

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO RATES OF CAMPUS CRIME?

By *Adriana Fernandez and Alan J. Lizotte*

Until recently, college campuses were seen as idyllic ivory towers that were insulated from the traumas of the real world. However, in the 1980s this image began to change. The new perception, touted in the media and consumed by parents and students, increasingly portrayed the campus as a dangerous place. In response, the federal government passed the Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act, requiring for the first time in 1992 that colleges and universities report the numbers of various types of crime to prospective and current students and employees. The idea behind this legislation was to provide a mechanism for individuals to assess the relative risk of experiencing a crime on one campus as opposed to another.

To address and manage the reporting of campus crime data, the Consortium for Higher Education Campus Crime Research (CHECCR) was established. The analysis that follows employs data sets housed at CHECCR. The data were obtained from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) and are supplemented with data on CHECCR members.

Trends in Crime

Figure 1 shows trends in violent crimes over time. These include: murder, assault, rape, and robbery. These crime trends are reported per 100,000 population in the nation. For campuses they are per 100,000 students.

In 1991 there were more than 750 violent crimes per 100,000 people in the nation, according to the UCR, but only about 64 per 100,000 on campuses. The rate of violent crime from 1974 to 1991 has steadily *decreased* on campus by 27%

(from 88 to 64 per 100,000). Campuses are apparently becoming safer.

Figure 2 shows that property crime rates in the nation at large are higher than they are on campus, but that the differential here is a relatively modest two-to-one. In short, colleges have fairly high relative rates of property crime, but low rates of violent crime. Yet, even with regard to property crime, things have been improving, not worsening, at the nation's colleges and universities.

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a substantial divergence in the property crime rate trends for the nation and campuses. In the former, it's up, while on campus it has declined substantially. This suggests that in recent years campuses have become better at controlling property crime. There are several possible reasons why this trend has developed. One reason is the increased professionalism of campus police; the increased attention and policy initiatives by campus administrators is another.

Correlates of Campus Crime

One way to determine which factors are related to crime on campus is to correlate crime rates in different institutions with various college and community attributes. We find that different types of crimes have different correlates that predict them. The exact predictors depend upon characteristics of both offenders and of potential victims. For most types of crime, the higher the percentage of students living in campus dormitories, the higher the crime rate will be. Simply put, the size of the dormitory population is an indicator of the amount of time that students spend on campus. Naturally, the more time that they spend there, the more

they are at risk of being victimized there. However, it's more than just exposure time that drives these crime rates. When students live on campus, they are probably less effective guardians of their person and property than when they live at home. Furthermore, they bring to campus many expensive goods that are tempting targets.

For crimes that involve economic motivation and some criminal expertise (like motor vehicle theft and burglary), the amount of similar crime in the community is a very good indicator of specific types of crime on campus. Moreover, the wealthier the student body, the more likely it is to become the target of these criminals from the larger community (Figure 3). Private schools, and those with wealthier students who live off campus and commute, are most likely to have high rates of motor vehicle theft, especially when the larger community has the same problem. On the other hand, schools with many relatively wealthy students living on campus experience more burglary, especially when the community has high rates of burglary.

Yet if different colleges and universities differ significantly in their susceptibility to different types of crime, the main fact remains that overall the campus is a pretty safe place. College crime rates are coming down. The fear of campus crime has probably been exaggerated.

Adriana Fernandez is research associate, School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany; and Alan J. Lizotte is professor, School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany, and executive director, CHECCR

Figure 1
National and Campus Violent Crime Rates (per 100,000)

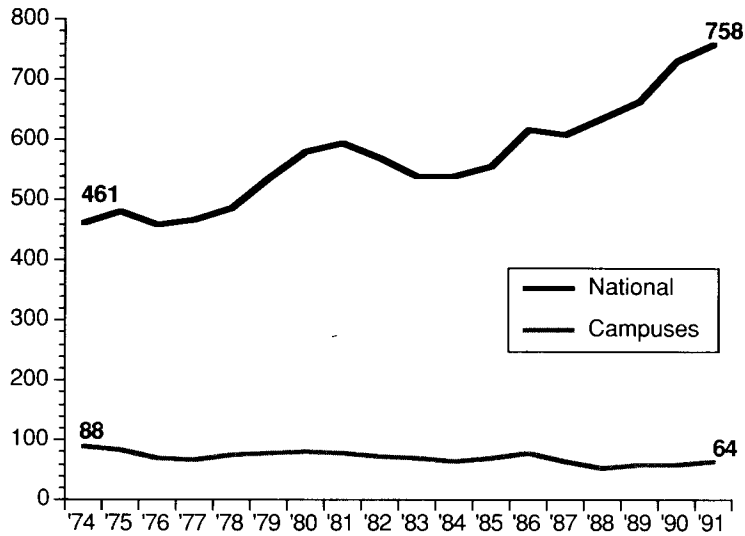


Figure 2
National and Campus Property Crime Rates (per 100,000)

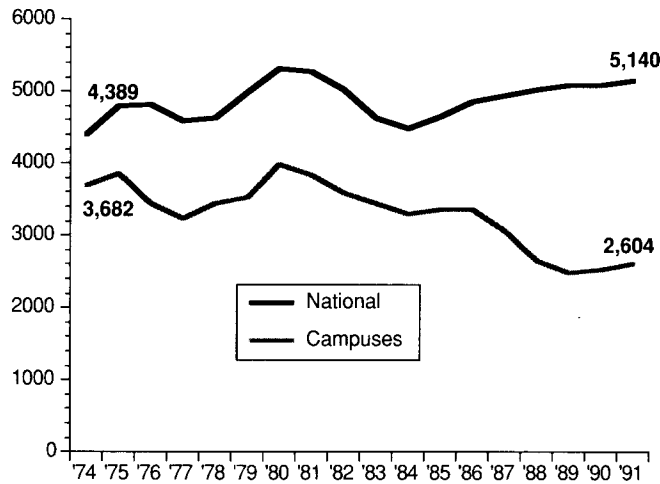
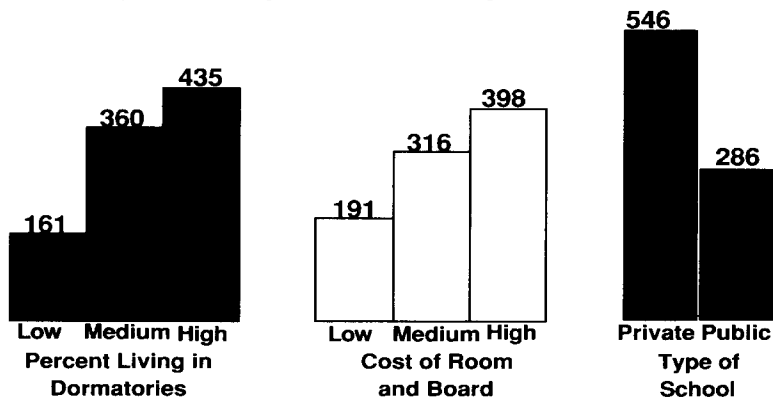


Figure 3
1991 Campus Burglary Rates By Various Campus Characteristics (per 100,000)



Source: Data provided by the Consortium for Higher Education Campus Crime Research, 1992; and US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, latest that of 1992).