

# Colleges must not only respond to reports of sexual violence but also prevent it (essay)

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## Sexual Violence: Responding to Reports Is Not Enough

As institutions improve their ability to receive and respond to reports of sexual violence, they must be sure not to neglect the actual prevention of it, argues Joseph Storch.

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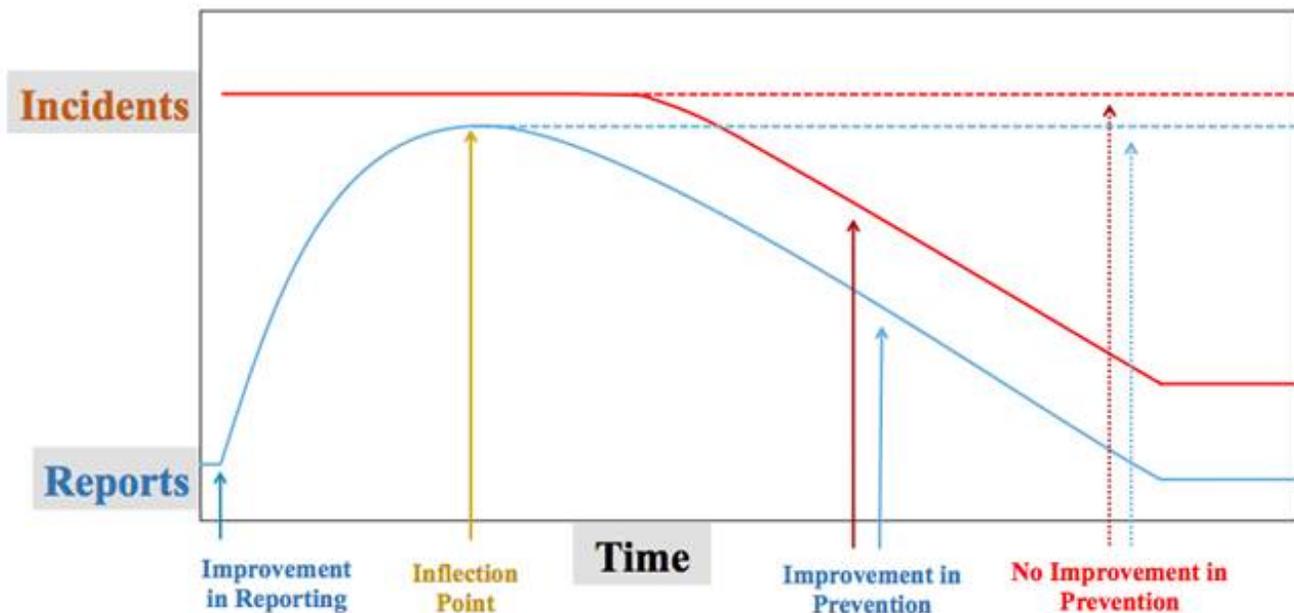
**By**

[Joseph Storch](#)

The elevated attention paid to sexual and interpersonal violence, coupled with new legislative requirements, is leading colleges and universities to improve the ways that victims and survivors can report incidents of such violence. Providing additional resources and educating students about reporting options can lead to a significant increase in those reports. That is a positive step forward. However, surges in reporting can, in turn, stress institutional resources and delay or stop colleges and universities from shifting their focus to actually *preventing* sexual violence and bringing reporting numbers back down.

Yet more recent requirements of the 2013 Violence Against Women Act reauthorization and state legislation in [New York](#) and [California](#) demand colleges and universities to work more on preventing violence in the first place. This is a favorable development over all and one that should be celebrated. But shifting to prevention is easier said than done in a field that does not have decades of evidence-based solutions. Worse, institutions that are working through the compliance curve detailed here will have to expand prevention efforts at the exact time when the employees charged with implementing such programs are swamped dealing with reports.

It isn't surprising, therefore, that [the vast majority of institutions reported no rapes occurring in 2014](#) -- at least in the specifically defined locations of the Clery Act that were disclosed to a campus security authority or local law enforcement. That was the case even as climate survey after climate survey has shown that a considerable portion of women and men have been victimized by such violations (although the [precise number can differ between surveys](#)). Societally, the reporting level is low, and that applies to sexual violations in college as well. As shown below, at the beginning of the reporting curve, the number of violations is much higher than the number of reports.



But as institutions develop and improve their [reporting methods and resources](#), and they endeavor to disrupt longstanding silos between different offices that can lose reports in bureaucracy, reports of sexual and interpersonal violence will skyrocket. It isn't unheard of for campuses to have such reports of sexual and interpersonal violence double or triple year over year in the midst of a campaign to educate students about reporting options on top of additional efforts to respond in a timely way to reports of violations. That spike puts substantial pressure on first responders, Title IX coordinators, judicial and conduct professionals, and counseling centers.

That pressure is a systemic risk, as the time and effort that campus officials spend responding to cases may draw attention away from the work needed to get to the next level: prevention programming. Such programming can include bystander intervention and engaging student leaders who can model behavior that changes the culture surrounding sexual and interpersonal violence. At this level, institutions can reach what I call the violence reduction inflection point (gold line), as shown in the figure above. It is at this most difficult point that resources are stretched thinnest -- and where many institutions become stuck, staff members become overwhelmed and morale can suffer.

But it is exactly at this point that colleges and universities need to spend the most time, resources and intellectual bandwidth to shift to a prevention model. If institutions can properly commit resources to improvement in prevention, that work will lead to a reduction in overall incidents of violence (solid red line) with a concordant reduction in reports of violence (solid blue line). Note that the road back down is a gentler slope than the initial increase in reports, as the process will take longer. The danger is that if the improvement in prevention is not there, incidents will occur at the same rate (dotted red line) and reports of incidents -- while never encompassing all incidents that occur -- will nevertheless remain high (dotted blue line), continuing to strain resources as the institution attempts to respond to them all.

The fact is, at most institutions, greater prevention efforts will require not simply asking existing response personnel to take on more tasks related to prevention. It will also demand an investment in additional resources and personnel, or additional shared efforts in offices across the campus. While good models of prevention programming already exist and can be adopted or purchased, the ideal is for a campus to eschew buying an off-the-shelf product in favor of developing programming that, while building on the publicly available work of others, is tailored to its specific campus culture and population. Such efforts are absolutely crucial to bringing the number of reports down -- not because the reporting will return to a low percentage of incidents, but because the incidents themselves will

decrease.

While the dollar cost of acquiring access to some of these programs is low or nothing, the time and resource cost of implementing any of them at a campus can be high. Thus, it is easy and tempting for overworked Title IX and student affairs professionals to say, "I have so many investigations on my plate, I can't even begin to think about additional programming." That understandable impulse is penny-wise and pound-foolish. Without an intentional and significant shift of current and new resources into prevention programming and culture change, the number of incidents will stay high, as will the number of reports (albeit never as high as all occurring incidents). Without a greater focus on prevention, staff will be endlessly overwhelmed, and we in higher education won't make the dent in the prevalence of incidents and reports that we have the capacity to make.

The Stream Model of Sexual and Interpersonal Violence Prevention and Response outlined below can help people think about prevention and response in both upstream and downstream programs. While downstream efforts, such as responding to violence and violations, are vital, institutions should also be constantly looking upstream to bring new programming and policies online that reduce the number of incidents that require a response.



In short, it is not enough to strengthen resources to respond to violence. Federal law requires, and the current times and our educational mission demand, that higher education lead the way in developing, studying and implementing prevention programming so as to lower the incidents of these crimes and violations on and off the campus. Colleges and universities must work to ensure that their efforts not only to respond to and increase reporting about assaults but also to ultimately prevent them are consistently moving forward.

## Bio

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