Tragedies on college and university campuses create headlines questioning the security of these institutions. However, many data contradict the perceptions these splashy sound bites engender.
A review of the most recent five-year trend data for 2006-2010, compiled by the U.S. Department of Education and collected in accordance with the Clery Act, reveal no significant changes in the violent crime rates reported by the nation’s universities and colleges.

We analyzed these data by converting them to a rate of reported crimes per 1,000 students, and separated the institutions by level (two-year vs. four-year), as well as location (urban, suburban, and small town/rural). Our analysis revealed no statistically significant change in the rate of violent crime reported from 2006 through 2010. (Data for 2011 are not yet available.)

For the purpose of the analysis, violent crimes were defined as murder, negligent and non-negligent manslaughter, robbery, aggravated assault, and forcible and non-forcible sex offenses. We aggregated the data for these six offenses to develop a rate of violent crime per 1,000 enrolled students based on the calculated mean for all institutions with five years of data (n=6176).

The data subsets based on level of institution and location likewise reveal no significant change in the rate of violent crime per 1,000 enrolled students.

Violent crimes—Four-Year Institutions

![Chart: Violent crimes—Four-Year Institutions](source)

Violent crimes—Two-Year Institutions

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Why the Misperception?

Many of us form opinions on a wide range of issues based on what we learn from the popular media. A reporter recently reminded us that “if it bleeds, it leads.” Clearly, the typical higher education consumer doesn’t have access to the level of detail revealed in the analysis cited here.

Thus, when violent crimes occur on campuses or in schools, the headlines tend to scream. (As a recent example, note the media coverage of the

Q: Would you say your campus is more or less likely to experience a violent act today compared with five years ago?
Chardon, Ohio school shooting, or the December murder of Virginia Tech Police Officer Derek Crouse.) We must also acknowledge the impact that cognitive biases have on issues of risk. For instance, many individuals underestimate common risks such as driving or cardiac disease, while they overestimate the risk of less common but more frightening possibilities such as a plane crash or cancer. Given this, we believe the general public overestimates the likelihood of violent campus crime.

Key findings from the Margolis Healy 2011 Campus Safety and Security Survey indicate that college and university administrators may share the public’s misperception about the likelihood of certain types of violent campus crime. Nearly one-third of respondents reported believing that their campus was somewhat more likely to experience a violent act today than five years ago. More striking is that while the majority reported a strong or extremely high concern of a single-victim violent crime occurring (the most likely violent crime on campuses since passage of the Clery Act in 1990), nearly two-thirds of respondents reported a strong or extremely high concern of a multiple-victim crime occurring.

Although there are no data to support the evolving myth that the nation’s campuses are unsafe, that reality gets lost in the headlines.

What can colleges do to address this challenge? First and foremost, institutions can take proactive measures to prevent, prepare for, and mitigate violence on their campuses. Initiatives such as emergency planning, threat assessment teams, strict and disciplined application of prohibitions on gender and sexual violence, and a well-resourced campus public safety department are critical for campus safety and security in the 21st century. Second, colleges and universities must better control their safety and security messages. They should also publicize their efforts in these areas. Finally, when safety and security systems and processes fail, institutional leadership must take responsibility for these failures, acknowledge the inherent challenges and realities of campus safety, and reaffirm the institution’s commitment to the safety and security of its community.

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