

**Creating Conversations about Consent through an on-Campus, Curriculum
Embedded Week of Action**

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Abstract

Sexual violence is a widespread issue on university campuses. Although not a new concern, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within the United Kingdom (UK) have only recently begun to implement specific on-campus prevention strategies. Many approaches focus on increasing knowledge of consent and related harms, but are often not evaluated, or sit outside of the curriculum. While research is increasing, UK students' perceptions of such approaches, as well as their on-campus experiences, reporting preference and advice seeking behaviour remain unclear. This article presents a case study of an award-nominated, annual 'Consent' week of action involving a range of free, cross-campus, inter-disciplinary workshops and events taking place within existing programme curricula activities. 171 students and 10 staff participants completed a 25-item survey focusing on event feedback, sexual violence victimisation experiences, bystander intervention opportunities, reporting preferences, support service knowledge and perceptions of consent. Our findings suggest that sexual violence is prevalent, with many students witnessing incidents, but not knowing where to report or seek advice. Reasons included self-management, stigma, safety concerns, limited faith in existing reporting mechanisms and the normative nature of sexual violence within UK HEIs. Students appeared to find consent difficult to navigate, viewing it as one-sided and binary. Students and staff rated the cross-campus 'Consent' week of action as excellent, outlining a range of benefits, particularly in increasing knowledge around consent. Our work highlights the importance of embedding consent-related initiatives within programme curricula, while highlighting challenges and recommendations for future initiatives within UK HEIs.

Keywords: Consent, education, university, sexual violence, student

1. Introduction

Sexual violence on university campuses is not a new concern, but a widespread issue which has a detrimental effect on student health, wellbeing and academic achievement (Association of American Universities, 2015; Halstead, Williams, & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2017; National Union of Students (NUS), 2010; Towl, 2016; Universities UK Taskforce, 2016). Universities form part of an important transitional period for young people, but this time often involves change, experimentation, risky behaviour and exposure to novel social situations (Lorant, Nicaise, Soto, & d'Hoore, 2013). University campuses are important places for taking action against sexual violence because universities have a duty to provide safe and positive experiences for their students, yet it is only in the last decade that researchers have focused on understanding these issues on UK campuses (Phipps & Smith, 2012; Public Health England, 2016; Universities UK Taskforce, 2016).

Much of the existing research from the United States (US) suggests on-campus sexual violence is a major concern (Lewis, Marine, & Kenney, 2016; Phipps & Smith, 2012). One of the first US studies to investigate the prevalence of sexual aggression and victimisation among college women suggested that as many as one in four had experienced rape or attempted rape (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Since this work, research in the US and Australia continues to suggest women are four times as likely as men to be sexually assaulted and, due to under-reporting from both victims and bystanders, real figures are likely to be higher (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Girdali & Monk-Turner, 2017; Ministry of Justice Home Office & Office for National Statistics, 2013). Prevention measures include raising awareness and empowering students to take action through bystander intervention programmes, among other initiatives (Hoxmeier, McMahon, & O'Connor, 2017).

During the last decade, the prevalence of on-campus sexual violence and assaults within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has become apparent. For example, a growing body of literature suggests that these issues are just as prevalent and widespread in the UK (Freeman & Klein, 2012; Lewis et al., 2016; National Union of Students (NUS), 2010; Phipps & Smith, 2012; Phipps & Young, 2013). Research also suggests that ‘lad cultures’, with their associated objectification of women and misogynist banter, exist as part of the normative fabric of most colleges and universities (Lewis et al., 2016; National Union of Students (NUS), 2014; Phipps, Ringrose, Renold, & Jackson, 2017; Phipps & Young, 2013, 2015). To address this, in the last few years, there has been some progressive work in this area, including a review of the limited available evidence by Public Health England (2016) and a report of existing on-campus sexual violence interventions by the Universities UK Taskforce (2016). This has also involved a review of the so-called ‘Zellick’ (1994) guidelines, which advise universities on how to deal with criminal misconduct allegations by students. In 2016, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) released Catalyst funding for projects and initiatives which seek to address sexual violence on UK campuses. This has led to important pockets of action taking place within some universities, but there is still some way to go before effective intervention work exists across all UK HEIs.

It has been suggested that the poor responses to these issues by UK HEIs may be due to tensions between institutional duty of care, self-preservation and longstanding, embedded norms which actually condone on-campus sexual violence (Freeman & Klein, 2012; Lewis et al., 2016; Phipps & Young, 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2013; Towl, 2016). For example, the suppression or under-reporting of these incidents may be due to HEIs attempting to preserve their reputation in competitive HE landscapes, or because HEIs simply have more pressing priorities than those related to sexual violence. Furthermore, recent changes within HE might have led to the restructuring and centralisation of valuable university services and, coupled with a reduction

in funding for external support service and charities, this could further impact victims who might be prevented from accessing valuable support or guidance. For example, research suggests that mechanisms are often not in place to collect prevalence information at UK HEIs and that existing prevention interventions have limited efficacy, or are not evaluated at all (Crighton & Towl, 2007; Ministry of Justice Home Office & Office for National Statistics, 2013; Towl, 2016). Furthermore, the lack of action by HEIs may cause additional suffering to victims, by possibly undermining offences or increasing barriers to reporting.

To initiate on-campus conversations about these issues an annual ‘Consent’ week of action was developed at a centrally-located, large (i.e. 10,000-25,000 students) UK HEI in 2015. The aim of this initiative was to promote activism surrounding sexual violence, with a view to changing the on-campus culture and providing oppressed groups with a voice. A focus was on building awareness, increasing knowledge of reporting mechanisms and relevant support services, as well as increasing knowledge about consent. Focusing on consent was important, not only because research suggests young people generally show difficulty navigating consent in sexual situations, but because consent-related initiatives have been found to be effective in sexual violence prevention (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Jozkowski, 2015; National Union of Students (NUS), 2014; Phipps & Smith, 2012; Phipps & Young, 2013).

This ‘Consent’ week of action was partly inspired by the NUS ‘I Heart Consent’ week campaign. Importantly, instead of sitting outside of university programmes and being ran externally by Students’ Unions, the current week of action was designed to be innovatively integrated within universities and subject programmes. It was important that the initiative was not viewed as an add-on to existing module activities, as it was likely that students would not engage or would view the sessions as separate to their programmes. Instead, this week aimed to empower all staff and students to change normative perceptions around sexual violence,

while creating consent-related conversations on-campus. This included sexual violence, but also other topics related to relationships, communication, gender and sexuality, among others. As part of this week, a range of free, cross-campus, inter-disciplinary workshops and events were developed, including: Consent in the Classroom, Bystander and Awareness Training, Consent and the LGBTQ+ Community, Psychological Impact of Non-Consent, Consent and the Law, Consent in the Media and student poster sessions, among others. To enhance partnership working, the week was supported by local councils, charities, LGBTQ+ groups, Unions, with dedicated break out rooms and confidential support drop-in sessions.

Inter-disciplinary researchers use different definitions and measurements to evaluate Consent-related initiatives, so existing research can be contradictory (Cowling, & Reynolds, 2004; Fedina et al., 2016; Halstead et al., 2017). Further work is therefore required to understand the efficacy of Consent-related approaches, as well as how young people's perceptions of consent are informed and constrained by decision making processes. In order to evaluate the current initiative and contribute to the existing research, during the most recent 'Consent' week of action, student and staff participants were surveyed about their perceptions of the week. Students were also asked about their experiences of victimisation and bystander intervention opportunities on campus, reporting preferences, knowledge of available support services, as well as their understanding of consent-related issues. The current article outlines the findings from this survey, including practical implications and recommendations for future related initiatives. Findings are presented in relation to the following research questions:

- i. What are student and staff perceptions of the 'Consent' Week initiative?
- ii. What recommendations do these types of initiatives provide for further practice?
- iii. What does consent mean for students?

- iv. What are students' experiences of sexual violence on campus, as both victims and bystanders?
- v. Would students report certain types of incidents? If so, what would they report and why might they not report?
- vi. Where would students generally seek advice about incidents of sexual violence or harassment?

2. Materials and Methods

This research had full ethical approval from The University's Research Ethics Committee.

2.2 Participants and Sampling Approach

171 student participants were recruited through convenience sampling during the 'Consent' week of action. At the beginning of the week, research assistants described the purpose of the research and invited students to take part. Research assistants were briefed to ensure that students were not coerced into participating. The response rate was good, with approximately 80% of attendees during the week completing the survey. At the end of every event, student participants were also asked to complete an evaluation form. Feedback forms were also distributed separately to the 10 staff members involved in running sessions or organising the week.

While the majority of students in our sample were female (N = 142), only 64% of the university student body where the 'Consent' initiative took place were female, which highlights key differences in terms of event participation and the student body. Student participants in our survey were aged 18-55 years (M = 18-20 years), with 78 Year 1, 42 Year 2, 42 final year students and 9 postgraduate students, which was more representative of the student population.

150 students in our study were heterosexual, with 1 gay, 1 lesbian, 2 bisexual, 15 other and 2 preferred not to say. Event attendance was good, but varied due to the session type and subject, for example, one Bystander Training event had only 10 student attendees, whereas a Consent and the Law session had over 80 participants.

2.3 Measures

Our 25-item survey obtained both quantitative and qualitative information on students' perceptions of the 'Consent' week initiative, their experiences of sexual violence victimisation, bystander intervention opportunities, reporting preferences, knowledge of support services and understanding of consent. The survey was constructed using items from existing surveys (e.g. National Union of Students (NUS), 2014). For example, these questions asked students to focus on their experiences since coming to university, such as: "*Have you ever experienced any of the following at university? Have you ever witnessed any of the following being directed at a fellow student at university? What would you report? Where would you seek advice from?*" In each case, students were presented with a list of options and asked to tick all that applied, or to state any additional answers that were not listed.

Open-ended survey questions requiring qualitative responses focused on students' definitions of sexual consent and their reasons for not reporting, for example: "*What does 'consent' mean to you?*" and "*Why might you not report these incidents?*". Event evaluation questions asked students and staff to rate the week out of 5 and to highlight their preferred and least preferred events, as well as suggestions for improvement. Surveys were completed through the University's online survey software through electronic devices (phones, tablets, laptops), or in a printed hardcopy format, which tended to be the preferred completion method (N=107). Full descriptions and definitions were provided for all questions to aid participants' understanding, as well as information about available support services both during and outside the 'Consent'

week initiative. Research assistants were present to assist students if required, or to provide further information about support services.

2.4. Analysis

Mean ratings were calculated for the event evaluations and prevalence information was provided in terms of proportions. For these questions, participants were asked to tick all answers that applied to them, so the percentages provided indicate the proportion of the whole sample selecting 'Yes'. Answers to the qualitative survey questions were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby responses were coded by two independent researchers. This analytical process involved grouping together prominent thematic responses as themes and the removal of duplicates. Secondary coding then focused on identifying the final set of themes and illustrative statements. A coding meeting involving members of the research team identified that the themes produced by all researchers were similar, suggesting good consistency. Qualitative event feedback is also provided in the Results section below.

3. Results

3.1 What were student and staff perceptions of the 'Consent' Week of action?

The week was exceptionally rated by students (4.5 out of 5) and all sessions were viewed as useful. The Consent and the Law and Bystander training sessions were seen as the most useful, with one student explaining:

“You know what, when someone asked me previously if I was ever sexually harassed or assaulted I would say no, but now [after this session], I've had a comment made to me. I found that as sexual harassment.” (Female student)

In terms of improvements, some students had clashes with classes they had to attend during the week, which was an issue when they wanted to attend classes in other subject areas. Other students felt that the week should be longer and that an annual event was not enough:

“I think awareness is key, so like not just a reminder, Consent week, like that’s effective but I think it needs to be constant and throughout the year, like not just at the start of freshers either, people need to be like reminded of these things.” (Female student)

Staff feedback was also extremely positive, with most enjoying embedding consent-related issues into their classes. Many enjoyed the flexibility, seeing this as an opportunity to test out new teaching techniques, including technology-enhanced learning (e.g. live class surveys). Some staff voiced concerns over the amount of required preparation and some noticed a drop in normal attendance for their classes during this week, possibly because students did not see the sessions as “relevant to them”. Other staff felt that an annual event suggested these issues were “only important for that one week” of the year, but that ongoing work was essential:

“I don’t think we do much of this [at the university], again I think just because we haven’t got anybody who would really lead on that sort of thing, but it would be something to look at, perhaps, you know, highlight it, flag, identifying some of the big issues, running some sort of targeted campaigns.” (Female staff)

During planning meetings, organisers agreed that the week was resource intensive, particularly as line managers did not recognise it as a workload activity. As staff were from different areas of the University, manager support, resources and practices also varied across the team. Some staff who did not participate in the curriculum-based sessions, but attended sessions ran by other staff members, felt it was too much additional work, that they could not fit additional

sessions into tightly-packed programmes, or were unsure how to justify changing class content to Module or Programme Leaders.

3.2 What are Students' Experiences of Sexual Violence on Campus?

Table 1 illustrates the self-reported prevalence of sexual violence victimisation and bystander intervention opportunities by student participants, as well as whether they would report these.

[Insert Table 1 here]

As illustrated by Table 1, 25.73% of students (N = 44) had experienced unwelcome sexual advances at the university, defined as unwanted sexual touching or grouping, whereas 45.03% (N = 77) had not experienced any of these incidents themselves. The prevalence of not witnessing any of these incidents directed at *others* as a bystander (N = 104, 60.82%) was higher than the figure for not experiencing any of these incidents themselves. Students also reported a higher prevalence for witnessing sexual comments (N = 56, 32.75%), verbal harassment (N = 40, 23.39%) and group intimidation (N = 28, 16.37%) when it is directed at others, than when they experienced these themselves as victims. 'Other' answers included 'encouragement of touching by authority' and 'sexual comments regarding my age'.

3.3 Do Students Report these Incidents?

Students suggested that unwelcome sexual advances should be reported to relevant university support services (N = 83, 48.54%), the Students' Union (N = 51, 29.82%) and the police (N = 45, 26.32%). Some participants were unsure of where to report these incidents (N = 24, 14.04%). When asked where else they might report them, the most common place was a "personal academic tutor", an assigned member of staff for student pastoral issues, followed by "trusted lecturers" and "student reps". Most students would report to internal support structures and, surprisingly, many of the organisations, charities and support services who had

given their time to take part in our ‘Consent’ initiative were not mentioned. Few students also mentioned other forms of external support services, such as parents.

3.4 Why Might Students Not Report?

A thematic analysis generated from responses to this question identified two main themes in relation to why students would not report these incidents. This was due to a number of individual factors, as well as external influences which, when combined, led to a wider culture of non-reporting.

3.4.1. Individual Factors

In explaining why they might not report incidents of sexual violence experienced themselves, or those observed directed at others, many students referred to their own a) self-management skills, b) the stigma of reporting and c) safety concerns.

a) Self-management Skills

A large majority of those responding to this question did not see the need to report these issues because they felt that they possessed the skills to manage these types of incidents themselves. As one female student explained, if they experienced someone groping them: “I can deal with it” and others agreed stating they would “deal with it my own way”. However, for some of these students it would “depend on the severity” and many distinguished between “proper rape”, which they would seek support for, compared to unwanted sexual comments or harassment, which are “only words being said”. This suggests that the low rates for reporting sexual violence may be further impeded by a perceived ‘hierarchy of severity’, as students only reported certain types of victimisation, such as physical violence or assault. This, coupled with coping strategies for managing incidents, could reflect a normalisation of experiences of sexual violence victimisation, which many students believed replaces the need to report.

b) The Stigma of Reporting

In contrast, a separate sub-group of students did not feel they had the “knowledge”, “skills” or “confidence” to report these incidents and were concerned about the negative connotations of and stigma of reporting. For these students, reporting these incidents required “owning up” to and “facing” the issue, which many were concerned about doing. As one female student explained: “I would not want to turn it into a big deal”, whereas others explained that it was “too stressful” to have to recount or relive what had happened. Many students said they would “feel embarrassed”, or “silly reporting it” due to the stigma attached to such behaviours. For these students, their concerns over the stigma of reporting, coupled with the uncertainty of what would happen once they did appear to be a barrier to disclosure.

c) Safety

Some students would not report these incidents due to concerns for their “own safety”. Many students spoke from their own experiences, in receiving feedback from peers, or their concerns about what they thought might happen. In many cases, this involved a fear of repercussions from others as “it might make the problem worse”. One female student added: “I would be scared I’d become a target”, suggesting that this “fear of backlash” and potential threat to their personal safety prevented them from speaking out and reporting these issues.

3.4.2. External Influences

Students also described a number of external influences which prevented them from reporting, which many felt they had less control over. This included a) issues with existing reporting mechanisms and b) the normative nature of sexual violence within HEIs.

a) Issues with Existing Reporting Mechanisms

For most students answering this question there was a genuine lack of knowledge about how these incidents were handled. Many students did not “know how”, or were “unaware of where to go or who to speak to” in order to report or obtain support. For those that were aware of reporting mechanisms, most described their limited faith in these processes. Some students explained how reporting was a “waste of time”, whilst others assumed the university was “powerless” to do anything. As one female student explained: “no point, as nothing would be done”. Another female student added that, even if students do report, “I don’t think anything would happen as a result of it”, adding “most people get away with it”. These issues with existing reporting mechanisms appeared to prevent students from reporting, as they felt that their university did not take these issues seriously.

b) Normative nature of sexual violence within HE

Most students mentioned that sexual violence was prevalent on campus, as one student explained: “it is simply a part of life”. Linking to the stigma described by participants in the previous theme, others stated how students should not “overreact” and report these types of behaviour, as often sexual comments or touching were “just jokes”. This normalisation of sexual violence within university contexts was further highlighted when students explained these were “not important issues” for universities and that “there are more serious issues to be dealt with”. For students, the police would be even less interested, as one student explained: “when you are in a club and someone is inappropriate, you are not going to call the police”. The suggestion that incidents are just “banter” not only normalises sexual violence, preventing students from reporting, but further reduces the likelihood of contacting external support and report services.

3.5 Where do Students Seek Advice and Support?

In support of our qualitative findings, within the survey, most students appeared to not know where to seek advice about these issues (N = 111, 64.91%). Some participants did know who to approach for advice (N = 22, 12.87%) and an analysis of the qualitative responses from these participants suggested most would approach a “trusted lecturer” or a “personal academic tutor”. However, a range of responses were provided for this question, further suggesting students were uncertain about available support services. Other answers included the “Students’ Union, friends, residential teams, reception, counsellors, support services, student helpdesk” and even “the internet”.

3.6 What does Consent Mean for Students?

The most prominent response to this question involved “giving permission”, which was provided by over half of the sample. It appeared most students viewed consent as binary, in terms of “saying yes/ no”, providing “approval” or “agreement” for something to occur. In this sense, consent existed as something that could be “given or taken away”. Students appeared to view consent as the responsibility of one individual in having the “confidence” to explicitly express permission, which could possibly absolve the responsibility of the other participant in establishing consent. However, a range of qualitative responses were given by students when answering this question, indicating confusion about what consent entailed. For example, participants suggested consent could be “implicit, explicit, physical, verbal, mental” and even “financial”, was often “sexual” and “situational”, involving “touching”. A small number of participants suggested consent was a process, involving “reciprocation, acceptance” and “mutuality”.

4. Discussion

This article presents a case study of an annual UK, curriculum-embedded ‘Consent’ week of action, including perceived benefits and challenges, as well as student and staff evaluations of

this initiative. Findings also highlight student experiences of sexual violence victimisation, bystander intervention opportunities, reporting preferences, support service knowledge and how consent is understood by young people. Key recommendations will now be provided in relation to this work.

Our findings highlight benefits for university teachers, for example, in tackling sensitive issues without explicitly focusing on sexual violence and in allowing teaching staff from a range of subject areas to creatively embed consent into existing curricula. However, without centralised university support, resources, administration and workload recognition, staff uptake for such opportunities is likely to be low. Considering staff perspectives in relation to sexual violence and consent is important, particularly for personal academic tutors who appear to be key to student disclosures. Further research should consider not only how changing HEI landscapes might influence staff roles and available support, but also how university managers' perspectives might impact the creation of a mutually respectful campus communities which aim to stand together against sexual violence.

A cross-campus, curriculum-embedded Consent initiative benefits students by increasing awareness of sexual violence and creating conversations between students about consent, which young people appear to have difficulties in negotiating (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Jozkowski, 2015; National Union of Students (NUS), 2014; Phipps & Smith, 2012; Phipps & Young, 2013). The wide-ranging definitions provided by students not only illustrates the complex and multi-layered nature of consent, but also suggests a one-week event may not be enough in unpacking these perceptions. Consent-related initiatives must form part of the wider campus culture, information campaigns and activities, as well as signposting both support and reporting services. It is essential that consent conversations are situated within all university programmes and wider campus life.

One of the biggest benefits was how this initiative signposted students to available support services, which is incredibly important within institutions that do not have other provisions in place. In-line with existing research, over a quarter of our sample had experienced unwanted sexual advances at university and many had observed incidences happening to others. While these findings must be interpreted with caution, they do support research highlighting the widespread nature of sexual violence within UK HEIs (Freeman & Klein, 2012; Lewis et al., 2016; National Union of Students (NUS), 2010; Phipps & Smith, 2012; Phipps & Young, 2013). In-line with existing research, our findings also suggest young people do not know where to seek help or advice (Association of American Universities, 2015; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Garcia et al., 2012; National Union of Students (NUS), 2014; Phipps & Smith, 2012). UK HEIs must do more to highlight available support both within and beyond the university, while ensuring students have the knowledge to access, locate or use these services (Garcia et al., 2012; Walsh, Banyard, Moynihan, Ward, & Cohn, 2010).

Even if students are educated about what is and is not consensual, many would not report these incidences if they had experienced them. In-line with existing research, reasons involved self-management, stigma, safety concerns, not being believed, limited faith in existing reporting mechanisms and the normative nature of sexual violence within HE (Freeman & Klein, 2012; Lewis et al., 2016; National Union of Students (NUS), 2010, 2014; Phipps & Smith, 2012; Phipps & Young, 2013). In response to this, some UK HEIs are putting in place anonymous reporting procedures to collect accurate data on these issues (Ghani & Towl, 2017a, 2017b; McMahon, 2015; Public Health England, 2016; Towl, 2016; Universities UK Taskforce, 2016), which might provide some consistency in how sexual violence prevalence is currently measured within UK HEIs. Universities must work together to reduce the stigma associated with reporting and communicate to staff and students that sexual violence will not be tolerated.

Building an on-campus culture of awareness, empathy and respect, with active bystanders and appropriate supporting and reporting structures might begin to tackle longstanding norms.

4.1 Limitations

While this research provides key insights for future initiatives, it is not without limitations. The small and selective sample was due, in part, to recruiting attendees during the ‘Consent’ week initiative. While the sample size is too limited to make broader generalisations, it does provide some important implications in terms of student participation. For example, non-attending students may have perceived these sessions as non-essential or separate from usual class topics. The higher number of female participants also highlights the need to engage male students, as these are not just issues experienced by women. While the focus of this work was on staff and student experiences, no comparative baseline or post-intervention data was collected, which does reduce generalisability. Participants sampled during the week of action are also more likely to be more concerned about consent-related issues. Despite this, the current research is directly influencing future work in this area, namely in understanding student, staff and university managers’ perceptions of sexual violence on campus.

5. Conclusion

Universities continue to be key sites for prevention work in tackling sexual violence, which remains a widespread and complex concern. This article presents a case study of a curriculum-embedded, cross-campus Consent week of action which embeds conversations about consent into the curriculum, helping to change the normative culture of consent within HE, by increasing knowledge and providing vital information about support services. While further research is required, this work highlights staff and student benefits, challenges and key recommendations for the implementation of future initiatives in this area.

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Table 1. Self-reported Victimization, Bystander Intervention Opportunities and Reporting Preference

Incident Type	Experienced Myself		Witnessed Directed at Others		Would Report	
	N Yes	%Yes	N Yes	%Yes	N Yes	%Yes
Overtly Sexual Conversations	52	30.41%	44	25.73%	50	29.24%
Sexual Comments	43	25.15%	56	32.75%	83	48.54%
Verbal Harassment	18	10.53%	40	23.39%	81	47.37%
Unwelcome Sexual Advances	44	25.73%	21	12.28%	84	49.12%
Group Intimidation	15	8.77%	28	16.37%	109	63.74%
None of These	77	45.03%	104	60.82%	11	6.43%