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# Regulation and Reporting: A Study of Policy-Based Inhibition of Sex-Positive Cultures and Sexual Assault Reporting on College Campuses

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Regulation and Reporting: A Study of Policy-Based Inhibition of Sex-Positive Cultures and Sexual  
Assault Reporting on College Campuses\*

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research process.

**Regulation and Reporting: A Study of Policy-Based Inhibition of Sex-Positive Cultures and  
Assault Reporting on College Campuses**

ABSTRACT

How does treatment of consensual sexual behavior affect willingness to report assault on college campuses? This study proposes that higher levels of policy-based inhibition of informed, consensual sex cultures lead to lower reported rates of sexual assault because they increase stigma and minimize discussions about sexual behavior. Stigma reduces willingness to address marginalized communities and deviant behaviors, in this case sexual activity, particularly outside of wedlock. If people are not willing to discuss sex, reporting sexual assault is unlikely because of high social stakes associated with breaking norms. Policies about consensual sexual behaviors are reflective operationalizations of the stigmas that lead to sexual activity being labelled as “deviant.” In this study, levels of inhibition are represented by a content analysis of campus policies regarding consensual sexual behaviors and incidences of reported sexual assault per 10,000 students for a stratified random sample of 128 private, liberal arts schools of 500-5,000 undergraduate students. The study controls for Protestant affiliation and Historically Black College or University (HBCU) identity. Inhibition level did not have independent statistically significant impact on reported sexual assault incidences on college campuses. Protestant affiliation, however, was associated both with level of inhibition and with incidences of assaults reported. HBCU status had no effect on sexual assault rates. The results fail to support that policy-based inhibition of sex-positive cultures on college campuses is associated with reported sexual assault rate. Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported, implying inhibition level is representative of restrictive culture of Protestant schools and the

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corresponding number of assaults reported, rather than being an independent cause for reported assault number. The non-significant correlation between policy and reports also affects understandings of the social function of policy, as this study does not find that policy affects behavior. Together, the findings suggest opportunities to consider how policy reflects different cultures and how to create spaces where people feel safe reporting, to develop an accurate understanding of sexual assault on college campuses.

**Regulation and Reporting: A Study of Policy-Based Inhibition of Sex-Positive Cultures and Assault Reporting on College Campuses**

Sex cultures are created through sociological institutions. Institutions including religion and education interact to create attitudes about consensual sex passively through daily interactions and conversations. These attitudes are reified through policy. Simultaneously, there is a growing conversation in the United States about sexual assault. College campuses, where personal behaviors are controlled to varying degrees, are a particular focus of this conversation. For many young adults, college offers a unique opportunity to make personal living choices outside of parental influence, and break away from previously understood norms surrounding sex. Higher educational environments are also spaces rampant with ignorance concerning sexual and reproductive health, and high sexual assault rates. In the semi-regulated space of academic institutions, personal norms are being reshaped and influenced by the policies of the institution. Colleges and universities offer a unique opportunity to explore how cultures (created by pertinent sociological institutions and operationalized by policy) that support or inhibit informed, consensual sex affect willingness to report sexual assault.

The issue addressed here represents ways in which shame and stigma influence individuals' lives. The works of Goffman concerning shame and stigma provide frameworks that support the necessity of this study. Goffman (1963) articulates the different social functions of shame and stigma, which directly influence the way we address problems in our lives and society. Goffman's theories reflect how being told that something is or is not okay affects willingness to talk about it, which relates to this study and the choice to report sexual assault or

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not. The theory has also been the basis of a number of adjacent studies, with themes that include willingness to pursue resources for sexual and reproductive health, in both positive and negative situations. Goffman's framework can be used to examine the potential ramifications of restricting consensual behaviors, and their influence on willingness to talk about problematic instances of the same behaviors.

This framework contributes a necessary and practical approach to the creation of safe spaces for addressing instances of assault. Sexual assault reporting rates are often considered synonymous with assault rates; however, sexual assault on college campuses is a severely underreported crime. According to the Campus Climate Survey Validation Study, approximately 21 percent of female undergraduates in 2015 report an instance of sexual assault at some point in their college career (Krebs et al. 2016:73), and yet according to Clery Act data 89 percent of colleges in 2016 reported zero instances of rape in the previous academic year (Becker 2017). Although not all assaults are rapes, the discrepancy between the number of assaults that individuals acknowledge outside of school and the number of reported assaults schools are receiving suggests the underreporting of sexual assault on college campuses.

This study contributes to the acknowledged but underexplored distinction between reporting rates and assaulting rates, and provides frameworks for how campus leaders and administrators can approach breaking down the barriers of shame and stigma surrounding reporting. By encouraging students to discuss assault in non-judgmental, safer spaces, researchers can begin to truly understand the pervasiveness of this issue on college campuses and beyond. This conversation is imperative within the ongoing challenge of combating sexual and gender-based violence.

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In all, there is a need to practically evaluate the way that shame and stigma surrounding sex (as reflected and reified through policy) affect willingness to report sexual assault. Social theory provides the framework to explore how social stigma minimizes willingness to discuss topics that go against societal norms and behaviors. These theories include human sexuality, regardless of whether the interaction is positive or negative. When sex is stigmatized, sexual assault may be even more so. In an applied context, it suggests that the creation of informed, consensual, sex-positive cultures could lead to normalizing pertinent conversations, and inhibiting these environments could minimize willingness to address when something goes wrong: when assault occurs. I hypothesize that the higher a college or university's score on the scale of level of policy-based inhibition of informed, consensual sex cultures, the lower its reported sexual assault rates per 10,000 students.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Multiple theoretical frames can illuminate how and why norms exist, and the impact these norms have on social human behavior. These frameworks include the works of Erving Goffman (1963) and of Clifton Bryant and Craig Forsyth (2012), which address stigma and shaming, and deviant behaviors respectively. The theories intersect to create a bridge between policy and behavior, as they suggest the variety of ways policies create different expectations and behaviors.

### *Stigma*

Goffman (1963) was one of the first theorists to suggest that stigma is a social construct by which individuals can understand norms and appropriate behaviors across contexts. His theory includes an understanding that people often fit into the social structure provided by



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stigmas, as stigma is a social force that explicitly and implicitly identifies norms. For better or worse, Goffman discusses how people tend to be affected by stigma regardless of personal needs or environments. Using Goffman's insights, it is clear that sexual behavior is highly stigmatized, and therefore stigma plays a role in how and why people do or do not pursue sexual health resources (Balfe et al. 2010; Hall et al. 2018). More specifically, the framework's application extends to provide understanding of how stigma plays a role in why people do not report sexual assault (Kennedy and Prock 2018; Sprankle et al. 2018).

Goffman's work includes a discussion of how minorities, social deviants, and other marginalized communities are often on the negative end of an "imbalance of treatment" (Goffman 1963:127). He goes on to address how the policies of a given social group create and reify the imbalance for members and outsiders alike. Policy functions as a tool to establish norms for initial interaction within a social group or community; it has a powerful influence on the stigmas that dictate social behaviors. This link between policy and stigma underscores the importance of addressing its influence on human behaviors.

### *Deviance*

Bryant and Forsyth (2012) explored deviant lifestyles and developed a framework to engage with their meaning in society. Their work engages with the tension between the individual and the lifestyle expected of them, and the choice to behave in deviant manners overtly or covertly in different contexts. Specifically, they address deviant verbal, religious, and sexual behaviors. Within these varying contexts, their theories examine how standards are created, and how deviating from these standards in the form of verbal and physical expression, both publicly and privately, can negatively affect an individual's social status. Similarly to

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stigma, this framework suggests that the concept of deviance is daunting enough to discourage reporting sexual assault in environments where acknowledgement of sexual behavior is taboo.

In their assessment of verbal deviance, they state “to violate the rules of the speech code [of a given community] is to invite sanctions” (Bryant et al. 2012:535). They continue, explaining how policy creates the norms that inherently define deviance in speech. This deviance includes not only speech patterns, but also content. In environments where topics are stigmatized through policy, the thought of discussing them and risking being labelled deviant often becomes an incapacitating barrier.

Bryant and Forsyth go on to discuss the influence of religious policy on behavior, stating that “once indoctrinated into a religious faith or denomination, many individuals develop certain seemingly spontaneous or compulsive religious habits” (Bryant et al. 2012:539). There is a clear connection between religious rules and understood norms that bleed into all aspects of life, not just the explicitly religious ones. Therefore, policy is once again an influence on what people do, say, think, and feel on a daily basis. Religious policy exemplifies an institution that leads to stigma and affects human behavior, in humans’ efforts to avoid becoming stigmatized and labelled “deviant”.

Finally, they address the pervasive nature of sex stigmas in society. Although there are fewer clear instances of policy in this realm, they note that sex stigma is ever-present-- though more in the lives of women than men (Bryant et al. 2012:542). Sexual promiscuity is punished and constantly used to assess human value in most of society, regardless of specific context. Because it is so often intertwined with policy, such as religious guidelines of sexual purity, it is

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important to note the importance of sexual stigma in the relationship between policies around sex and decisions to discuss or not discuss when assault occurs.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large body of literature about sexual behaviors, on and off college campuses. The culture around sexual behavior in modern society reflects changing norms, which have mixed effects. Sex positivity culture has positive influences by normalizing some kinds of conversation about sex, but it does not completely erase shame around the topic (Mercer 2018). Additionally, the literature addresses the importance of college and young adulthood as a time in individuals' lives when young people often expand sexual experiences and understandings (Patrick and Lee 2008). Thus, the context for the literature through a modern lens is that although society is growing to be more progressive, there is still a stigma, and college is often an opportunity to explore and expand understandings of human sexuality. Policy, which is highly relevant in the regulated environment of a college campus, influences sex cultures. There is a need to examine how policy affects shame and stigma around sex, which in turn creates complicated environments for victims of sexual assault. The literature is centered around stigma concerning sex because the impact of this research goes beyond taking reported assault numbers at face value. Instead, it leads to suggestions about reporting culture and assault rates on college campuses to pose how they might differ from one another.

#### *Policy and Reporting*

Policy often both creates and reflects stigma around sexual assault as well as consensual sexual behavior. Policies can shape what individuals feel comfortable discussing, as they reflect the norms presented by groups with privilege and power. Thus, they are often performative

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efforts at inclusivity that do little more than reify existing problematic structures, which does not help victims of sexual assault (Griffin et al. 2016; Narang 2018). Policies also feed into victim-blaming cultures that inhibit safe spaces (Arbeit 2017; Holtzman and Menning 2019).

Policies around sexual assault have been correlated with sexual assault rates, suggesting the tension between how assault numbers reflect policy and how they reflect culture (Klein et al. 2018; DeLong et al. 2018). One study found that a lack of policies that explicitly outlined what assault was, what consent looked like, and what resources were available, were main reasons that people did not report assault (Holland and Cortina 2017). To contrast, when more explicit policy definitions of consent and positive sexual encounters were provided, along with more specific outlines of responses and consequences for assault, reported assault rates were negatively correlated with campus sexual assault prevalence (Moore and Baker 2016). Both cases concluded with low reported assault rates, but one reflected a culture of fear rooted in shame and stigma that led to a lack of reporting, whereas the other reflected the influence of policy as a catalyst for informed, consensual sex cultures that acted as preventative measures to assault. This contrast demonstrates how when clear outlines of consent and assault are provided, these policies clearly define what deviant behavior (sexual assault) looks like, and therefore, perpetrators are less likely to offend and victims are more likely to report, because there are established guidelines of right and wrong. The studies demonstrate that ambiguity in policy is correlated with lower reporting rates, while clarity in policy and explicit support for victims of assault positively influences reporting rates. These findings once again suggest that policy and culture have a circular relationship, with each influencing the other.

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In college environments such as Greek communities, students rely on policy for suggestions of what is right or wrong. Policies' focus on the frequency of illicit behaviors, rather than on creating preventative and sex-positive cultures is demonstrated to affect communities' ability to internalize assault prevention methods (Maples et al. 2019). This focus contributes to the understanding that policy influences culture, and therefore conversations about sex are directly affected by restrictive or permissive policy. It also suggests that schools' use of different types of policy reflects the kinds of conversations they are open to having with students: they can either proactively hold conversations about consent, assault, and positive sex practices, or passively acknowledge or even ignore the issue, leaving room for ignorance and ambiguity until they are required to respond.

Within the conversation about policy's relationship to culture, there are questions about how to use policy positively to create healthy sex cultures, rather than taking an inhibiting or neutral approach. This discussion is challenging in part because there is not a clear social understanding of "consent," making it difficult to reflect in policy (Novack 2017). For example, by not having a clear social understanding of consent *and* by not having a definition of consent reflective in university policy, ultimately students are forced to draw conclusions after an assault based on cultural norms alone – which may vary and perpetuate victim blaming perspectives. This gap demonstrates how policy and culture are reciprocally related, and how policy is both a cause and an effect of the culture that exists. In all, policy is reflective of existing cultures, and often reifies problematic community responses to sexual assault which shame victims and minimize their understanding of the trauma that has occurred.

### *Minimization and Invalidation*

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The systemic victim-blaming and minimization that often occurs after an assault leads to lower rates of reporting and inhibits the existence of safe spaces to discuss the issue (Arbeit 2017; Holland and Cortina 2017; Kennedy and Prock 2018). These responses by others are created by social stigmas around sex, and reflect skewed understandings of how to create safe spaces, which in turn affects willingness of victims to self-identify as victims (i.e. report). This response is especially intensified in marginalized communities, which are already stigmatized, such as sex workers and members of deviant sexual communities (Haviv 2016; Ralston 2012; Sprankle et al. 2018).

Shame and stigma contribute to invalidating and minimizing the trauma of an assault by those not directly involved in a violation. Society is quick to look for responses centered around the victim rather than the perpetrator, which ultimately encourages the pattern and reduces the perceived legitimacy of assault reports (Ashdown, Hackathorn, and Daniels 2019; Hlavka 2017; Hotlzman and Menning 2019; Spencer et al. 2017).

### *Sexual Health Resource Pursuit*

Stigma around sex can discourage people from pursuing appropriate resources to maintain sexual and reproductive health, and is applicable to both positive and negative outcomes from potential or passed sexual encounters. There is a discrepancy between sexual victimization and resource utilization, with one of the most common reasons cited as personal shame or fear of stigmatized responses by one's community (Kennedy and Prock 2018; Stoner and Cramer 2017).

Although very different in terms of individual impact, sexual assault and the acquisition of sexually transmitted infections are both highly stigmatized negative outcomes of potential or

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passed sexual encounters. For example, a 2010 study of Chlamydia testing rates found that women were not willing to go for testing because of the societal understanding (stigma) that if one has a sexually transmitted infection, they must be sexually promiscuous and their reputation will be ruined (Balfe et al. 2010). This situation is a parallel circumstance, as it also discusses willingness to report and pursue resources after a negative sexual interaction. The other end of this concept was also discussed, as some studies focused on how less stigmatized groups are *more* likely to report sexual assault, rather than just how more stigmatized groups are less likely to do so (Jordan, Combs, and Smith 2014).

Additionally, the level of stigma varies greatly depending on the prominence of different identities in one's social grouping. Other stigmas, such as crime history, can create barriers to reporting sexual assault (Hlavka 2017; Kubiak et al. 2018; Ralston 2012). These barriers are created in part because privileged groups are less informed and less interested in learning about assault (Worthen and Wallace 2017). These privileged groups are often the ones creating policies, thus encouraging the ignorance and stigma they bring in.

### *Religion*

Religion is an institution that dictates moral and ethical guidelines for all aspects of human life. Protestant Christianity is associated with conservative views about sex and sexuality due to biblical understandings of sexual morality, which are upheld as frameworks for right and wrong in Protestants' lives (Bryant et al. 2012). For many, college is an opportunity to explore who they want to be. People often choose religious schools because they reflect conservative ideas the students walk in believing, particularly regarding sexual relations (Williams, DeFazio, and Goins 2013). Christian affiliation has a direct influence on individuals' sexual pursuits, as

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many Christian students aspire to remain abstinent until marriage. Students pursue environments that reify their existing understanding of human sexuality, as reflected and enforced in policy (Hauser and Obeng 2015; Luquis, Brelsford, and Rojas-Guyler 2012).

Religious schools also have relatively low reports of assault when compared to secular schools (Vanderwoerd and Cheng 2017). In the study mentioned here, they suggested this was due to lower assault rates, reflecting the successful prevalence of moral guidelines on sexual behavior. However, this contrasts with previously discussed literature, which suggests the importance of stigma around reporting. The ideas are in contrast because the latter implies that the low reported assault rates could be due to a lack of reporting, rather than lower assault rates. Therefore, it is important to address the potential for religion's influence on the creation of policy that shames and creates stigma around consensual sex, thus inhibiting sex-positive culture.

### *Race*

Race is another community-creating sociological institution. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are a unique cultural space in United States education, which is historically white-dominated. Research has identified the influence of race on willingness to discuss sexual assault. Race has been demonstrated to affect disclosure of assault or other interpersonal violence on college campuses (Demers et al. 2018). There is, however, a gap in literature around this topic in majority-black environments. There is an established need to consider how cultural factors impact stigma, policy, and understood deviant behaviors. Therefore, consideration of race in community and norm development could impact explorations of college campuses and the spaces they create for different sex cultures. It differs from religion in that it does not as obviously create an inherent moral code, but also affects community and culture development.



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### *Conclusion*

Policy is a tool for demonstrating behaviors that are and are not acceptable. The tone of policy in turn can create or inhibit trust when something goes wrong. Moore and Baker (2016) examined reasons that students did or did not pursue reporting perpetrators of assault, and they found that students often did not report to schools because of a lack of trust. Policies that create fear and confusion around sex and available resources, or minimize and invalidate a victim's experiences, can impact a victim's ability to trust the structures around them. Policy therefore directly affects the culture of a college campus, where policy uniquely exists as pervasive lifestyle regulation.

There is research about policy as a cause and as an effect of cultural stigmas regarding sexual assault. There is also literature that addresses how shame is created by communities, how it is internalized, and how each of these affect victims' willingness to report. There is, however, very little research about how policy can be used as a tool to encourage or inhibit positive sex practices, and how the choice to do one or the other affects the culture of reporting on college campuses. The present study exists in that space, and offers insights into the issue presented here.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### *General Method*

To analyze the effect of different levels of policy-based inhibition of informed, consensual sex cultures on willingness to report sexual assault, I used a pre-existing data set concerning sexual assault and other relevant data from higher-level academic institutions across the United States of America. I worked with existing data sets, government and non-governmental, and then did a content analysis of university websites and policies to better

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understand each school's sex culture. I created a scale to reflect level of inhibition of sex-positive culture, and used SPSS to analyze scores on that scale in relation to the number of reported assaults per 10,000 students.

### *Data Source*

The data set has a total universe population of 1,304 institutions and the unit of analysis is at academic institutions. This dataset (collected with data 2014-present) provides a unique opportunity to look at the universe of higher-level academic institutions through the exploration of a number of variables concerning American colleges and universities. These variables include descriptive statistics and modifiers, assault data, and data on policies, including specific data on policies around sexual assault. It is one of the only data sets available that addresses the niche at the intersection of academic institutions' policies and campus sexual assault rates, and is therefore appropriate to study potential cultural contributors created and reified through policy to sexual assault rates on college campuses.

### *Data Collection*

The data in the set was acquired through a multi-step process with a total of five researchers. Descriptive statistics including (but not limited to) student population and public or private status was collected from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, which was narrowed down to schools that were in the United States; Public, four-year or above; Private, four-year or above; degree-granting, primarily baccalaureate or above; and without only programming offered completely via distance education. Data on sexual assaults was collected from the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act

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(Clery Act). The Clery Act data includes 11,307 higher-education institutions' annual crime reports. All schools represented participate in federal financial aid programs.

### *Population and Sample*

From the larger universe, members of the research team narrowed our sample to private Bachelor's degree-granting schools with an undergraduate population between 500 and 5,000 students using a stratified random sampling method. Using the IPEDS variable on religious affiliation from 2016, a random sample of schools with Protestant or no religious affiliation were extracted: 60 secular schools and 60 Protestant schools in total.

Members of the research team also explored schools' mission statements to ensure the sample was also limited to schools with a liberal arts curriculum. The two researchers on the team involved in this part of the process also checked the mission statements of the schools for "faith-based" language. Language that strongly related to the Church and/or Christ, the bible, gospel and/or faith were coded as "faith-based". Using this information, the Protestant schools selected were both categorized in IPEDS data as Protestant and had a "faith-based" mission. Schools that met only one of these criteria were removed from the sample and replaced with another randomly selected Protestant school, whose mission met the screening criteria. This process created a sample that had only schools which identified Protestant in IPEDS' terms *and* had faith-based language in their mission, and a matching sample of non-religiously affiliated schools.

Additionally, we had to replace some schools using the process described above if the school's handbook was not available online. We added the new schools in a one to one ratio (one school added for every school cut). We also replaced them within affiliation type, so if a

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Protestant school's handbook was unavailable, we replaced it in the sample with another Protestant school. This method ensured we could keep the ratio of Protestant to secular schools the same despite the replacements.

We also intentionally added all Protestant and secular Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to ensure that HBCUs would represent at least 20 percent of the sample. There were, however, fewer secular HBCUs than Protestant HBCUs that were small, private, liberal arts schools, so the sample had more Protestant schools than secular ones. The final ratio was 72 Protestant-affiliated schools to 56 secular schools. The final sample of 128 schools was therefore 44 percent Secular and 56 percent Protestant institutions.

### *Measures*

*Operationalization of inhibiting policies.* Once the sample was gathered, we did a content analysis of pertinent student handbooks for each school, to gather data about policies concerning sexual behavior. We looked for an assortment of key policies around sexual behavior including (but not limited to) policies around premarital sex, living with romantic partners, homosexuality, and definitions of consent (see Table 1). The variables were developed based on a small inductive exploratory study of 10 student handbooks (5 Protestant and 5 secular) concerning uses of the word "sex" in policy. This small sample's content analysis found a total of over 150 different policies concerning sexual behavior. This pilot study provided the background with which to develop variables that represented the different aspects of sex culture efficiently, using deductive methods of content analysis (looking for the presence of specific things rather than exploring the language used inductively), this pilot study provided an understanding of how to

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operationalize ideas about different potential inhibitors to a culture that supports informed, consensual sex.

### **\*\*TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE\*\***

*Inhibition scale.* The independent variable is a scale variable that measures the level of inhibition to a culture that supports informed, consensual sex on college campuses (also referred to as a sex-positive culture). The scale is created by assigning codes to a select number of the policies identified in the process described previously which scale from -1 (Actively support such an environment) to 2 (Actively prohibit such an environment), with room in between for schools that do not mention the topic in question (0) or discourage but do not prohibit pertinent behaviors (1). Dichotomous variables are coded as either a 0 or a 2, so they can be on the same scale despite not having as many options. This scale allows for operationalization of the policy variable which accounts for how the presence of some policies (such as prohibiting sex before marriage) can be inhibitors, but how the presence of others (such as clearly defining and discussing consent) can encourage a positive environment. This process was necessary to most accurately use the variables, as not all of them were positive nor were all of them inhibitors. In this way, we created a scale of net inhibition level by accounting for things that could act as the opposite of inhibitors, rather than just counting the number of restrictive policies. A full list of the variables that will make up the scale, their labels and values, and (re)codes, can be found below in Table 1.

*Assaults reported.* The dependent variable is the reported assault rate on the campus. This variable addresses the sum total of reported assaults (including rape, fondling, statutory rape, and incest) per 10,000 students, averaged between three years (2014, 2015, and 2016). This variable

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was used because it presented all kinds of assault together, as opposed to just one kind, such as rape. Therefore, it is the most accurate representation of all reported assaults available in this data set. It is also ideal because it presents the number in relation to a standard figure (per 10,000 students), which makes comparison between schools more accurate.

*Controls.* Finally, the study controls for religious affiliation of the university, and for whether or not the school is a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). For this variable, HBCU's were coded as "1" and non-HBCU's were coded as "0." The literature suggests religion could contribute to cultural understandings about sexual and reproductive health and behaviors due to its influence on individuals' internalized morals and stigmas. The variable is divided as mentioned earlier into the categories of "Protestant Christian" (1) and "None" (0). This choice acknowledges the relationship between religion and the potential for higher levels of inhibition of informed, consensual sex cultures that is suggested by the literature.

We also controlled for the schools' status as an HBCU or not. HBCU's have unique cultures and environments for students, and so we wanted to address the influence this could have on the impact of sex-positive culture inhibition on assault reporting. We used the dichotomous variable "HBCU" to control for whether or not a school was an HBCU, and we were thus able to isolate the group. HBCU's made up around 19 percent of the sample.

## FINDINGS

### *Univariate Findings*

Table 2 reports the means, medians, and standard deviations for each variable. Figures 1-4 present frequency distributions for each variable. For the independent variable (level of policy-based inhibition), the mean signifies the average level of inhibition. For the dependent

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variable (assaults per 10,000 students), it signifies the average number of assaults. For the two control variables (religion and HBCU), it signifies what percentage of respondents had the positive response (Protestant and HBCU). The relationship between the mean and the median (or midpoint) of each data set suggests the direction of a skew, if any, for each variable. The standard deviation also contributes to assessments of skew, and of the normality of each distribution.

### **\*\*TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE\*\***

As Table 2 demonstrates, the mean for the level of policy-based inhibition variable (six) is greater than the median of four. There is a standard deviation of five, which is nearly as high as the mean. This difference suggests a right skew, which means the majority of data are to the left of the mean. In context, this skew means that the majority of schools have a level of inhibition lower than five, which is low-medium inhibited (considering the scale is from negative one to sixteen). Figure 1 demonstrates that the schools' levels of inhibition of sex-positive cultures fill the full range, from negative one to sixteen. It is clear that the majority of schools are on the lower end, with a modal response of an inhibition level of three.

### **\*\*FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE\*\***

Table 2 also demonstrates the mean, median, and standard deviation for the number of assaults recorded per 10,000 students. The mean (17.81) is over twice the size of the median (6.09), which again suggests a right-skew. The high mean is influenced by outliers, as there was one school with over 220 reported assaults, as shown in Figure 2. The standard deviation (28.713) is around one and a half the size of the mean and over four times the size of the median. These drastic differences support that the majority of data is on the lower end of the range. This

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is further supported by Figure 2, which shows that around 70 percent of schools had fewer than twenty assaults recorded per 10,000 students.

**\*\*FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE\*\***

The control variables' numbers signify slightly different things, as they are dichotomous variables. Figure 3 shows that 56 percent of schools in the sample have Protestant affiliations, which is reflected in Table 2 by the fact that the mean for the variable is 0.56. The median of one demonstrates that the middlemost value was a Protestant school. The standard deviation of 0.498 makes sense because it means that the data is all between zero and one, which were the only options. Figure 4 shows that just under 20 percent of the sample are HBCU's, which is shown in Table 2 by a mean of 0.19 for the variable. The median variable for HBCU was zero, which means that the middlemost value was not an HBCU. Once again, the standard deviation of 0.392 shows that all data are between zero and one.

**\*\*FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE\*\***

**\*\*FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE\*\***

### *Bivariate Findings*

Table 3 presents the findings from a bivariate analysis for each permutation of two variables. There is no multicollinearity issue, as there are no values higher than .7 in the results. There is a statistically significant relationship between level of policy-based inhibition and reported assaults per 10,000 students, when  $p$  is less than .01. At  $-0.361$ , the relationship is negative and moderately strong. This correlation means that schools with higher levels of policy-based inhibition of sex-positive cultures are likely to have fewer reported assaults per 10,000 students than schools with lower levels of inhibition.



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### \*\*TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE\*\*

There is a statistically significant relationship between a school having a Protestant affiliation and the number of reported assaults per 10,000 students, when  $p$  is less than .01. At  $r = -.448$ , the relationship is negative and moderately strong. This correlation signifies that schools with Protestant affiliations are likely to have fewer reported assaults per 10,000 students than secular schools.

The relationship between being a Historically Black College or University and the number of reported assaults per 10,000 students is statistically significant when  $p$  is less than .05. The relationship is negative and weak, with a value of  $r = -.191$ . This result means that HBCU's are marginally more likely to have more reported assaults per 10,000 students than non-HBCU's.

A school's religious affiliation has a statistically significant relationship with the level of policy-based inhibition of sex-positive cultures when  $p$  is less than .01. The relationship is positive and moderately strong, at  $r = .643$ . This relationship means that schools with Protestant affiliations are likely to have higher levels of policy-based inhibition of sex-positive cultures than secular schools. There is no statistically significant relationship between status as a Historically Black College or University and the level of policy-based inhibition of sex-positive cultures.

There is a statistically significant relationship between status as a Historically Black College or University and religious affiliation. The relationship is positive moderately weak, at  $r = .222$ , and suggests that HBCU's are more likely to have a Protestant affiliation than non-HBCU's, but could simply be attributed to the skewed nature of the sample.

### *Multivariate Findings*

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Table 4 displays the results of a multivariate regression analysis of the dependent variable, reported assaults per 10,000 students, and the three other variables: level of policy-based inhibition of sex-positive cultures, religious affiliation, and status as a historically black college or university (or not). The  $R^2$  value is .219, which represents that approximately 22 percent of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by the variables in this model. The equation is statistically significant, which can be seen in the statistically significant  $F$  value of 11.622. The regression equation has a constant of 34.387, which signifies that when all other variables are “0,” a school will start with around 34 sexual assaults reported per 10,000 students.

**\*\*TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE\*\***

Table 4 shows that the coefficient of only one variable is significant: Protestant affiliation. This variable has an unstandardized coefficient ( $b$ ) of -19.85, which means that on average, Protestant schools (coded as “1”) have almost 20 fewer sexual assaults reported per 10,000 students than secular schools. The standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of the Protestant variable was -.344, which has little to no significance because the other standardized coefficients were not significant and thus cannot be compared. In the regression equation, level of policy-based inhibition of sex-positive culture and status as an HBCU had no statistically significant effect on the number of reported sexual assaults per 10,000 students.

The regression fails to support the hypothesis that higher levels of policy-based inhibition of sex-positive culture will lead to lower numbers of sexual assault reported per 10,000 students because level of policy-based sex-positive culture inhibition did not have a statistically significant effect on the number of reported assaults per 10,000 students. These results are inconsistent with the bivariate analysis, in which all three variables (level of inhibition, religious

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affiliation, and HBCU status) had statistically significant effects on the number of reported assaults per 10,000 students (see Table 3). Instead, regression uncovered the spurious relationship between policy-based inhibition of sex-positive cultures and the number of sexual assaults reported per 10,000 students. Each of these variables is influenced by Protestant affiliation, which allows for a consideration of cultural factors in their own right when questioning reason for sexual assault report fluctuation.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis represent a conundrum. They do not reflect findings in literature that articulate how stigma about a behavior (in this case consensual sex) decreases willingness to pursue resources when something goes wrong, whether it be the contraction of a sexually transmitted infection (Balfe et al. 2010) or an instance of assault (Kennedy et al. 2018; Sprankle et al. 2018; Stoner et al. 2017). The present analysis also does not reflect findings about how fear-inducing policies around sex inhibit discussions about sex, whether in specific reference to consensual sex or to assault (Holland et al. 2017). The results could be taken at face value, which would suggest Protestant-affiliated schools have less assault in general. The theoretical frameworks of stigma and deviance as influencers on assault reporting, however, can be used to interpret that the statistical significance of Protestant affiliation signifies that it is a determining factor for probable reported assault rates by influencing reporting culture, rather than the number of assaults.

Religion is an institution that creates laws of life, which includes creating and articulating stigmas, as Bryant and Forsyth (2012) describe. Since Protestant affiliation had a statistically significant impact on the number of sexual assaults reported per 10,000 students, the relationship

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between religion as a structure (Bryant et al. 2012) and the stigma described by Goffman (1963) becomes more influential than the relationship between policy and stigma. However, because religion has been demonstrated to create stigma around sex (Williams et al. 2013), the study suggests that religion impacts both policy and culture, rather than working under the assumption that religion, policy, and culture can be disentangled from one another. The findings also imply a need to reconsider the three variables' timeline: whether religion, policy, and culture develop simultaneously or have a time-ordered relationship with policy at the end. The study thus uses Goffman's connections between stigma and behavior (1963) to apply the theories of Bryant et al. (2012) about relating religion and behavior through policy, rather than working on each individually.

This study's hypothesis was disconfirmed, but the theoretical frames can still apply when religion is factored in as a link in the chain connecting culture, stigma, policy, and assault reporting. Although the original hypothesis is null, policy is still as a piece in the puzzle, though possibly more as a representation of cultures otherwise caused, rather than a causal variable in its own right. Therefore, it can be considered reflective of culture rather than an enactor of culture and stigma. This is a powerful contrast to the initial theoretical hypothesis which posed that policy would have a unique influence on behavior when compared with the effects of both culture and stigma.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigates how the level of policy-based inhibition of informed, consensual sex cultures affects reported sexual assault rates per 10,000 students on college campuses analyzing data from IPEDS, the Clery Act, and a content analysis of student handbooks from 128

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colleges and universities across the nation. The data and analyses disconfirm the hypothesis that the higher a college or university's score on the scale of level of policy-based inhibition of informed, consensual sex cultures, the lower its reported assault rates per 10,000 students. In the bivariate analysis, correlation with the independent variable (level of inhibition) was statistically significant, as were status as an HBCU and Protestant affiliation. The level of inhibition and HBCU variables lost their significance in the multivariate regression analysis, when controlling for religion. Protestant affiliation's statistical significance remained throughout both analyses.

The theory of social stigma suggest that norms and stigma are entangled with one another, and therefore together define what can be considered "deviant." Theories of social deviance suggest that humans tend to avoid deviance when possible, and follow norms created by social institutions to avoid the stigmas that norm-breakers experience. In theory, it follows that policy is an impactful operationalization of stigma because it explicitly identifies deviant behaviors. The regression analysis does not support that policy is an integral part of the process of creating stigma and therefore reporting. However, it still supports that shame and stigma are cornerstones of culture, which inherently impact behavior. The statistically significant nature of religion on reported assault rates per 10,000 students presents the influence of culture, and identifies its statistical significance in the study and beyond. This result matters because it leads to questions about where stigma comes from, and the questionable reciprocity of culture, stigma, and policy.

### *Limitations and Weaknesses*

The present study made steps toward understanding about the relationship between consensual sex cultures and assault reporting cultures, or at least gave tools to understand how to

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ask informed questions about the topic. However, it did also have limitations and weaknesses. The study's sample size was small, with just 128 schools of over 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States. There was not room to explore other intricacies of college environments, such as size or the presence of other intentional communities on campus (division I sports, Greek life, et cetera). In future research, this could provide a more holistic understanding of college campus culture.

Additionally, distinguishing only between Protestant and secular was a limitation. By only looking at these two categories, the study is unable to draw conclusions about religion in general. This limitation does not weaken the study, but it does restrict its scope significantly. Similarly, the Historically Black College or University (HBCU) variable does not provide the scope necessary to thoroughly examine the effects of different racial communities' norms on sexual assault reports or reporting. It provides a nod to the presence of communities that intentionally consider race in their construction, but does not allow for an in-depth understanding of what this community construction means for sex cultures.

This study was weakened by a lack of understanding of reporting culture. The analysis used reports of sexual assault on college campuses, but this is not the same as the number of reports, and there is no way to know how many assaults occurred that were not reported. Therefore, the study is limited because it cannot draw conclusions about potential rationales for lower reported assault numbers: namely, whether it should be attributed to the number of assaults occurring or the culture around reporting assault. In a related vein, the study looked at the construction of sex-positive cultures on college campuses. While the variables used provided tools for understanding one part of sex cultures (consensual sexual behaviors), a lack of

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understanding about reporting culture remains. This means that the study had no way of addressing, for example, the effect of the number of steps someone has to work through in the reporting process. A more holistic understanding of sex cultures, which would include exploring the reporting process and potential cultural implications of this process, could provide tools to consider reporting culture in its own right more effectively.

### *Implications*

There is room to continue expanding understanding of sex cultures and assault reporting on college campuses. This study clearly identifies the relationship between Protestant affiliation and the number of reported assaults per 10,000 students on college campuses. It does not, however, discuss how different religious cultures treat sex differently. This gap could be filled through an examination of how different religions, within Christianity (Protestant versus Roman Catholic), between religions (comparisons of schools with Christian, Islamic, Jewish, etc., affiliations), or between religious and secular affiliations in general, affect assault reports. This would provide insights about how religion affects assault reporting cultures in general, rather than just in one religious context, as well as provide a more in-depth understanding of different religious understandings of sexual behaviors.

Additionally, in relation to the study's weaknesses, the operationalization of assault reporting culture is lacking. This study looked at numbers of assaults, but there is room to understand how assault reporting cultures are created, and how the number of assaults and reporting culture relate to one another. This means there are two ways to interpret the results, as mentioned previously: that Protestant schools have fewer assaults, or that they are environments which oppress reporting. The latter is supported by theories of social stigma and deviance, which

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is why it is more prevalent in the conclusions drawn here, but there is a need to research truths between the two options.

Finally, this study has implications concerning policy. The study explores the relationship between stigma and behavior, particularly in relationship to what deviance can look like when someone's health and safety is in question from a stigmatized behavior. However, analysis found that the relationship was between religious affiliation and reported sexual assaults, rather than between policy-based inhibition of sex-positive culture and reported sexual assaults. This implies that in some instances, such as college campuses, cultural factors such as religion have spurious impact on policy, and policy is reflective of culture rather than a cause of culture. This takes away from the previously understood power of policy in creating stigma, as it is more of a vessel for culture than a driving force. In practice and in reference to the topic at hand, the study therefore suggests that in order to create safe sexual spaces, where assault rates are down and assault reporting rates are high, there is a need to use policy as a tool to understand the cultural factors at play. The next step would then be to build communities that challenge those factors, rather than assuming that changing policy will change culture and behavior. This method changes understandings about how to enact social change, and provides room to consider the role of policy in creating systemic change toward sex-positive cultures.



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**Table 1. Variable Descriptions for determining sample size, independent, dependent, and control variables. N=128**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Values</b>	<b>Recode</b>
Total population	Total undergraduate student population	[population of institution]	0 = < 5000 1 = 5000+
Private vs Public	Is the school private or public?	0 = private 1 = public	NONE
Curriculum style (dichotomous)	Does the school have a liberal arts curriculum or not?	1 = Liberal Arts, 0=Not Liberal Arts	NONE
Sex before marriage	Does the school permit consensual sex before marriage?	Prohibit, Discourage, Not Mentioned, Mentioned Positively	-1 = Mentioned Pos 0 = Not mentioned 1 = Discourage 2 = Prohibit
Consequence for sex before marriage	Does the school impose disciplinary consequence for having consensual sex before marriage?	Yes/No	0 = No 2 = Yes
Religious moral rationales for policies about sex	Does the school refer to moral definitions around sexual behavior (role in choice to engage) in a religious context?	Yes/No	0 = No 2 = Yes
Secular moral rationales for policies about sex	Does the school refer to moral definitions around sexual behavior (role in choice to engage) in a nonreligious context?	Yes/No	0 = No 2 = Yes

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Living with a romantic partner before marriage	Does the school permit living with a romantic partner before marriage?	Prohibit, Discourage, Not Mentioned, Mentioned Positively	-1 = Mentioned Pos 0 = Not mentioned 1 = Discourage 2 = Prohibit
Consensually shared nude image content	Is the sharing of consensual sexual images (i.e. nude pictures) prohibited?	Prohibit, Discourage, Not Mentioned, Mentioned Positively	-1 = Mentioned Pos 0 = Not mentioned 1 = Discourage 2 = Prohibit
Consensual sex as "misconduct"	Does the phrase "Sexual Misconduct" include consensual sex?	Yes/No	0 = No 2 = Yes
Handbook defining consent	Does the college's student handbook provide a definition of consent?	Yes/No	0 = Yes 2 = No
Title IX defining consent	Does the college's Title IX policy provide a definition of consent?	Yes/No	0 = Yes 2 = No
School's religious affiliation	Religious affiliation, simply divided between Christian sects and other	Protestant, Catholic, None/Other	1 = Protestant 0 = None
Historically Black College or University	Is the school an HBCU?	Yes = 1 No = 0	NONE

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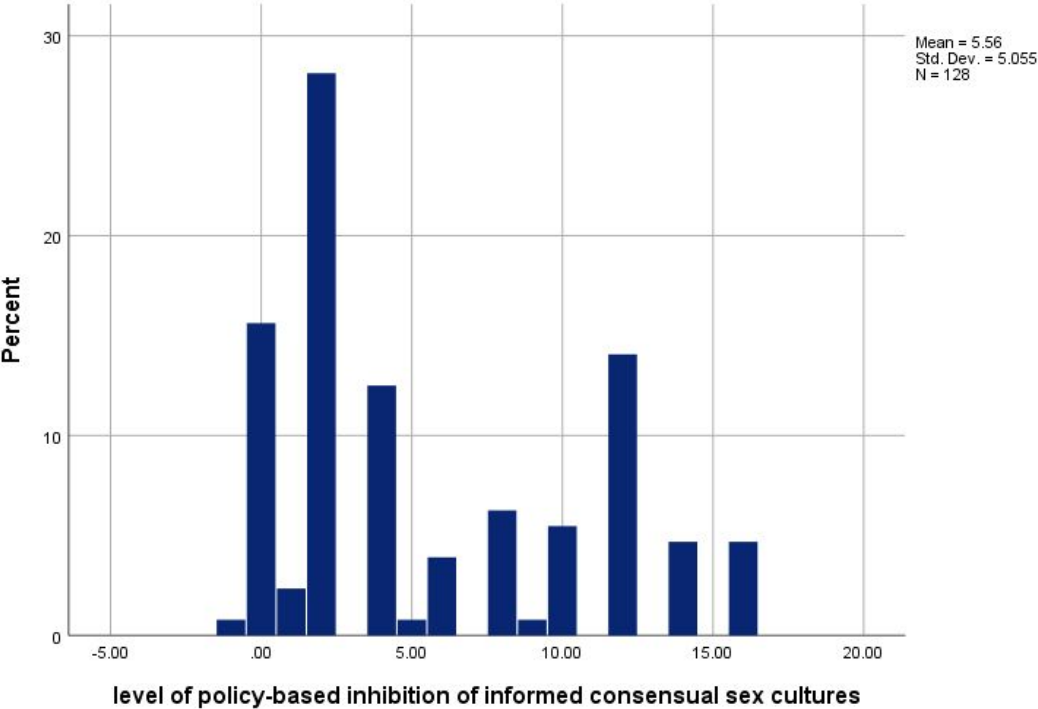
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**Table 2. Means, Medians, and Standard Deviations for All Variables (N=128)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Level of policy-based inhibition	5.560	4.000	5.055
Assaults per 10,000 students	17.810	6.090	28.713
Protestant	0.560	1.000	0.498
HBCU	0.190	0.000	0.392



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**Figure 1. Histogram of Level of Policy-Based Inhibition of Informed Consensual Sex Cultures**

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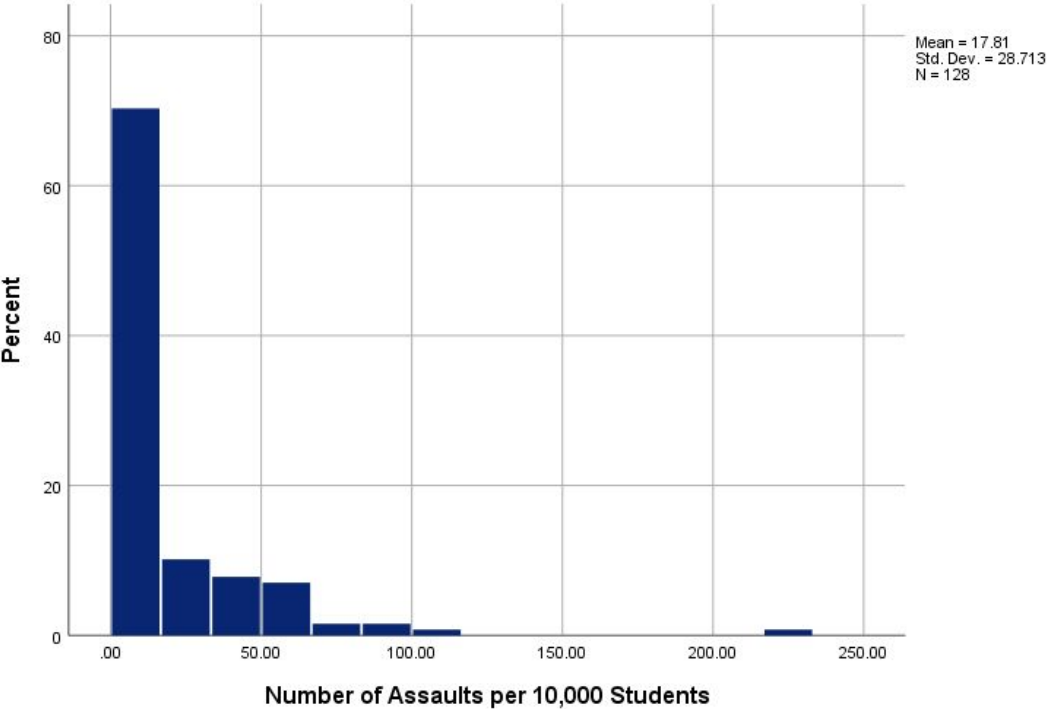


Figure 2. Histogram of Assaults per 10,000 Students

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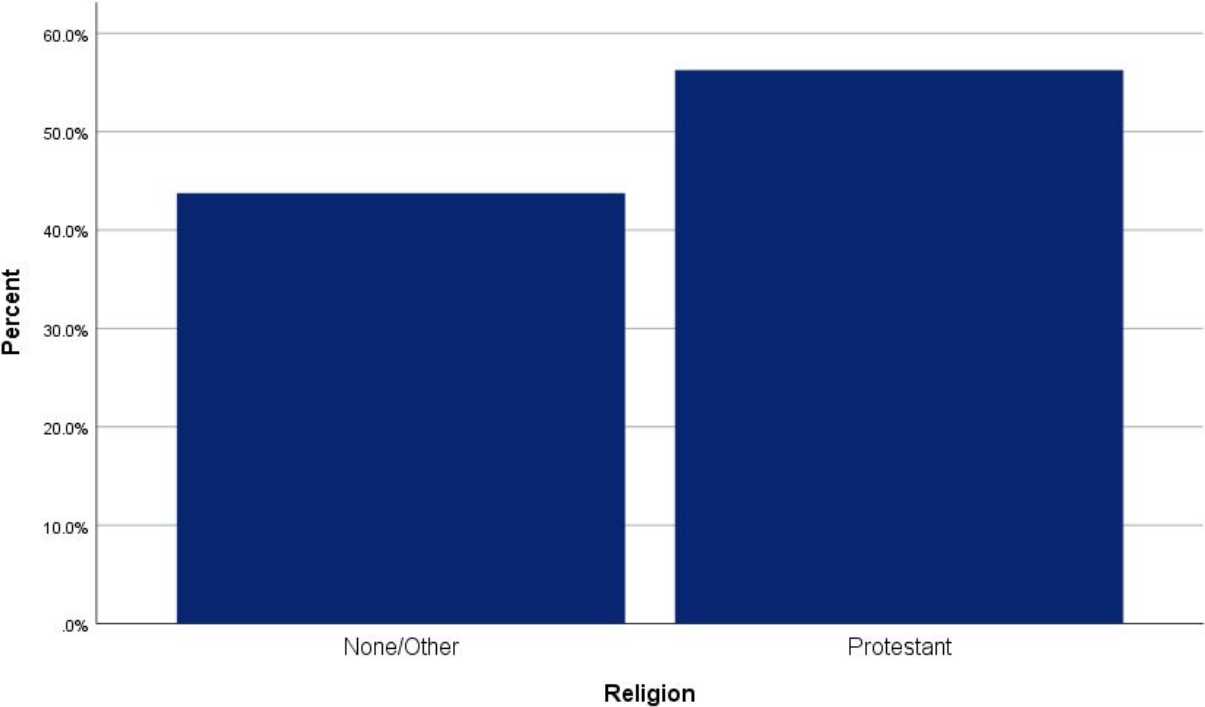


Figure 3. Bar Graph of Religion

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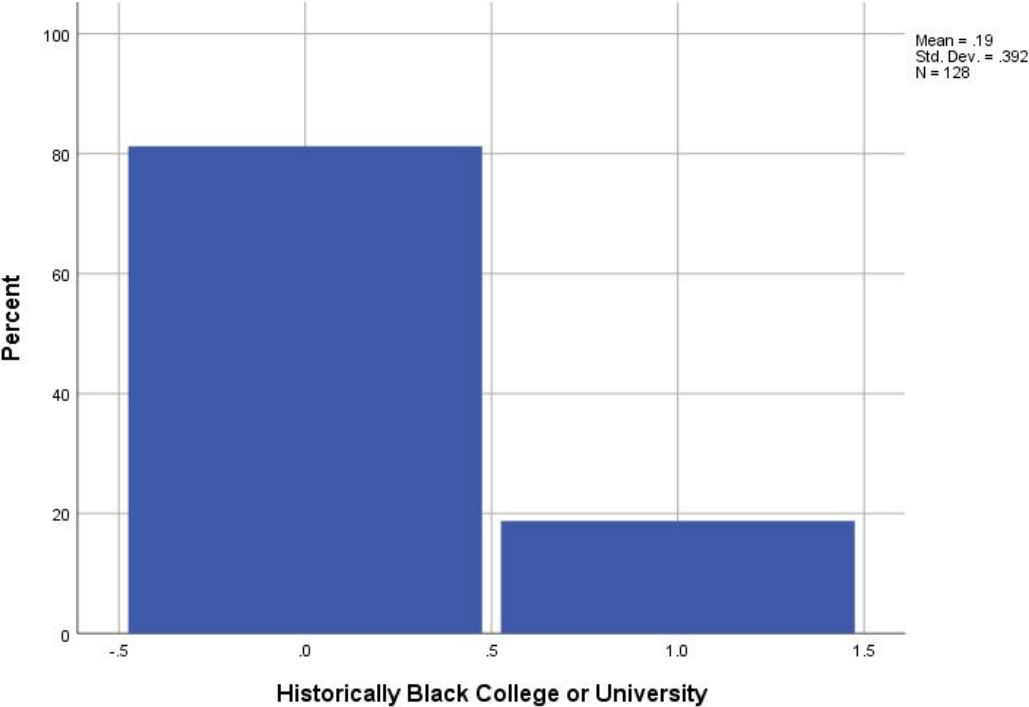


Figure 4. Bar Graph of Historically Black College or University

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**Table 3. Correlations (*r*) Among Reported Assaults per 10,000 Students and Three Independent Variables (listwise deletion, *N*=128)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Level of Policy-based Inhibition</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>HBCU</b>
<b>Assaults per 10,000 Students</b>	-.361**	-.448**	-.191*
<b>Level of Policy-Based Inhibition</b>		.643**	.113
<b>Protestant</b>			.222*

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .01

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**Table 4. Regression of Reported Assaults per 10,000 Students with All Variables**

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<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>b</i></b>	<b><i>β</i></b>
<b>Level of Policy-Based Inhibition</b>	- .729	-.128
<b>Protestant</b>	-19.850	-.344*
<b>HBCU</b>	-7.300	-.100
<b>Constant</b>	34.387	

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$R^2 = .219$ ;  $F(3,124) = 11.622$ ;  $p < .05$

\* $p < .05$