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978-0-521-12405-8 - The Dark Side of the Ivory Tower: Campus Crime as a Social Problem

John J. Sloan III and Bonnie S. Fisher

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## THE DARK SIDE OF THE IVORY TOWER

A cursory reading of the history of U.S. colleges and universities reveals that violence, vice, and victimization – campus crime – has been part of collegiate life since the colonial era. Not until the late 1980s – some 250 years later – did campus crime suddenly become an issue on the public stage. Drawing from numerous mass-media and scholarly sources and using a theoretical framework grounded in social constructionism, *The Dark Side of the Ivory Tower* chronicles how four groups of activists – college student advocates, feminists, victims and their families, and public health experts – used a variety of tactics and strategies to convince the public that campus crime posed a new danger to the safety and security of college students and the ivory tower itself, while simultaneously convincing policy makers to take action against the problem. Readers from a range of disciplinary interests, campus security professionals, and informed citizens will find the book both compelling and valuable for understanding campus crime as a newly constructed social reality.

John J. Sloan III is Associate Professor of Criminal Justice and Sociology and Chair of the Department of Justice Sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He has authored or coauthored more than 100 scholarly articles, book chapters, research reports, and presentations and coedited two previous books on campus crime. Professor Sloan has been a Research Assistant at the Institute for the Study of Children and Families at Eastern Michigan University, as well as Visiting Professor of Criminal Justice at the universities of Alabama and West Florida.

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# **The Dark Side of the Ivory Tower**

*Campus Crime as a Social Problem*

**John J. Sloan III**

University of Alabama at Birmingham

**Bonnie S. Fisher**

University of Cincinnati



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## Preface

On February 14, 2008, 27-year-old former graduate student Steven P. Kazmierczak killed 5 people and wounded 16 others after he opened fire in a lecture hall at Northern Illinois University using a shotgun and three handguns. That shooting came almost a year to the day after the worst mass shooting ever on a U.S. college campus occurred at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), when 23-year-old Seung-Hui Cho, a senior there, shot and killed 32 students and professors and wounded dozens of others in two separate on-campus incidents before taking his own life. Media reports of shootings, rapes, serious sexual and physical assaults, stalking, and other heinous crimes occurring on college campuses have become common, appearing in news outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Boston Globe* and trade publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. These publications have also widely reported that alcohol abuse among college students is rampant and has been linked to many deaths from alcohol poisoning or serious injuries suffered while intoxicated. If media reports are to be believed, a “dark side” of the ivory tower of academe has emerged, which threatens the health and safety of millions of college students in the United States.

What is interesting is this: violence, vice, and victimization have occurred on college campuses dating back to the origins of higher education in America. Historical evidence indicates that during the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, murders, lynchings, rapes, violent assaults, serious vandalism, hunger strikes, and riots were not uncommon on college campuses. What is also interesting is that beginning

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in the 1980s, and continuing to the present, alarm bells started ringing as a variety of sources – including government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. General Accounting Office – expressed mounting concern about crime and safety on American college campuses. Claims began appearing in mass-media outlets that college students were *routinely* being murdered, raped, and otherwise victimized on college campuses. Reporters described a “rape culture” that had apparently developed on college campuses. According to these reports, the campus rape culture encouraged college men, enabled by alcohol use or by the provision of drugs such as GHB or Rohypnol (“roofies”) to unsuspecting women, to sexually victimize college women on campus. Student offenders appeared to be committing these types of assault with relative impunity. Parents of student victims claimed to the press that security on college campuses was either lax or nonexistent, which created many opportunities for on-campus victimizations. Students also appeared to be drowning themselves in a sea of alcohol, engaging in dangerous “binge drinking” with far-too-frequent fatal consequences. Finally, claims were leveled by a variety of sources – including student victims, their parents, counselors, and campus officials – that postsecondary administrators, in a cynical effort to maintain the images of their institutions, denied there was a crime problem on their campuses, did little to prevent on-campus victimizations, failed to respond adequately to the needs of campus crime victims, and failed to punish adequately known student offenders.

It thus appears that over the past 20 years, “campus crime” – an umbrella term we use to refer to a variety of illegal or deviant behaviors occurring on college and university campuses – moved from a private problem involving victims, their families, and individual post-secondary institutions to a large-scale social problem to which policy makers, including Congress and the state legislatures, have repeatedly responded.

What events contributed to the apparent change in how media portrayed the dark side of academe? Were specific groups or individuals responsible for the apparent sea change in how mass media depicted crime occurring on college campuses? If yes, then what strategies did these groups or individuals use? How did policy makers become

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convinced that campus crime was a problem deserving of their attention? What steps did policy makers take to address crime on college campuses?

In this book, we argue that since the late 1980s campus crime in the United States has been *socially constructed* as a new social problem. What this means is that campus crime came to be labeled a social problem not necessarily because of some objective level of threat it posed to the public welfare but because groups of activists *made claims* about the problem and used a variety of strategies and tactics to convince the public and policy makers that the problem posed a “real” threat to the collective well-being.

In analyzing how campus crime was socially constructed as a new social problem, we identify the major parties involved in its construction, including the claims they made about campus crime. We also examine the strategies they used to package, and then disseminate to the public, information about the problem. Finally, we examine policy responses that activists were able to shape and have mandated to address the problem. In so doing, we draw upon extant literature that examines how only some problems, under certain conditions, come to be selected, identified, and responded to as social problems.

In Chapter 1, we present a brief history of violence, vice, and victimization on American college and university campuses to illustrate that the dark side of the ivory tower has always had a presence on college campuses and that recent claims about the threat it poses are nothing new. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework that guided our examination of the social construction of campus crime. Here, we not only discuss the applicability of the framework to understanding campus crime as a social problem and provide examples but also identify four groups we believe were instrumental in helping to construct campus crime as a new social problem. We then devote the next four chapters to examining these groups and analyzing their individual contributions to socially constructing campus crime. Chapter 3 is devoted to analyzing the role played by Security On Campus, Inc. (SOC), a nonprofit, grass-roots lobbying organization that was founded by the parents of a student slain in her dorm room at Lehigh University in 1986. The chapter reveals the claims of SOC that college and university campuses are “unsafe and violent” places and the

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instrumental role SOC played in getting Congress to first consider and ultimately to pass new federal laws designed to reduce campus crime. Chapter 4 analyzes the contributions of campus feminists to constructing campus crime through their claims that “date” or “acquaintance” rape was rampant on college campuses. Campus feminists also identified not only the causes of this form of sexual victimization of college women but the consequences for victims of this crime as well. Chapter 5 explores how victims of campus crime – primarily students and their families – helped construct campus crime as a social problem by making claims to the media based on lawsuits they had filed against postsecondary institutions. In their suits, they alleged that postsecondary administrators failed to take necessary steps to prevent their on-campus victimizations from occurring. These claims resulted in postsecondary institutions not only being forced by Congress to address security and safety issues on college campuses but also being held liable in multiple state courts for the victimizations. Chapter 6 examines how public health researchers also assisted in socially constructing campus crime as a new social problem by making claims about the extent and nature of collegiate alcohol abuse. In particular, these researchers created a new term, “binge drinking,” that defined how college students were abusing alcohol and from which serious negative consequences, both direct and indirect, arose. In Chapter 7, we examine commonalities among the claimsmakers and their legacy to the social construction of campus crime as a new social problem.

We have several goals for this book. First, we seek to describe and explain how campus crime came to be elevated to the status of a new social problem. Specifically, we show how several disparate groups of activists, both individually and collectively, were able to bring the problem to the public’s attention, to use mass media to disseminate their claims, and to shape policy responses to the problem. Second, we show how these groups of activists, despite representing different interests, ultimately became loosely coupled around sets of claims each group was making about campus crime and security, ranging from who were the perpetrators to what they perceived as appropriate policy responses. Third, we seek to make a contribution to the existing literature on the social construction of social problems. Finally, we seek to educate readers about how social forces, rather than objective



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levels of danger or threat, often work first to create and then to help institutionalize social problems.

The book can serve as a resource for those concerned about campus crime and safety issues and is directed to both academic and nonacademic audiences. For the academic audience, the book could be used as a main or supplemental text in various courses in sociology, social problems, criminology, criminal justice, victimology, or public policy in which discussion about crime in specific social contexts occurs. The book could be used in a “first-year experience” or “freshman experience” class for college students, where freshman critically examine a topic that is salient to their campus experiences. A senior capstone course could also be designed to use the book to bring together the experiences of college students’ tenure and critically compare these to the themes developed in the chapters. The universal appeal of the topic of campus crime most certainly would pique students’ interest at any stage of their college years. For the nonacademic audience, the book could serve as a resource to help readers understand better how social problems and related policy responses are not necessarily grounded in the objective threat the problem poses but rather in how skillfully activists are able to bring the problem to the forefront of public discourse.

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