Prevalence refers to the proportion of people in a population who have had a particular experience within a given time period. A student who has experienced more than one incident is counted only once in a measure of prevalence.

Cornell-specific weighting variables were used to generate estimates of the prevalence of sexual violence for the Cornell student population.

When asked on the survey to describe their gender identity students could select: woman, man, transgender woman, transgender man, genderqueer or gender non-conforming, questioning, or not listed. A small number of undergraduate students reported a gender identity other than woman or man (n=22).

In the survey, absence of affirmative consent was defined as someone having sexual contact “without your active, ongoing voluntary agreement. Examples include: initiating sexual activity despite your refusal; ignoring your cues to stop or slow down; went ahead without checking in or while you were still deciding; otherwise failed to obtain your consent.”
“LGBAQN” includes students who reported their sexual orientation as: gay or lesbian, bisexual, asexual, questioning, or not listed.

Prevalence by Sexual Orientation

Compared to heterosexual/straight identifying women, LGBAQN women were much more likely to have experienced nonconsensual penetration involving the use of physical force or the absence of affirmative consent (Figure 2).

Nonconsensual penetration involving force, incapacitation or absence of affirmative consent was also much more prevalent among LGBAQN men than heterosexual/straight identifying men (Figure 3).

Prevalence Among Undergraduate Women by Race and Citizenship

Given the small number of men reporting nonconsensual penetration, the rest of this report focuses on particular aspects of undergraduate women’s victimization.

Overall, white (U.S.) women and those who reported “other” or multiple races had the highest prevalence of nonconsensual penetration while Asian (U.S.) women report the lowest (Figure 4).  

Prevalence within specific race/citizenship groups varies by tactic. For example, penetration involving physical force was most common among other/multi-racial (U.S) and international women.

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5 The category of “Other/Multi (U.S.)” includes students who self-reported their race as American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and those who selected multiple races.
Prevalence Among Undergraduate Women by Ability/Disability

Figure 5 compares the prevalence of nonconsensual penetration among undergraduate women who answered either "no" or "yes" to the survey question asking whether they had a disability registered with Cornell’s Student Disability Services. Across all tactics, undergraduate women who said they have a registered disability had a much higher prevalence of nonconsensual penetration than undergraduate women without such disabilities.

Prevalence Among Undergraduate Women by Class Year

Figure 6 shows the prevalence rates of nonconsensual penetration "since being enrolled at Cornell" by undergraduate women’s class year. This cumulative prevalence rate increases with the number of years a female undergraduate has been enrolled at Cornell. By their senior year, almost one in five (19%) of undergraduate women have experienced nonconsensual penetration by force, incapacitation, or absence of affirmative consent; this compares to a cumulative prevalence rate of 7% among first year women.

Figure 7, on the other hand, shows prevalence rates for nonconsensual penetration within the 2014–15 academic year; thus the time period for measuring prevalence is consistent across class years. During this “current year” time period, 8% of senior women experienced nonconsensual penetration by force, incapacitation, or absence of affirmative consent; this compares to 7% of first year and sophomore women and 6% of junior women. Differences associated with class year were most apparent in incidents of nonconsensual penetration involving physical force and absence of affirmative consent, with senior women experiencing these tactics more often than undergraduate women in lower class years.

Almost one in five (19% of) senior women reported having experienced nonconsensual penetration by force, incapacitation or absence of affirmative consent since entering Cornell.
Discussion and Implications

While any occurrence of nonconsensual penetration is unacceptable, the prevalence rates shown in this report are especially concerning. There are some particular aspects of this report that deserve more attention.

Tactics used

Survey results concerning the tactics used in experiences of nonconsensual penetration challenge a commonly-held perception that sexual assault on college campuses is largely an issue of miscommunication — popularly described as “he said, she said” — as well as the related perception that sexual assault is mostly due to some misunderstanding of consent between individuals. Rather, the data suggest that the circumstances under which undergraduate women at Cornell are sexually-victimized more often involve the threat or use of physical force, or are offenses against highly-intoxicated or otherwise incapacitated individuals. Prevention strategies that focus primarily on educating about the role of consent will be insufficient to reduce incidents of sexual violence.

Prevalence by class year

Cumulative prevalence rates confirm that the likelihood of experiencing nonconsensual penetration increases with the number of years an undergraduate woman has been on campus. Cumulative estimates of sexual violence are lowest among first year women and highest among senior women. There has been a commonly-held belief that first year women are at greatest risk of sexual violence on college campuses due to their age, lack of social and sexual experience, isolation from long-standing relationships, and subsequent need to develop new social connections upon entering college.

While these factors may contribute to first year women’s vulnerability to being sexually victimized, the data don’t support this belief. Focusing on instances of victimization occurring within a single academic year (the 2014-2015 year in this survey), reveals that the prevalence of nonconsensual penetration for undergraduate women is, in fact, highest among senior women, particularly for incidents involving physical force of absence of affirmative consent. While sexual violence awareness and education for incoming students is important, these efforts should be sustained throughout the college years.

Vulnerable communities

The data suggest that particular populations of undergraduate students experience higher rates of victimization including: white women, multi-ethnic women, those who identify as LGBAQN and women with a disability.

A wide range of disabilities are registered with Student Disability Services (e.g., physical, cognitive, psychological, etc.) but the questions about disability status did not distinguish among them. Future surveys should collect more specific information about disabilities to increase our understanding of the association between disability status and increased vulnerability.

More research is needed to gain a better understanding of the variation in prevalence across different tactics and among particular populations of undergraduate women. A greater focus on resources and prevention work within vulnerable communities should be considered a priority.