual behaviors that would violate MIT’s policy against sexual misconduct did not define the experience in those terms themselves. When asked why they might hesitate to officially report an incident, survey respondents indicated a range of factors, sometimes in combination: that they felt partially responsible, that the incident wasn’t violent, that they had been drinking, that the other person involved was an acquaintance or a friend. We need to help students understand that harm can result from unwanted sexual encounters, whether or not they think harm was intended, so [it is alright to ask for help](#).

7. We are stepping up education around the links between alcohol, drugs and sexual assault.

Because nearly half of the respondents who experienced unwanted sexual behavior indicated that at least one such incident involved being taken advantage of while “too drunk, high, asleep, or out of it,” we need to step up our existing education efforts in this area. Several of our on-campus residence halls have already launched student-organized training sessions for residents. The Panhellenic Association is developing for MIT sororities a risk certification program on sexual assault, substance abuse, mental health, bystander intervention, and policy awareness. The Interfraternity Council has also taken up this responsibility, with a two-phase program to educate students about sexual assault, the role that alcohol and drugs can play, the power of “bystanders” to help prevent sexual assault, and ways to help a friend who has been assaulted. By the end of the semester, upwards of 60% of fraternity brothers – more than one-third of all undergraduate men at MIT -- will have completed some or all of this training. Drawing on what we learn from this and other programs, we will roll out other tailored programs in dormitories and with other student groups, so that students have the information, skills and confidence to be more effective in reducing the incidence of sexual assault on our campus.

These initiatives represent just the beginning of what we need to do. In the coming months, I will work with the community to continue to learn from the survey results and translate those findings into action. If you have ideas now about how we can reduce the incidence of sexual misconduct on our campus and improve the support we offer when it does occur, I urge you to let me know at stop-assault@mit.edu.

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In all our efforts to combat sexual assault, we take our lead from President Reif. Since February when he charged me to address this problem, he has encouraged the work of my team at every step. As longtime members of the MIT faculty, he and I are dismayed by the extent and nature of the problem reflected in the survey results. We share the conviction that, as a community, we must hold ourselves to a higher standard. We also share the confidence that the MIT community will find a path to significant positive change.

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A closing thank-you

I close by thanking the thousands of students who took the time to complete the survey; the many staff members who administered and analyzed the data; and the many people – staff, faculty and students – who are already actively engaged in assessing, combating and responding to sexual assault at MIT.

Thanks to your efforts, we have the facts to begin to make our community stronger and safer for everyone.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Barnhart