As the nation’s concerns have turned to protecting students’ health on college campuses, it is important to remember the role campuses play in keeping students safe from all harm that can come their way. There are multiple layers to campus safety that higher education institutions, policymakers and students consider when seeking to ensure a safe learning and teaching environment.

Most colleges and universities have campus police departments or agreements with city police to respond to reports of criminal acts and campus emergencies. The police departments vary by institution depending on campus size, the city and municipal jurisdiction, and ultimately, the resources available to the college and university. The role of campus police is to protect students, staff and faculty from any potential threats, from stolen IDs to active shooters.

Colleges and universities must also prepare for emergencies. Currently, in the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities must comply with the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act. The act requires colleges to notify students, faculty and staff about all the measures they are taking to prevent an outbreak and whether anyone is in danger. Also, postsecondary institutions must have emergency management procedures in place to plan and coordinate mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery strategies for both natural and man-made disasters.

Did You Know?
- There were 37,573 criminal offenses—including 17,454 violent acts against women—reported on college campuses in 2018.
- About 92% of public campuses employ sworn police officers compared to about 38% of private campuses.
- The overall number of reported on-campus crimes decreased by 31% between 2001 and 2017.
Campus safety also often includes mental health services for victims of a crime or traumatic event. These services range from suicide prevention campaigns to counseling services and are considered by many to be increasingly important in this era of uncertainty.

Finally, campus safety includes basic crime prevention and safety measures such as lighting across campus, security in dormitories and nighttime transportation.

State Action

There have been over 119 bills introduced in at least 33 states addressing campus safety during the 2020 legislative sessions. Mostly they address sexual assault and sexual consent policies, sexual misconduct, guns on campus, police law, campus protection officers, threat assessments, hazing and campus safety studies.

Utah, for example, enacted SB 80, which requires the state board of regents to coordinate with the government and community organizations to study and make recommendations for providing public safety services on college and university campuses. Topics to be studied include policies and practices for hiring, supervising and firing campus law enforcement officers, training law enforcement to respond to sexual violence, and training faculty, staff and student organizations on campus safety.

Also in 2020, Maryland enacted SB 329 requiring public institutions of higher education to submit an outbreak response plan. The plans must include processes to expediently notify students, families, faculty and staff of an outbreak, provide guidance on protective measures, and report contagious diseases to local and state health providers.

Illinois this year introduced SB 3825. It amends the Preventing Sexual Violence in Higher Education Act by creating a Task Force on Campus Sexual Misconduct, which will develop a sexual misconduct climate survey to be approved by the attorney general. The bill would require each higher education institution to conduct the climate survey among all students every two years and allow colleges to add campus-specific questions. Enacted in 2015, the original act, HB 821, requires higher education institutions to adopt policies to address student allegations of sexual violence, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking. The law requires colleges and universities to notify student survivors about their rights; train students and campus employees on preventing sexual violence; allow students to report information electronically, confidentially or anonymously; and respond to a report submitted electronically within 12 hours.

Washington this year enacted HB 2327, requiring public four-year institutions of higher education to report any campus climate assessments to the governor and committees of the Legislature. Universities must also report their efforts to reach out to and capture information from students who have traditionally been marginalized and share how they are using information to design and improve campus safety policies.

Arizona enacted SB 1446, which requires student identification cards to include the telephone numbers of national and local suicide prevention hotlines and information about how to access a text-based emotional support service.

Federal Action

Signed into federal law in 1990, the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act requires postsecondary institutions that received Title IV funding to disclose campus crime activity, crime statistics and security policies in an annual report to the public. Offenses that must be reported include criminal homicide, sex offenses, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, arson, hate crimes, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, violation of weapons laws, and violation of drug and liquor laws. The Clery Act also requires colleges to make “timely warnings” to campus community members about specific types of criminal activity when an ongoing threat is believed to exist.

by the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Service may also coincide with state reviews performed through a selection process that aims to ensure compliance with the Clery Act requirements. A review may be initiated when a complaint is received, a media event raises certain concerns, the school's independent audit identifies serious noncompliance, or through a review selection process that may also coincide with state reviews performed by the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Service (CJIS) Audit Unit.”

Additional Resources

- NCSL's Postsecondary Bill Tracking Database
- NCSL's Higher Education Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)
- U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women
- Campus Security, U.S. Department of Education
- Title IX on Sex Discrimination, Department of Education Office for Civil Rights
- Campus Safety and Security, Department of Education
- Report on Crime and Safety in Schools, National Center for Education Statistics
- Campus Emergency Management Resources, Federal Emergency Management Institute
- Campus Law Enforcement, 2011-2012, Bureau of Justice Statistics

NCSL Contact

Marilyn Villalobos
303-856-1548

Tim Storey, Executive Director
7700 East First Place, Denver, Colorado 80230, 303-364-7700 | 444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515, Washington, D.C. 20001, 202-624-5400

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