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College Students' Perceptions of a Clery Timely Warning About Sexual Assault

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ABSTRACT

The Clery Act requires that U.S. universities issue “timely warnings” when certain crimes happen. The present study reports the results of a survey ($n = 444$) that college students responded to in the aftermath of receiving a Clery alert about a reported sexual assault. We find that students perceived the alert to be informative but also upsetting, and viewed the safety tips as helpful. Variation existed based on demographic and contextual factors.

College students in the U.S. routinely receive e-mail and/or text alerts describing acts of violence. Students receive these alerts due to a longstanding federal law they are likely unfamiliar with: the *Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act*. The Clery Act, as this law is commonly known, requires that universities issue “timely warnings” when crimes happen on or around campus that “pose a serious or ongoing threat to the campus community” (Clery Center, n.d., p. 1). Given the prevalence of such warnings, the significance of the subject matter they deal with, and the consistency with which the U.S. public expresses concerns about violence, we seek to build on previous scholarship by examining how students interpret a timely warning about sexual assault.

We extend the extant literature in three ways. First, whereas most prior studies of timely warnings have asked students to respond to hypothetical alerts (Adams-Clark et al., 2020; Han et al., 2015) or to recall previous alerts generally (Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020; Jee & Good, 2017), we surveyed students in the immediate aftermath of a real timely warning that went out to the campus community. Our approach has the advantage of providing greater detail into students' perceptions of the specific content included in an authentic Clery alert. Second, the broadest surveys of students' perceptions of timely warnings to date (Janosik & Gehring, 2003; Jee & Good, 2017) are now one to two decades old. In the interim, college students' engagement with the information environment has changed dramatically (the omnipresence of mobile devices, increased social media use, more opportunities for online courses, etc.), suggesting a need for newer research on how students respond to alerts. Finally, we take as our focus a timely warning about sexual assault. Timely warnings deal with a broad range of issues, but sexual assault was the impetus for the Clery Act and continues to be a topic of particular concern on college campuses. This study provides needed insight into an especially salient and important aspect of the Clery Act.

Literature Review

Originating as a bipartisan bill, the *Student-Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act* was signed into law in 1990. In 1998, the law was renamed the *Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act* (Graham & Konradi, 2018). The

Clery Act resulted from a stereotypical, yet rare, form of violence reifying a racist narrative of crime (Graham & Konradi, 2018). Clery, a White woman, was raped and murdered by a Black man in her dorm room at Lehigh University. The attack fit many people's existing perception of crime, a fact that contributed to the quick passage of the Clery Act (Graham & Konradi, 2018).

Initially, the Clery Act simply required campus administrators to make crime-related statistics publicly available and to share the information with admitted students. Through modifications over time, the Act has become tightly interwoven with the Violence Against Women Act and requires campus administrators to define policies related to sexual misconduct, provide services for victims of assault, and educate campus community members about sexual misconduct (Clery Center, n.d.). Most notable here is the aforementioned Clery requirement that campus administrators issue timely warnings when crimes happen on and around campus.

Research that has examined the Clery Act includes two foci relevant to the present study: college students' perceptions and use of crime information, and the observable impact of timely warning alerts. We consider each.

College Students' Perceptions and Use of Crime Information

Studies that have examined how college students (mis)understand and use crime information provided by campuses in compliance with the Clery Act indicate that students do not use crime statistics in their planning for college (Janosik, 2001, 2004; Janosik & Gehring, 2003; Jee & Good, 2017). In particular, Janosik and colleagues published a series of articles in the early 2000s examining a number of campus stakeholders' perceptions of campus crime statistics, as well as their perceptions of students' and parents' use of such information. Most campus professionals did not believe that students or parents were using the information provided to them (Gregory & Janosik, 2006; Janosik & Gregory, 2009; Janosik & Plummer, 2005).

To supplement these studies, Janosik and colleagues surveyed students and parents regarding whether the campus crime statistics influenced their decision about where to attend college (Janosik, 2004; Janosik & Gehring, 2003). Roughly a quarter of students and parents remembered receiving the campus crime statistics (Janosik, 2004; Janosik & Gehring, 2003), and 8% of students (Janosik & Gehring, 2003) and 6% of parents (Janosik, 2004) reported that the information they received influenced their decisions about where they or their child chose to attend college.

A later study examined students' awareness of Clery-related requirements on their campus. When asked if they knew about the Act ("I am aware of the Clery Act and campus security requirements"), the majority did not. The majority did know about the campus alert system and chose to participate in it and follow the instructions in the alerts (Latham-Staton et al., 2021). It is perhaps not surprising that students were unaware of the specific law that requires campus administrators to disclose crime statistics, yet were aware of an alert system that notifies them of specific crimes.

Impact of Timely Warnings

In examining the content of timely warnings, researchers have sought to understand the implied messaging in the language of the alerts—and the impact such implied messaging might have on specific groups who encounter it (e.g., victims and survivors, students of Color). For instance, researchers have clearly documented the racialization of crime that happens through such alerts. In one study examining timely warning e-mails between 2011 and 2015, of 104 crime alerts, 68 identified the suspect as a Black man, 21 did not include a racial identifier, 14 identified the suspect as White, and one as Asian (Pelfrey et al., 2018). Similarly, in a study examining timely warnings at two institutions in 2017, of 16 alerts, 10 identified the suspect as a Black man (Sherman, 2022). Reinforcing familiar patterns, this messaging solidified White students' trust in police and increased cynicism about policing among students of Color (Sherman, 2022).

Researchers have also considered other themes in the language of alerts. Wesley et al.'s (2022) study examining alerts on 55 campuses documented heavy reliance on passive voice (e.g., "She awoke to find the suspect assaulting her," p. 51), making perpetrators' actions invisible. Further, language focusing on victims' behaviors dominated the alerts, contributing to the harmful narrative that victims should do something to prevent their experiences with crime. These alerts also tended to "overgender" and include "gratuitous context," such as excessive descriptions of the victim and victim's behaviors to describe the crime (Wesley et al., 2022, p. 52). Finally, the prevention tips set up a "good victim/bad victim" dichotomy (Wesley et al., 2022, p. 52). Each of these three themes perpetuated victim-blaming in that they put additional responsibility on victims for preventing the crime from happening again.

Only a few studies have examined students' responses to alerts. One study noted that 92% of students reported reading alerts when they received them (Adams-Clark et al., 2020). Even when students read the alerts, the impact varied. In many cases, timely warnings negatively impacted students, especially those with a prior victimization history, who were sometimes retraumatized by the content of an alert (Adams-Clark et al., 2020; Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020; Linder et al., 2024). Because timely warnings frequently described "violent stranger-perpetrated assaults" and included safety tips geared toward stranger danger type of crime (Adams-Clark et al., 2020, p. 21), the alerts perpetuated rape myths and contributed to institutional betrayal (Adams-Clark et al., 2020). In addition, a modest correlation between fear of crime and reading alerts lead to a belief "that Clery notification policies may have the unwanted effects of fostering fear and overreaction for some recipients while leading others to disregard messages" (Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020, p. 602).

Students also described the importance of timeliness, relationship to the threat, trust, and social norms in acting based on alerts (Han et al., 2015; Madden, 2015). When students trusted the source of the information and when their "referent groups" responded positively to the instructions in the alert, they were also more likely to (Han et al., 2015, p. 923). Further, if they perceived that they were close to the alert based on time and location, they responded accordingly. Students noted that timeliness and geographic understanding were challenges with alerts. They often perceived that the alert came too late after the incident to be able to appropriately respond, or they did not understand from the alert where the incident actually happened (Madden, 2015).

Conceptual Foundation and Research Questions

The preceding synthesis of previous scholarship begins to provide a conceptual foundation for our study. Building from past work, we examine whether or not students read and incorporate information from Clery timely warnings into their decision-making related to avoiding crime, as well as how their social identities and contexts relate to their interpretation of timely warnings. Our approach is consistent with the literature on message processing and effects, which stresses that information acquisition is a mediated process heavily dependent on identity characteristics and contextual motivations (e.g., Eveland et al., 2003; Ewoldsen et al., 2022).

Working from that perspective, our initial focus is a descriptive assessment of students' perceptions, helping to update and extend prior survey research on safety alerts (e.g., Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020; Janosik & Gehring, 2003; Jee & Good, 2017). We then go further, incorporating both demographics and contextual factors. Specifically, we extend past research by moving beyond strictly male and female constructions of gender (used in Janosik & Gehring, 2003; Jee & Good, 2017) and by including race (which was not included in Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020). Further, extending Hasinoff and Krueger's (2020) approach, we explore three contextual factors that might influence how students perceive safety alerts: living on campus versus not, being a more or less habitual reader of alerts, and knowing (or not) the reason the alert was sent. Finally, we leverage a unique feature of the present study—that the survey was sent in the immediate aftermath of a real Clery timely warning—to provide new insight into the types of content that stay in the minds of students after an alert is sent.

These considerations lead us to pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students perceive safety alerts?

RQ2: How do demographic factors shape students' perceptions of safety alerts?

RQ3: How do contextual factors shape students' perceptions of safety alerts?

RQ4: What types of information do students recall in safety alerts?

Method

We conducted a survey at a large public university in the western U.S., a research-intensive institution with a student population (undergraduate and graduate) of approximately 35,000, of which roughly 70% are state residents. The survey, and other components of the broader project, were approved by the university's Institutional Research Board and the solicitation for survey participation that was sent to students was signed by both the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Chief Safety Officer. The survey was distributed 24 hours after a Clery timely warning alert was e-mailed (and texted, for those who opted in) to the campus community in October of 2022. That alert notified students about a reported sexual assault at a fraternity house adjacent to campus. The fraternity was named and the address provided, along with brief details about the event and mention of the university's response. Overall, the alert was 866 words long. Of those, 67 were devoted to prefatory notes and warnings, 178 to the alert message, and 621 to safety and support resources.

To survey students about this alert, we sent an e-mail solicitation to students' official university e-mail account that included a link to a Qualtrics survey, incentivizing participation with a drawing for a \$25 gift card. The university's Assessment and Analytics division provided us with a list of 9,000 student e-mails, following their usual protocols for pulling student samples (a random draw stratified by gender and year in school). Of the 9,000 e-mails sent, 8,332 reached students' inboxes; 475 of those students completed the survey. Our analysis focuses on just those students ($n = 444$) who completed the survey and answered yes to a question asking if they had "read the crime alert" recently sent by the university. The survey remained open for a month, but most participants took it on the day it arrived (83%) or the following day (11%). Just 2% of participants waited more than one week to take the survey. Once begun, it took the median participant roughly 3.5 min to complete the survey.

The final sample was 53% women (including cisgender and trans women) and 27% men (again, including cisgender and trans), with 14% offering another gender designation and 6% preferring not to answer. Racially, 68% of students identified as White, 9% as Asian, 5% as Latinx, 1% as Black, and 12% reported multiracial or other identity; 6% preferred not to answer. In terms of sexual orientation, 62% of students identified as straight, 10% as bisexual, 5% as Gay or Lesbian, and 11% reported multiple or other sexual orientations; 8% preferred not to answer. 5% of participants identified as having a disability, whereas 88% did not; 4% preferred not to answer. Age ranged from 18 to 48, with a mean of 21.8 ($SD = 4.3$). Students in their first year made up 28% of the sample, 13% were in year two, 14% in year three, 16% in year four or beyond, and 27% were graduate students. Thirty percent of the students in the sample reported living on campus, consistent with the university being primarily a commuter campus. Notably, the university does not provide demographic information about the student population that is as nuanced as we were able to capture in the survey, so it is difficult to directly compare our sample to the student population overall.

The survey began with an informed consent form, then asked participants if they had read the recent safety alert. Those who replied yes were asked a series of eight questions—adapted from Adams-Clark et al.'s (2020) experimental test of Clery alert effects—gauging their opinions about the alert on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (with a neutral midpoint). These items were: "The alert was informative," "The alert was relevant to me," "The safety tips were helpful," "The safety tips gave me an idea of how to avoid sexual assault," "I compared my experiences to those described in the alert," "The alert was upsetting," "The alert was too long," "I changed my behavior as a result of receiving the alert" (this final prompt was an addition to the seven used in the Adams-Clark et al. study).

Participants were then asked three more questions: “In reading the e-mail/text alert, what one detail most stood out to you?” (open ended), “Do you happen to know if the [university name] was required by law to send that e-mail/text alert?” (yes, no, don’t know), and “How often do you read the crime alerts that the [university name] periodically sends out by e-mail/text” (always, usually, rarely, never, not sure). The survey concluded with demographic questions and an opportunity for participants to indicate their interest in other opportunities to share their thoughts about campus crime alerts.

We address RQ1 and RQ4 by reporting descriptive statistics and examples. For RQ2 and RQ3, we use chi-squared tests to determine significant group differences, with alpha set at .05.

Results

RQ1: Students’ Perceptions

Table 1 helps answer RQ1 by showing participants’ perceptions of the safety alert. Most students found the alert to be informative (roughly 88% agreed or strongly agreed). They were less convinced that the alert was relevant to them, but a majority still held this view (52% agreed or strongly agreed). Nearly two-thirds of students (64%) agreed or strongly agreed that the alert’s safety tips were helpful, but far fewer (43%) felt those tips gave them an idea of how to avoid sexual assault. Perceptions were mixed on the question of comparing experiences to those described in the alert. Nearly the same percentage of students agreed or strongly agreed (34%) as disagreed or strongly disagreed (33%)—and that percentage mirrored the group that neither agreed nor disagreed (34%). A majority of students (61%) found the alert upsetting, and an especially large subset (23%) of these students strongly agreed with that statement. Only the idea that the alert was informative drew a higher proportion of strong agreement (26%) among participants. Few students (10%) found the alert to be too long.

Notably, behavior change (at least conscious and prompt behavior change) was a rare outcome: just 8% reported changing their behavior as a result of the alert. Open-ended answers (offered in response to an optional follow-up after the initial question about behavior change) nonetheless indicated that many of the students who changed their behavior did so in specific and concrete ways. For example, numerous students stated some variation on the theme that they would stop going to the fraternity house named in the alert, or to fraternity house parties in general. As one participant put it: “I will no longer go to [name of fraternity].” Another said: “I will avoid the Frat houses.” When participants indicated more general behaviors, they often described heightened awareness (e.g., “I realized I need to be more aware of my surroundings,” “I was just more aware,” “More aware of people around me”). These results indicate the alert prompted potentially meaningful behavior change for a small subset of students.

Table 1 Students’ Perceptions of a Clery Timely Warning

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The alert was informative	2.5	3.4	6.1	62.4	25.7
The alert was relevant to me	6.1	18.0	23.6	36.9	15.1
The safety tips were helpful	2.3	11.0	22.1	50.5	13.7
The safety tips gave me an idea of how to avoid sexual assault	9.5	17.1	30.0	34.7	7.9
I compared my experiences to those described in the alert	10.6	22.1	33.6	25.2	8.3
The alert was upsetting	5.2	15.1	18.2	38.7	22.5
The alert was too long	18.0	48.9	22.7	8.3	1.6
I changed my behavior as a result of receiving the alert	16.9	36.9	32.9	6.8	1.6

Numbers are the percentage of participants offering each response. Rows may not sum to 100% because some participants did not respond to every question.

RQ2: Demographic Factors

To address the possibility of demographic variation in students' perceptions of safety alerts, we focused on three variables: gender, race, and year in school. (Year in school is highly correlated with age, $r(433) = .73$, $P < .001$, but we view the former as more useful herein because it is more directly tied to student experience.) For each of these variables, we ran crosstabs with the eight perceptions of the alert (recall Table 1) to determine the percentage of each demographic grouping that reported holding each perception. To facilitate interpretation, we aggregated the response items used to measure perceptions from five to three, ranging from disagree (including strongly disagree) to agree (including strongly agree), with a neutral midpoint.

Gender proved to be the primary demographic variable that shaped perceptions. On five of the eight perceptions, there were significant group differences—with the most common result being that women's perceptions differed from those of men and, to a lesser extent, those of participants expressing other gender identities. Specifically, women (64.4%) were more likely to agree that the alert was relevant to them than were men (32.8%) or others (49.2%), $\chi^2(6, n = 443) = 39.60$, $P < .001$. Women (43.6%) were also far more likely to agree that they compared their experience to those described in the alert (men = 21.8%; others = 19.4%), $\chi^2(6, n = 443) = 35.44$, $P < .001$. In contrast, women (7.3%) were less likely than men (15.1%) or others (12.7%) to perceive the alert as too long, $\chi^2(6, n = 442) = 16.88$, $P = .01$. Other significant gender variation took the form more of disagreement than agreement. Specifically, women (32.2%) were more likely to disagree that the safety tips gave them an idea of how to avoid sexual assault (men = 16.9%; others = 22.6%), $\chi^2(6, n = 440) = 14.57$, $P = .024$. Men (30.3%) were more likely than women (16.2%) and others (21.0%) to disagree with the idea that the alert was upsetting, $\chi^2(6, n = 443) = 23.45$, $P < .001$.

In contrast to gender, there was a significant difference among racial groups on only one of the eight perceptions. White students (27.6%) were significantly more likely than students from other racial groups (multiracial or other = 17.3%, Asian = 15.4%, Latinx = 4.8%, Black = 0%) to disagree that the alert was relevant to them, $\chi^2(10, n = 443) = 19.51$, $P = .034$. This difference is noteworthy because the alert itself did not discuss race. It seems that White students' less precarious position on campus might make any threat—even one not explicitly about race—feel less relevant to them than to students from historically marginalized racial groups.

The final demographic variable we focused on was participants' year in school. This variable revealed a few noteworthy patterns, most of which pertained to first-year students and graduate students as distinct from other students (i.e., second-year, third-year, and fourth-year or later undergraduate students). In particular, first year students (77.0%) and, to a lesser extent, graduate students (69.7%) were more likely to agree that the safety tips were helpful than were others (second-year = 61.4%; third-year = 50.0%; fourth-year or later = 53.5%), $\chi^2(8, n = 435) = 26.01$, $P = .001$. Similarly, these two groups (first-year = 53.2%; graduate = 49.6%) were more likely than others (second-year = 39.7%; third-year = 32.3%; fourth-year or later = 29.6%) to agree that the alert's safety tips gave them an idea of how to avoid sexual assault, $\chi^2(8, n = 434) = 23.44$, $P = .003$. It seems possible that, at least so far as these undergraduate students go, there might be some waning belief in the utility of these alerts as they get farther into their college experience.

Interestingly, second-year students (82.8%) were significantly more likely than other groups (all others 65.1% or below) to perceive the alert to be upsetting, $\chi^2(8, n = 437) = 27.60$, $P < .001$. It is not entirely clear why this might be the case, but one potential explanation is that these students have been on campus long enough to become concerned about the potential for violence but not so long that they have grown desensitized to the content of the safety alerts. We observed significant group differences for year in school on one other item: "I compared my experiences to those described in the alert," $\chi^2(8, n = 437) = 18.47$, $P = .018$. No clear trend emerged in this variation.

RQ3: Contextual Factors

To consider how contextual factors might shape students' perceptions of safety alerts, we focused on three variables: living on campus, frequency of alert readership, and knowledge of the reason for the alert (running crosstabs on an aggregated three-part measure, as for RQ2).

As noted, approximately 30% of our participants lived on campus. We compared these students to those who did not live on campus. One significant difference emerged. Students who lived on campus (70.5%) were more likely to agree that the alert was upsetting than were those who did not live on campus (57.4%), $\chi^2(2, n = 435) = 6.99, P = .03$. On-campus students would, of course, have more opportunities to experience campus violence of the kind described in the alert. It seems this reality might be reflected in the different perceptions of the alert—although, it bears repeating, these two groups varied on this item alone.

As a second contextual factor, we explored frequency of alert readership. To do so, we compared three groups: those who reported “always” reading the campus safety alerts (56%), those who usually do (37%), and all others (7%), a group that included those who responded to our questions about frequency of alert readership with “rarely,” “never,” or “I’m not sure.” Significant differences emerged among these groups on four of our eight items. Specifically, those who always read the alerts (63.3%) were far more likely than others (usually = 38.0%; others = 37.9%) to find the alert relevant, $\chi^2(4, n = 443) = 31.15, P < .001$. This group of habitual readers was also the most likely to compare their experiences to those described in the alert (always = 39.9%; usually = 26.5%; others = 20.7%), $\chi^2(4, n = 443) = 17.85, P = .001$, and to *disagree* that the alert was too long (always = 77.1%; usually = 58.5%; others = 31.0%), $\chi^2(4, n = 442) = 40.96, P < .001$. In addition, habitual readers (68.5%) and others (65.5%) were more likely than those who usually read the alerts (50.0%) to find the alert upsetting, $\chi^2(4, n = 443) = 16.83, P = .002$.

As a final contextual factor, we looked at knowledge. Just 44% of participants reported (correctly) that the university was “required by law to send that e-mail/text alert.” We wondered if this group varied from those who either did not know (52%) that the university was required to send such alerts or the much smaller group who incorrectly thought the university was not required to do so (4%). For none of the eight perceptions did these groups vary significantly. It is nonetheless revealing that a considerable majority of students (56%) do not understand that the university is required by law to send such alerts. Further, that lack of understanding spanned demographic groups: neither race, gender, nor year in school was significantly related to how a participant responded to this question.

RQ4: Information Recall

RQ4 explored, via an open-ended prompt, the “one detail [that] most stood out” to each participant. By far the most-recalled detail was location—the location of the assault in general, the specific address listed, or that it occurred in a specific fraternity house. Together, these location-specific details were mentioned 190 times. For example, a common response was simply that “it was at a frat house” or “the location.” Others specifically mentioned “the address where the incident occurred.” Another commonly recalled detail was the event itself: what happened (a sexual assault) was mentioned 136 times. These responses included specifics, just stating “what happened,” or both. For instance, participants wrote, “that someone was sexually assaulted,” “the victim was sexually assaulted while drugged,” “just the fact that another sexual assault occurred on campus,” or, more simply, “what happened to the victim.”

Less common, but also mentioned, details included: the format of the alert, comments about the police being involved, the resources given, and the timing of the alert. For example, one respondent said, “I liked the format of the e-mail. The separation of the incident report from the prevention and safety tips stood out the most.” Another said, “the big orange header.” A third wrote, “The use of the bold yellow to highlight the wording ‘SAFETY WARNING’ stood out to me most. Not only was it at the top of the page, but my eye went directly to it.” Several noted issues with the police including, “the

police are responding,” “the police are investigating,” and “that the campus police are not involved.” Several other students mentioned the resources provided. For example, one student wrote, “I enjoyed the safety tricks and warning signs to look for.” Another said, “I really appreciate that the numbers were listed as to who to call if this happens again.” The timing of the alert was also mentioned. This included some students who thought it was timely (e.g., “one detail that stood out to me was how recent it was”) with others saying the opposite (e.g., “lack of timely relevance. Warning about a sexual assault a few days ago does very little to help the present.”).

Relatedly, a number of respondents specifically mentioned something more negative about the alert. For example, for some students a salient detail was that the wrong address was published initially. Several wrote “the address was incorrect,” or “the correction of the address.” Others discussed that the alert was sent out before being confirmed. Specifically, one respondent stated, “I was shocked it was released without being confirmed or without consulting the girl.” Finally, although not directly related to the question asked, several respondents used the opportunity to mention negatives they perceive with timely warnings. For example, one respondent wrote, “I notice how when I read these alerts sometimes it triggers some emotions for me when I was assaulted.” Several others commented on the victim-blaming language of the alerts. One respondent said, “I also feel frustrated by the idea that it’s a woman’s job to know what to do to avoid to be safe as opposed to investing in educating on consent and preventing these assaults.” Another commented on the lack of a response, “the lack of a substantial response plan/after action plan. It left me feeling like, okay? So now what? Another fraternity sexual assault: cool.” In sum, whereas most students recalled something about where the incident occurred or what the incident itself was, other students recalled a variety of other details.

Discussion

Responding to recent calls for more research on the implications of the Clery Act in higher education settings (Sulzer et al., 2022), our findings offer insight into students’ perceptions of a Clery timely warning in the immediate aftermath of it being sent. In general, the students surveyed found this alert informative and the safety tips helpful. A majority also found the alert upsetting, however. These contrasting findings are likely explained by the difficult subject matter of the alert—sexual assault. Notably, few respondents felt that the alert was too long, which may be encouraging news for university leaders crafting such alerts. Given that length was not a concern and most students found the alert informative and the safety tips helpful, the prioritization of safety content in these alerts may have value. Recall that, in the alert studied here, more than 70% of the words were devoted to safety and support resources. We also found some evidence that the value of that safety content waned with time: undergraduate students farther along in their studies were generally less likely than first-year students to find the safety tips helpful and to think they provided an idea of how to avoid sexual assault.

It is striking to note some of the other demographic differences in perceptions of this Clery timely warning. In particular, women experienced the alert quite differently from men and, to a lesser extent, people who identify as another gender. Women tended to take the alert more seriously, comparing their own experiences to the event shared in the alert and feeling that the alert was relevant to them. They were also less likely to think that the safety tips were helpful for avoiding sexual assault, or to find the alert too long. These findings make sense given what previous scholarship has identified related to the gendered nature of alerts (Wesley et al., 2022). Unfortunately, sexual assault is still a crime that disproportionately affects women and non-binary people (Cantor et al., 2019), potentially explaining these findings. Men, in contrast, stood out from the other groups in that they were more likely to disagree that the alert was upsetting. Race was a far less prominent factor than gender in this case, but White students appeared to be less concerned than students of Color about their safety on campus, given that they were less likely to think that the alert was relevant to them. Previous scholarship highlighting the racialized nature of

alerts (Pelfrey et al., 2018) illuminates students' of Color experiences with safety, albeit a different kind of safety than crime alerts typically warn about. Noting that women and people of Color are likely to experience more harm in campus environments than are men and White students, both by way of microaggressions and physical harm (Rankin & Reason, 2005), their heightened response to this alert may well reflect lived experience on campus and beyond.

Timely warnings are meant to alert the campus community when crimes happen on and around campus, so the fact that for most students the detail remembered was where the incident happened perhaps indicates that this particular alert achieved its purpose. If students know where something happened, they can avoid that location (cf., Madden, 2015). It bears underscoring, though, that in our sample very few students reported actually changing their behavior in response to the alert, which is consistent with prior research (Janosik, 2001, 2004; Janosik & Gehring, 2003; Jee & Good, 2017). Moreover, the fact that this alert specifically mentioned a fraternity may have facilitated more specific recall of location-based details, while also perhaps highlighting the way that timely warnings can impact the campus community's perceptions of sexual assault. For some, the fact that a fraternity house was the site of the attack may have reaffirmed their belief that fraternity members are the primary perpetrators of sexual assault on college campuses.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

The Clery Act mandates that campus administrators issue timely warnings when crimes happen; yet rates of crime, most notably sexual assault, have not decreased on colleges campuses since the Act's implementation (Gregory et al., 2016; Nobles et al., 2012). Even though a small subset of students report paying attention to alerts, it is likely that a larger number of students do not read alerts, let alone pay attention to the details. Further, of the students who read the alerts, a significant portion of them find the alerts upsetting, which warrants further exploration. Given the fragile state of mental health among college students (Lipson et al., 2022), creating unnecessary fear among students without actually reducing crime is unwarranted.

Ultimately, student affairs professionals and campus administrators should work with researchers and policymakers to address the federal law that requires timely warning alerts to ensure that the intention of the law matches the impact. As noted in other research, timely warnings related to sexual assault may not be effective at reducing crime (Linder et al., 2024) and may contribute to re-traumatization among a large number of students on campus, including both survivors and students of Color (Adams-Clark et al., 2020; Linder et al., 2024).

Until the law is effectively modified or repealed, university administrators should communicate with staff in advocacy and counseling-based student affairs roles that an alert is coming to help them prepare for the impact on students. Further, university leaders might consider including some kind of content warning—though with an awareness of the potential limitations of such an approach (Jones et al., 2020)—and should not include the words “sexual assault” in the subject line. These strategies could help reduce, though not eliminate, the re-traumatization of some survivors. In addition to providing resources for students in the alerts, student affairs professionals should engage students about how they feel about receiving alerts and provide strategies for managing well-being in the aftermath of an alert. The compliance culture around addressing sexual misconduct on college campuses has led to a situation wherein some higher education professionals do not feel comfortable discussing sexual violence with students for fear of needing to report students' disclosures (Holland et al., 2021). Given this, providing support for student affairs staff to engage with students about sexual assault, timely warnings, and general campus safety warrants further attention.

Future research should explore what is “upsetting” about the alerts to different groups of students, and here our data provide some initial paths to pursue. In addition to the demographic differences already described, we found that students who live on campus were more likely to find the alert upsetting, suggesting proximity is a factor in such a response. Future research should also explore perceptions of those students who do not read the alerts at all, as this behavior may in part reflect

a desire to avoid upsetting content. More generally, Clery alerts have the potential to be effective only if the campus community is actually reading them. Understanding why (many) students are not may enable university administrators to create processes that could better serve campus communities.

It is important to note that a majority of participants indicated they did not know that the university is required by law to issue timely warnings, a finding consistent with prior research (e.g., Latham-Staton et al., 2021). Certainly, such knowledge is not required as a foundation for impact (or lack of impact). We found no variation in the perceptions of participants based on knowing or not knowing the Clery timely warning requirement. A general lack of awareness about the Clery requirements may nevertheless suggest that universities need to do a better job raising awareness about timely warnings and their purpose.

Future research should further examine the consequences of timely warnings. Understanding students' experiences of safety as shaped by demographics and context—as we began to do herein—is crucial. Given that previous scholarship has found crime alerts to be unnecessarily racialized and victim-blaming (Adams-Clark et al., 2020; Pelfrey et al., 2018), future research should further explore how students of Color and victim-survivors of sexual violence experience Clery alerts. Such research will also need to interrogate the language used in the alerts. As others have found (Wesley et al., 2022; Pelfrey et al., 2018; Sherman, 2022), the language used may have harmful unintended consequences, such as reifying gendered and racialized stereotypes about sexual violence and campus safety.

Limitations

The present study focused on just one Clery alert. This approach had the advantage of asking participants about real and specific content, but also limited our ability to generalize. As discussed, students' reactions to this alert reflected its focus on a sexual assault that took place at a fraternity. Studying reactions to other alerts will be necessary to assess students' perceptions of timely warnings more broadly. Similarly, our study focused on a single university with its own particularities (e.g., large public institution, commuter campus). Although our sample was reasonably large for a single-campus study, it was a convenience sample that reflected a particular type of engaged student on a single campus. Future research on other campuses and with broader samples of students will help determine the extent to which the identified patterns hold more generally. These limitations notwithstanding, our hope is that the present study provides important initial insights and a productive foundation for future research.

Conclusion

Clery timely warnings have the potential to critically impact the campus community. This study provides valuable knowledge about students' perceptions of one timely warning. Most participants found the alert they received to be informative and the safety tips to be helpful; they also found it upsetting. Moreover, students' perceptions varied considerably based on factors such as gender, year in school, and whether they lived on campus. Student affairs professionals and campus administrators should consider these findings as they issue timely warnings on their campuses.

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