



**The Invisible Among Us:
Exploring Criminal Victimization Experiences and Perceptions of College
Students With Physical Disabilities**

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Abstract

Seventy-six physically-challenged college students responded to a survey through the Office of Disability Services at a medium-sized university in the south. In this exploratory study, they were asked to indicate their general worries while attending classes. The goal of this project was to identify if, and to what extent, they worry about becoming the victim of a crime, and where worries about crime ranks among their other worries. Results provide counter intuitive findings with respect to perceptions of risk and vulnerability to crime based upon physical disability and articulate the need for better coordination of overall services for this group.

Introduction

New laws have resulted in improved educational opportunities, and many colleges and universities have removed architectural barriers to students with physical disabilities (see Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act* of 1973, and the *Americans With Disabilities Act* of 1990). Student affairs and student service professionals' challenge of meeting the needs and concerns of students who are physically differentially-abled, including the deaf, blind, and/or in wheelchairs have increased the numbers of individuals with disabilities who are able to attend colleges and universities. Given these physical enhancements, academic successes continue to be thwarted by their worries or concerns while studying in college (Elliot and Witty, 1992).

The primary focus of this paper is to assess their general worries and, in particular, to detect the extent to which, they worry about becoming the victim of a personal and/or property

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crime. Other foci concern the nature and range of past victimization experiences, strategies used to insulate themselves from criminal victimization, and suggestions for continued attention and improved quality of life while studying in college.

Background

All students, able-bodied or not, have worries while studying in college. For the disabled, these worries are intensified and, at times, different. The literature suggests that these worries range from getting to class on time, embarrassment from an inability to complete simple tasks, such as reaching for a library book to an inability to hear a fire alarm (Goodrick *et al.*, 1990; Fairbanks, 1992; Williams, 1995). Other concerns from the physically-disabled while studying in school are worrying about time limitations placed on taking tests, whether they will be allowed to tape class sessions, feelings that the professor will expect less from them due to their physical limitations, worries about socially interacting with able-bodied students because of negative perceptions of them, not graduating and/or worrying about their future employability (Reeser, 1992; Kelly *et al.*, 1994; Hart and Williams, 1995; Powers and Sowers, 1995; Huepner and Thomas, 1996). Many students deal with these concerns by “passing” (e.g., Cox and Klas, 1996), that is, they may pretend that they are ‘abled’ and thus reject or fail to solicit opportunities for assistance. Similarly, others cope by using humor to put them and/or others down (Bailey, 1990). In contrast, the more positive ways utilized to cope with worries include use of study and/or support groups.

Based upon an extensive review of the literature, worry about victimization ranks high among the physically disabled (Coston, 1998). Several other studies suggest that researchers who are studying fear, worries, and/or concerns should focus on examining the salience of this emotion in relation to other worries, fears, and/or concerns of other people (Coston and Finckenhauer, 1993; Coston, 1994; Coston, 1995; Coston, 1998). These suggestions drive the foci of this research.

Sample and Procedure

This medium-sized university in the South with an enrollment of 18,000 students is located in a Metropolitan area of more than 1.5 million people. The university offers baccalaureate and masters degree programs and provides on-campus housing for approximately 4,000 students.

Of the 350 differentially-abled students who utilized the services of the Office of Disability Services during the fall semester of 1997, 135 were either blind, hard of hearing, deaf, or wheelchair bound. Of the 135, 76 agreed to answer a twenty minute, 41-item questionnaire. The survey instrument was read to them in person by trained interviewers. Questions solicited personal information such as age, race, sex, marital status, type of disability, major, employment history and place of residence. Students were also asked if they had ever been the victim of a property or personal crime. If so, they were asked about the nature and frequency of these events. They were also asked about their self-perceptions of vulnerability to victimization risk and whether they use any self-protections strategies, including the type. These students were asked to identify their top five worries or concerns.

After these worries were listed, they were asked to prioritize their worries with one as the greatest and five as the least worry. Students were asked to rank-order their responses to questions about their experiences with disability services and their academic experience. Last, they were asked if they had any suggestions for the academic community that could improve upon the quality of their lives while attending college.

Results

Characteristics of the Sample

Thirty percent of the 76 respondents were wheelchair bound. Twenty percent of the sample reported having a visual impairment, and 50% reported problems resulting in deafness or difficulty in hearing. Fifty percent of the sample reported having been diagnosed while growing up; others reported being diagnosed at birth (29%), and the others reported a diagnosis of disability within the past 10 years (21%).

The median age of students in this sample was 22 years. The ages ranged from 18 to 48 years. Eighty percent of the respondents in the sample were single. Fourteen percent indicated that they were married and 6 percent were legally separated or divorced. Most of the respondents (43%) reported owning a home, 35% reported living in university housing, 16% reported living at home with their parents, and 6% reported living in an apartment. Over half of the respondents reported working (55%). Forty-five percent reported not working. Ninety-two percent of the students who responded were undergraduates and 8% were graduate students. Seventy-four percent of the respondents were majoring in the arts and sciences, and nearly 27% were majoring in the natural sciences' areas. Over half (51%) of the students who responded reported that for some jobs they sometimes think that their disability will affect their career goals; however 35% of the sample indicated that they felt that their disabilities would not interfere with their career goals. Additionally, only 15% reported that their disability would negatively impact career objectives.

Treatment by Disability Services, Faculty, Staff, and Students Without Disabilities

Most students rated the quality of physical accessibility on the university campus as good to excellent, 41% and 43%, respectively. However, those students who were wheelchair bound were more inclined to rate the quality of physical accessibility as fair to poor, 15% and 5%, respectively.

Most of the students in this sample rated the Office of Disability Services as excellent (65%). Twenty-five percent of the respondents reported that the Office of Disability Services was good, while four percent rated the Office of Disability Services as fair. Six percent had no comment.

Over three-quarters (78%) of the students (or respondents) reported that the faculty do not mistreat them while they are enrolled in their classes. A few students reported that mistreatment by faculty while enrolled in their classes occurs often (10%), sometimes (8%), and rarely (4%). Eighty-five percent of the students reported that the support staff did not mistreat them. However, the remaining 14% reported that mistreatment does occur sometimes.

Crime-related Data

Differentially-abled students were asked about feelings of safety while on campus, their biggest worries while studying on campus, the nature and frequency of past victimization experiences and how much they worry about becoming the victim of a crime. Over half of the students reported always feeling safe while on campus (51%). Thirty-two percent reported that they feel safe often and 16% reported only feeling safe sometimes. Seventy percent of the students reported that they had never been the victims of a crime, while 39% reported a past victimization experience. The numbers of past victimization experiences ranged from one to four. The types of crimes reported were assaults (37%), larceny (25%), grand theft auto (21%), robbery (15%), and attempted murder (2%). Ten percent of those students who reported having been the victim of a crime reported more than one type of crime in a single incident (two incidents of rape and robbery and three incidents of a larceny and grand theft auto). Seventy-five percent of the sample reported that they did not believe that they were at a greater risk of being victimized than people without a disability. Twenty-five percent believed that they had a greater risk of being victimized than those without a disability.

Interestingly, the official police data indicate that in 1998, only 6% of the 18,000 student population reported having been the victim of a crime. At the time of writing, neither the university, nor the local police department compartmentalized data based upon disability. Thus, these self-report data reveal more about this population's experiences with crime.

Self-Reported Worries

Students were asked to identify their five biggest worries while studying on campus. Table 1 illustrates that the rank-ordering of concerns and includes inter-category rankings. The primary worries relate to graduating, keeping up with course material, being homesick, the lack of money generally, and finding employment after graduation. Within the primary category, these students reported also worrying about obtaining and maintaining a good GPA. A few students reported that they worried about physical accessibility in getting to and from their classes and to other parts of the university, for example getting around at the library. Surprisingly, concerns about criminal victimization appeared as their least worry. Other worries reported by students in the sample include: the lack of funding to continue school, mistreatment by non-disabled students, being lonely, finding a job after school, and finding friends and/or a romantic partner. Finally, students were asked to show on a five-point scale the degree to which they worry about becoming a victim of crime. Consistent with the results in Table 1, only eight percent reported extreme concern about becoming the victim of a crime. Most of the respondents reported that they do not worry (51%), or that they were somewhat unworried (41%). In short, the expectation of criminal victimization as a major concern or reality is not indicated in this research.

Table 1 <u>List of Student Worries While Studying on Campus</u> (1 = most important worry; 5 = least important worry)				
1	2	3	4	5
Graduating 55%	Keeping up with school work 70%	Being homesick 65%	Money 75%	Finding a job after school 67%
Keeping up with school work 25%	Mistreatment from non-disabled students 24%	Lack of courtesy by non-disabled students 20%	Finding a romantic partner 15%	Not being treated as a misfit 15%
Good GPA 10%	Lack of funding to continue school 5%	Keeping up with school work 10%	Keeping up with school work 5%	Finding a romantic partner 10%

Suggestions for Improvement

Students in this sample were asked for their suggestions for improving the quality of their academic experience while studying. Forty percent of the students stated that the academic community (particularly the offices of Student Government, the Dean of Students and Disability Services) need to develop outreach programs (including workshops) to help them to integrate with their non-disabled peers. Further, it was reported by these students that they want to spend study as well as leisure time with abled students in order to better acclimate to the university environment. Other comments included their desires to: (1) join fraternities/sororities, (2) be asked to join the abled for meals and/or other social events, and (3) have better interpersonal relationships with non-disabled peers in order to develop friendships some of which might result in romantic relationships. Twenty-five percent of the students reported that they would like to have more public transportation available to them. This transportation, according to answers to this open-ended question, included transportation to and from locations off campus, and more transportation within the perimeters of the campus, i.e., a shuttle bus service. Eighteen percent of the students commented that they would like for the library to be more accessible in terms of devising methods for physically retrieving books and journals off of the shelves. Seven percent of the students suggested that there be better lighting in the parking lot and along the walkways during nighttime hours.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This was an exploratory study on the physically-disabled college student, a potentially high risk group. Additional studies may be needed to further assess perceptions of victimization. In addition, since this research focused only on physical disabilities, future research directives might include samples involving college students with learning disabilities.

The results of this study provide new information on the criminal victimization experiences and worries about future victimization among college students with physical disabilities. These findings present a challenge to college student personnel whose responsibility it is to insure that within this population that every attempt to fully integrate the disabled student is undertaken. Supervisors should be trained and followed by the provision and updating of in-service programs on an ongoing basis in order for the campus community to be sensitive and responsive to this special population's needs (e.g., among food service, physical plant, library, clerical, counseling, law enforcement and academic personnel). These steps, along with critical input from the students with physical disabilities on how services can be tailored to their needs, may result in a more effective approach to addressing the unique service needs of students with physical disabilities.

These suggestions are seen as fundamental to the quality of academic life which is an integral component of the overall quality of life. One last interpretation of the data suggests that the concerns of the students with physical disabilities seem to reflect the concerns of the student without physical disabilities, driving home the importance of an integrated network of support for counseling and career services for all students.

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