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## #Metoo social work education: Exposure to Interpersonal Violence Among Social Work Students

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### ABSTRACT

BSW and MSW social work students are effected by interpersonal violence on campus, yet little is known about their experiences during schooling. This study explored rates of victimization and associated effects since institutional enrollment among a sample of 734 MSW, PhD and BSW social work students across a university system. Over 14% of participants reported sexual violence, 17% reported stalking, and 30% reported sexual harassment. Over 8% reported physical intimate partner violence (IPV) and 19.4% reported psychological IPV. Social work students did not significantly differ from non-social work students in rates of violence, though they reported a significantly greater fear of victimization than other students. Findings illustrate the need for trauma-informed classrooms and awareness of Title IX policies among social work educators.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Awareness of interpersonal violence in the lives of college students has increased in recent years, spurred by policy changes, activism, and a burgeoning evidence base further solidifying scope and impact. Bachelor's-level (BSW) and master's-level (MSW) social work students are among those affected by interpersonal violence on campus, including personal victimization experiences. Students may be experiencing interpersonal violence at the same time that they are in training to be able to create healing and growth for others. Previous studies have explored violence experiences among social work students, including childhood trauma (Didham, Dromgoole, Csiernik, Karley, & Hurley, 2011), client-perpetrated violence (Alink, Euser, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2014; Criss, 2010), and sexual harassment in field placements (Moylan & Wood, 2016; Risley-Curtiss & Hudson, 1998). However, little is known about interpersonal violence (such as intimate partner violence [IPV], sexual violence [SV], stalking, cyber violence, and sexual harassment) victimization experiences that occurred during students' social work education. More information about prevalence, risk, and effect of interpersonal violence is needed to enhance the curricular and faculty response to social work students' interpersonal violence experiences. The current study addresses this gap by exploring interpersonal violence victimization among a sample of 734 BSW and MSW social work majors on eight campuses across a university system in the Southwest. The study explores the prevalence of interpersonal (IPV, SV, stalking, cyber violence, and sexual harassment) victimization of BSW and MSW social work students and associated potential impacts of violence on mental health, academics, and perception of campus climate. The study also explores social work student risk for victimization compared to non-social work students. Findings from this study guide social work education programs in addressing interpersonal violence experienced by students and increasing access to safe learning environments for the growth of future social workers.

## Literature review

### *Interpersonal violence on campus*

In recent years, campuses have conducted surveys of prevalence and perceptions of interpersonal violence (frequently referred to as “campus climate surveys”) among their students at unprecedented rates (Wood, Sulley, Kammer-Kerwick, Follingstad, & Busch-Armendariz, 2017). These studies have shed light on the number of students experiencing interpersonal violence such as SV, sexual harassment, cyber violence, stalking, and IPV during their time in college. Findings related to prevalence for each type of violence vary depending upon survey methodology, decisions related to the definition of different forms of violence, and other factors (Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2018), with most studies suggesting that college is a risky time for violence.

These types of interpersonal violence are considered sex discrimination under Title IX of the Educational Amendments (1972) and are prohibited at educational institutions receiving federal funds (Huerta, Cortina, Pang, Torges, & Magley, 2006). Recently, Busch-Armendariz et al. (2017) conducted a survey with students on eight campuses and found that 12% had experienced unwanted sexual touching and 6% had experienced rape since enrollment at their college. Similarly, the Association of American Universities found that across 27 universities, 11.7% of students had experienced SV by force or incapacitation, and 4.2% of students had experienced stalking during their time at school (Cantor et al., 2015). Previous studies have found physical violence in 10% to 30% of students in intimate relationships and upwards of 50% reporting forms of psychological violence (Cantor et al., 2015; Grover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008; Shorey, Stuart, & Cornelius, 2011). Critically, at a time when higher education is increasingly turning to digital tools and online learning, the extent of students’ exposure to cyber harassment (for example, using technology to threaten, stalk, or inflict emotional abuse) is less clear. One meta-analysis of studies in Western contexts found that 15% of adolescents aged 12 to 18 had experience with cyber bullying, and a study on a college campus in the United States found that over half of students knew of at least one victim of cyber violence (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014; Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Sexual harassment rates by peers are estimated to be 29.9% of graduate and undergraduate students during their time at college, with 19.3% of all students experiencing harassment by faculty or staff members (Wood, Hoefer, Kammer-Kerwick, Parra-Cardona, & Busch-Armendariz, 2018a).

### *Effect of interpersonal violence on college students*

Experiences of interpersonal violence while in school create a range of negative effects for college students. Sexual harassment victimization has been associated with decreased physical health, mental health issues including depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use, and academic disengagement (Avina & O’Donahue, 2002; Shinsako, Richman, & Rospenda, 2001; Street, Gradus, Stafford, & Kelly, 2007; Wood, Hoefer, et al., 2018). Collegiate IPV has been linked with depression, PTSD, anxiety, and academic disruptions (Brewer, Thomas, & Higdon, 2018; Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2017; Wood, Voth Schrag, & Busch-Armendariz, 2018b). Campus sexual assault has perhaps the most robust knowledge base, with identified impacts including physical and mental health challenges (Basile et al., 2016; Perilloux, Duntley, & Buss, 2012), increased drug and alcohol use (Kilpatrick et al., 2003; Young, Grey, Boyd, & McCabe, 2011), and a range of academic effects including decreased grade point average and increased risk of dropout (Jordan, Combs, & Smith, 2014). Students who experience interpersonal violence, including sexual and dating violence, before and during college are also at a sustained increased risk of future violence victimization (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003).

### *Risks factors for interpersonal violence among college students*

Students’ risk for interpersonal violence is affected by factors including gender, age, sexual orientation, and degree path. Female-identified students, transgender and gender nonconforming students,

and sexual minority students are at increased risk for sexual harassment and violence (Cantor et al., 2015; Coulter et al., 2017; Wood, Hoefer, et al., 2018). Risk for SV and peer-perpetrated sexual harassment is higher among younger students (Cantor et al., 2015; Wood, Hoefer, et al., 2018). Degree path or program of study may also influence risk. Students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics students may experience faculty- and staff-perpetrated sexual harassment at higher rates than other students (Fnais et al., 2014; National Academies of Science, Engineering and Math, 2018). Social work students have several risk factors for interpersonal violence, including being majority female and frequently from historically underrepresented groups. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2016) survey of programs indicates that over 85% of undergraduate social work students are female; 48.4% are aged 20 to 24 and 44.9% are from historically underrepresented groups. Graduate social work students are 85% female, over 72% are 35 and younger, and 45% are non-White (CSWE, 2016).

### ***Social work students' experiences of violence across the life span***

Demographic factors suggest that social work students may be at increased risk for interpersonal violence during their college experience, but recent studies suggest that they may have additional risk factors. Social work students may have higher rates of previous trauma exposure compared to the general college student population, including more students with family histories of mental health disorders and substance use and more experiences with violence (Zosky, 2013). Past experiences in childhood may influence a students' choice to pursue a helping profession and may be an important source of motivation and meaning for social work students (Zosky, 2013). Adverse childhood experiences are associated with negative outcomes into adulthood. Risks include mental and physical health issues, substance use, lower academic performance, and engaging in greater risky behaviors and fewer healthful behaviors (e.g., healthy eating, sufficient sleep; McGavock & Spatt, 2014; Windle et al., 2018). Previous trauma experiences may leave BSW and MSW students vulnerable to retraumatization upon entering the profession, putting them at increased risk of experiencing challenges that can affect their academic and career outcomes (Zosky, 2013).

Social work students may also experience exposure to traumatizing or retraumatizing material, as well as violence, within the context of social work education and fieldwork. Social work students are expected to complete field placements as part of their degree requirements, which usually involve interaction with clients and social service staff in an agency setting. During fieldwork, as well as in their future social work careers, students may be subject to harassment, verbal abuse, threats, and physical violence from both clients and other staff (Criss, 2010; Dunkel, Ageson, & Ralph, 2000; Moylan & Wood, 2016). In a recent study of the experiences of 515 undergraduate and graduate social work students, 55% of participants had experienced at least one incident of sexual harassment found on the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire during their time in the field (Moylan & Wood, 2016). These experiences were not distributed equally among all students but were more likely to be experienced by students who were younger, Latina/Hispanic, or in a committed relationship (Moylan & Wood, 2016). The most common perpetrators of sexual harassment in the field were other staff at the field placement and clients (Moylan & Wood, 2016). Social work curricula may also inadvertently cause secondary traumatization in students through activities such as case studies and role-plays that trigger past experiences (Zosky, 2013). Experiences of violence and harassment are not frequently discussed as part of social work curricula, and students may be reluctant to discuss their victimization or fear of victimization because of concerns about being perceived as incompetent or lacking commitment to the profession (Dunkel et al., 2000; Wood & Moylan, 2017). Students who experience violence in the field may fear future violence, compromising their ability to work effectively with clients, and may ultimately be more likely to leave the profession (Criss, 2010; Dunkel et al., 2000; Wood & Moylan, 2017).

The potential risk for interpersonal violence among social work students merits further attention. The lack of knowledge about the experiences and effects of interpersonal violence among social work students creates an important gap in knowledge that affects educators' abilities to implement

modifications in the classroom context for adult survivors of experiences of recent trauma. This study explores the experiences of violence of undergraduate and graduate social work students from a sample of self-identified majors across a university system. The study research questions are as follows:

- (1) What is the prevalence of interpersonal violence victimization (including IPV, SV, stalking, cyber violence, and sexual harassment) among undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW and PhD) social work students during their time in school?
- (2) Do social work students differ in the extent of interpersonal violence compared to students in other majors?
- (3) Are there differences between undergraduate- and graduate-level social work students?
- (4) To what extent is interpersonal victimization associated with mental health and academic outcomes for social work students?
- (5) To what extent is such victimization associated with social work students' perceptions of campus climate?

## Methods

Data for this study were taken a larger study examining the prevalence of IPV, SV, cyber violence, stalking, and sexual harassment at eight academic campuses across a Southwestern university system. The Internet-based survey was administered to students aged 18 or older enrolled at one of eight academic institutions. At seven campuses, a random sample of students was invited to participate (at one small campus a census sample was used). The anonymous survey was advertised as a safety survey and references to victimization did not appear in promotional or recruitment materials. Participants were randomized to three pathways to minimize the survey's length. Individual campuses designed promotion and incentives approaches, with a range of cash and prize drawings offered to participants. Institutional review board approval was gained from the sponsoring university prior to data collection, and all participants gave their informed consent. Across the eight academic campuses, 186,790 students were invited to participate and 26,417 completed the survey, for a response rate of 14.1%. See Busch-Armendariz et al. (2017) for extensive details on survey methodology. Of these, 734 students across seven of the eight campuses reported that they were currently pursuing a social work degree. [Table 1](#) describes study participants.

## Measures

### Demographics

The survey included comprehensive demographic questions assessing gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, living situation, and classification in school. Demographic questions were modified from the Johns Hopkins Climate Survey (Johns Hopkins, 2014). Students were asked to select their current program of study from a comprehensive list of programs provided on the included campuses.

### Victimization questions

A series of behaviorally specific measurement tools was used to assess victimization experiences. The time frame of reference for all victimization questions was since enrollment at the institution (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017). Students were considered to have experienced that form of victimization if they reported at least one instance since enrollment.

**Sexual harassment victimization.** Sexual harassment was measured with the Department of Defense Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ-DoD; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995). Measures

**Table 1.** Description of social work students ( $n = 734$ ) and comparison with full eight-campus sample ( $n=26,417$ ).

Demographics	Social Work Students		Full Sample	
	Mean/SD	% (N)	Mean/SD	% (N)
Current Gender Identity				
Female	87.6%	(642)	63.3%	(16,726)
Male	10.4%	(76)	35.3%	(9,334)
Non-Binary/Gender Non-Conforming/Other	2.1%	(15)	1.4%	(357)
Age at last birthday	29.1	9.4	24.6	8.06
Classification in School				
Freshman	5.2%	(38)	18.7%	(4,877)
Sophomore	5.4%	(40)	14.9%	(3,885)
Junior	12.9%	(95)	19.0%	(4,949)
Senior	14.0%	(103)	21.1%	(5,524)
Graduate/Professional	59.3%	(453)	25.20%	(6,578)
Other	0.7%	(5)	0.1%	(287)
Race/Ethnicity <sup>a</sup>				
White Non-Hispanic	41.1%	(302)	38.4%	(10,138)
Hispanic or Latino	43.5%	(319)	41.0%	(10,832)
Asian	4.0%	(29)	16.9%	(4,454)
African American	11.4%	(84)	6.1%	(1,614)
Bi or Multiracial	3.8%	(28)	3.4%	(886)
Another Race/Ethnicity	7.2%	(53)	6.8%	(1,795)
Current Living Situation				
On Campus Residence	9.0%	(63)	19.8%	(5,002)
Off Campus	70.4%	(494)	53.4%	(13,501)
Off Campus- With Parent/Guardian	20.7%	(145)	26.9%	(6,800)
Caring for children at home	27.0%	(189)	13.6%	(3,440)
Sexual Orientation				
Gay/Lesbian	4.2%	(31)	3.3%	(858)
Bisexual	5.9%	(43)	4.5%	(1,181)
Heterosexual/straight	85.4%	(626)	88.7%	(23,305)
Other	4.5%	(33)	3.5%	(917)
Relationship Status				
At least 1 intimate rel. while in school	519	(70.7%)	15,228	(57.9%)
No intimate rel. while in school	198	(27.0%)	10,253	(39.0%)
Prefer not to say	17	(2.3%)	808	(3.1%)

<sup>a</sup>Adds to more than 100% because participants could choose more than one category.

included 14 items assessing experiences of harassment perpetrated by peers and 16 items assessing harassment perpetrated by faculty or staff members. Items were behaviorally specific questions such as “treated you differently because of your sex” and “implied better treatment if you were sexually cooperative,” and participants were asked to indicate the number of times they had experienced each form of harassment since their enrollment. In the current sample of social work students, the reliability coefficient of the faculty and staff SEQ was 0.92 and the reliability of the peer SEQ was 0.78.

**Physical violence.** Physical IPV was measured using a behaviorally specific scale developed by the Center for Research on Violence Against Women (2015). The scale included nine items assessing types of physical violence perpetrated by a dating partner or spouse, specified as not having been done in a playful or joking manner. Items include “threw something at you,” “used a weapon,” and “beat you up,” with participants indicating the extent of behaviors (0–6+). In the current sample of social work students, the mean was 0.61 ( $SD = 3.79$ ) and the coefficient alpha was .98.

**Psychological violence.** A modified version of Follingstad’s (2011) behaviorally specific measure was used to assess psychological violence. It includes five items assessing frequency and severity of psychological violence (0–6+). It assesses the frequency of behaviors such as “threaten or intimidate you” or “tried to make personal decisions for you,” specifying actions not done in a playful or joking manner (Follingstad, 2011). In the current sample of social work students, the mean was 1.36 ( $SD = 4.45$ ), and the coefficient alpha was .96.

**Cyber violence.** The eight victimization items of the Cyber Abuse Dating Scale were modified to measure cyber violence victimization perpetrated by any individual during a student's time at university (Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). Items included "They sent threatening text messages to me" or "They used information from my social networking site to harass me or put me down" (Zweig et al., 2013). The social work sample mean for cyber violence severity was 0.18 ( $SD = 0.78$ ), and the coefficient alpha was .72.

**Sexual violence.** The ARC3 (2015) adaptation of the Sexual Experiences Survey Short Form Victimization (Koss et al., 2006) was used to assess extent of SV. Subscales included assessed the frequency and severity of unwanted sexual experiences, including unwanted sexual contact (non-rape) and rape (Koss et al., 2006). In the current sample of social work students, the mean for SV (non-rape) was 0.67 ( $SD = 2.64$ ; coefficient alpha=.88) and the mean for rape was 0.31 ( $SD = 1.59$ ; coefficient alpha = .84).

### **Posttraumatic stress disorder**

The Primary Care Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PC-PTSD 5) measure was used to screen for PTSD symptoms. A person is considered to screen positive for potential trauma symptoms with affirmative answers to three of four items. During the survey, participants answered questions for the reference frame of the previous month. Questions include "Have you had nightmares about it or thought about it when you did not want to?" and "Were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled" (Prins et al., 2003). In the current social work student sample, the mean was 1.22 ( $SD = 1.50$ ), and the coefficient alpha for the current sample was .84, indicating strong reliability. Using the established criteria that aPTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL) score of 3 indicates symptomology, 24.34% of the social work students screened positive for PTSD symptoms.

### **Depression**

The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CESD-10) was used to measure depression symptoms (Eaton, Muntaner, Smith, Tien, & Ybarra, 2004). The CESD is a 10-item scale that includes items such as "I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me" and "I felt lonely." Participants were asked about thoughts occurring in the last week and frequency. In the current sample the mean was 18.68 ( $SD = 5.52$ ), and the coefficient alpha for this scale was .83, indicating strong reliability. Using Andersen, Malmgren, Carter, & Patricks's (1994) cutoffs for clinical significance, 31.93% of the current sample of social work students screened positive for depression symptomatology.

### **Academic disengagement**

Academic disengagement was measured using a five-item scale modified for ARC3 (2015) from Hanisch and Hulin (1990) and Huerta et al. (2006). Participants were asked items that assess academic disengagement, including being late for class or doing poor work. The scale also assesses the frequency of behaviors (range *never* to *always*). In the current sample of social work students, the mean was 2.48 ( $SD=2.02$ ), and the coefficient alpha was .60, indicating some potential issues with reliability.

### **Sense of community on campus**

Students' sense of community on campus was measured using eight items adapted from Peterson, Speer, and McMillan (2008). These items assess sense of belonging at the university ("I belong at this university," "I feel like a member of this university") and the ability of the university to meet the student's expectations and needs ("I can get what I need at this university," "This university helps fulfill my needs"). In the sample of social work students, the mean was 28.16 ( $SD = 6.94$ , range 8–40), and the coefficient alpha was .92, indicating strong reliability.

### **Sense of safety from violence**

Students' feelings of safety from experiencing interpersonal violence on campus were measured using items from the Rutgers Campus Climate Survey (McMahon, Stepleton, O'Connor, & Cusano, 2014). Items were measured using a five-item Likert response set and included "On or around this campus, I feel safe from [sexual harassment, dating/domestic violence, SV, stalking]." In the social work student sample, the mean was 10.97 ( $SD = 3.66$ , range 0–16), with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of safety. The coefficient alpha for this scale was .92, indicating strong reliability.

### **Participants**

Table 1 describes the demographics of the included social work students, as well as the overall sample of university students. The social work student sample included 734 self-identified social work students across seven campuses of a university system in the Southwest. Nearly 60% of social work students (59.3%) identified as graduate (MSW or PhD) students, with 88% identifying as female. Students were 29.1 years ( $SD = 9.4$ ) old on average. Forty-four percent of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latino, 41% identified as White, and 11% identified as African American. Most students (91%) were living off campus, and 27% were caring for children in the home. Similar to demographics for social work students nationwide (CSWE, 2016), these students varied from the broader population of climate survey respondents in a number of important ways. Compared to the broader sample, more social work students were female, older, and graduate students. A greater proportion of social workers identified as African American and fewer identified as Asian. More social work students resided off campus, and more reported caring for a child at home (see Table 1).

### **Data analysis**

Descriptive statistics and correlations were analyzed to understand the prevalence and effect of forms of victimization among social work students. Chi-square analyses were performed to assess any differences in violence exposure between undergraduate and graduate social work students. Two forms of analysis were conducted to assess the extent to which social work students are similar or different from other (non-social work) students in terms of their exposure to violence, experience of potential outcomes, and perceptions of campus climate. First,  $t$  tests were conducted to assess differences between social work students and other students across experiences of victimization and key outcomes. A series of propensity score matching (PSM) models followed the  $t$  tests because social work students are demographically different from the broader student population on factors including age and gender, which are both known to be associated with victimization. PSM matches social work and non-social work students on their conditional probability of group membership, allowing for the control, identification, and balance of covariates among the two groups (Guo & Frasier, 2014; Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1983). PSM also allows for the simultaneous controlling of a range of covariates, creating two groups (social work students and non-social work students) that are balanced across the identified covariates. PSM allows for the minimization of selection effects, creating a less biased comparison of group outcomes (Guo & Frasier, 2014). Based on observed differences between social work students and the broader student population, the groups were matched on the following covariates: age, gender, housing status, current relationship status, sexual orientation, and race. PSM models omit any variance attributable to observed differences in covariates between social work students and non-social work students.

### **Results**

Table 2 provides frequencies of forms of victimization experiences for social work students. Sexual harassment by students (30%) and faculty/staff (21%) was the most frequently reported type of victimization for social work students. Students also reported experiences of SV (14.4%), rape (8.9%), physical (8.6%) and

**Table 2.** Interpersonal violence victimization experiences among social work students during their time at school and differences between bachelor's and graduate students.

	BSW students		MSW/PhD students		$\chi^2$ <sup>a</sup>	All social work students		$N$ <sup>b</sup>
	%	n	%	n		%	n	
<b>Intimate partner violence<sup>c</sup></b>								
Physical	8.4	15	8.7	30	0.01	8.6	45	523
Psychological	21.7	39	18.3	63	0.88	19.4	102	525
<b>Sexual violence</b>								
Sexual violence (other than rape)	14.5	27	14.2	40	0.01	14.4	67	467
Rape	12.0	22	6.8	19	3.7	8.9	41	462
Cyber violence	11.7	31	8.2	36	2.4	9.5	67	707
Stalking	17.7	34	16.5	48	0.12	17.0	82	483
Sexual harassment by other students	30.6	59	29.8	87	0.03	30.1	146	485
Sexual harassment by faculty/staff	22.6	66	18.6	35	1.09	21.0	101	480

<sup>a</sup>No significant differences were observed between BSW and MSW/PhD students.

<sup>b</sup>*N* varies due to multiple survey pathways. Students were randomized into one of three survey versions, each with a different set of questions to reduce participant fatigue. For information, see (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017).

<sup>c</sup>Intimate partner violence is assessed among students who have had a partner since enrollment; all other forms of victimization are assessed among all students.

psychological (19.4) IPV, and cyber violence (9.5%), with no observed differences in rates of victimization between BSW students and graduate (MSW/PhD) social work students.

Bivariate correlations observed between form of victimization and key outcome measures are provided in Table 3. Significant positive correlations were observed between all of the following forms of victimization, with increasing levels of one form of violence victimization correlated with increasing levels of the other: physical IPV, psychological IPV, SV (non-rape), rape, cyber violence, and stalking. However, no association was observed between student-perpetrated sexual harassment and physical IPV or cyber violence victimization, and there was no observed correlation between faculty/staff-perpetrated harassment and physical IPV, any form of SV, and cyber violence victimization. Large effect sizes were observed between extent of physical and psychological IPV ( $r = 0.62, p < .001$ ) and SV and rape ( $r = 0.84, p < .001$ ). Medium effect sizes were observed between sexual violence and physical ( $r = 0.34, p < .001$ ) and psychological IPV ( $r = 0.34, p < .001$ ), between psychological IPV and stalking ( $r = 0.39, p < .001$ ), between stalking and sexual harassment by students, and between sexual harassment by students and sexual harassment by staff ( $r = 0.44, p < .001$ ). Medium effect sizes were also observed between PTSD and depression ( $r = 0.46, p < .001$ ) and sense of community on campus and sense of safety from interpersonal violence ( $r = 0.43, p < .001$ ). Significant correlations were also observed between many of the victimization types and key outcomes such as depression, PTSD, academic disengagement, sense of community, and sense of safety from violence, but all fell within Cohen's (1992) guidelines for a small effect.

A series of *t* tests and PSM analyses was run to understand the extent to which social work students are similar or different from their university peers in terms of either victimization extent or in potential outcomes (see Table 4). No significant differences in extent of any type of interpersonal violence victimization were observed in *t* tests for differences between social work students and non-social work students. Social work students had significantly higher PTSD symptomology ( $t = -4.16; p < .001$ ; 95% confidence interval [CI],  $-0.32$  to  $-0.11$ ), lower levels of academic disengagement behaviors ( $t = 8.03; p < .001$ ; 95% CI,  $0.56$ – $0.92$ ), lower feelings of community on campus ( $t = 4.95; p < .001$ ; 95% CI,  $0.82$ – $1.89$ ), and less sense of safety from interpersonal violence ( $t = 6.44; p < .001$ ; 95% CI,  $0.60$ – $1.13$ ) than non-social work students. All differences fell within Cohen's (1992) range for small effect sizes. In the PSM models, only one model had a significant treatment effect for social work students. Social work students' sense of safety from interpersonal violence was lower than that of non-social work students after PSM, ( $\beta = -0.43; Z = -2.17; p = .03$ ; 95% CI,  $-0.82$  to  $-0.04$ ). This suggested that any apparent differences in victimization or effect between social work students and other students, other than the difference in social work students' sense of safety, is attributable to the characteristics that students were matched on.

**Table 3.** Bivariate correlations between victimization, mental health, and academic indicators.

		Mean	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Physical IPV	0.61	3.8	0-54	—											
2	Psychological IPV	1.4	4.5	0-35	0.62***	—										
3	Sexual violence (non-rape)	0.67	2.6	0-28	0.34***	0.34***	—									
4	Rape	0.31	1.6	0-18	0.19***	0.46***	0.84***	—								
5	Cyber violence	0.43	1.0	0-9	0.16***	0.27***	0.11*	0.14**	—							
6	Stalking	0.69	3.0	0-45	0.13*	0.39***	0.11*	0.11*	0.12*	—						
7	Sexual harassment: students	4.6	11.7	0-116	0.00	0.26***	0.21***	0.13***	0.35***	—						
8	Sexual harassment: faculty/staff	1.1	3.6	0-29	0.06	0.11*	0.06	0.05	0.03	0.12**	—					
9	Depression Symptomology	18.7	5.5	10-40	0.05	0.16***	0.08	0.09	0.09*	0.15**	0.21***	—				
10	PTSD symptomology	1.2	1.5	0-4	0.06	0.16***	0.12*	0.15**	0.05	0.15***	0.11*	0.19***	—			
11	Academic disengagement	2.5	2.0	0-11	0.14**	0.19***	0.13***	0.10*	0.08*	0.17***	0.24***	0.15***	0.24***	—		
12	Sense of campus community	28.2	6.9	8-40	-0.15***	-0.12***	-0.04	-0.00	0.03	-0.05	-0.04	-0.13**	-0.26***	-0.11**	-0.08*	—
13	Sense of safety from interpersonal violence	11.0	3.7	0-16	-0.15***	-0.15***	-0.15***	-0.07	-0.05	-0.11*	-0.24***	-0.19***	-0.22***	-0.16***	-0.09*	0.43***

Notes. IPV = intimate partner violence; PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** *t* Test and propensity score analysis for differences in victimization between social work students and other students.

	Social work mean	<i>t</i> Test for differences in group mean				Treatment effect for social workers after matching <sup>a</sup>				
		Non-social work mean	Cohen's <i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	Coefficient	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Physical IPV	0.61	0.51	-0.04	-0.08	.42	-0.34 to 0.14	0.24	1.06	.29	-0.20 to 0.68
Psychological IPV	1.36	1.15	-0.06	-1.28	.20	-0.54 to 0.11	0.96	1.18	.24	-0.64 to 2.55
Sexual violence (non-rape)	0.81	0.72	-0.04	-0.66	.51	-0.33 to 0.12	0.05	0.46	.64	-0.16 to 0.26
Rape	0.31	0.23	-0.05	-1.02	.31	-0.22 to 0.07	0.04	0.44	.66	-0.13 to 0.20
Cyber violence	0.43	0.40	-0.03	-0.74	.46	-0.10 to 0.04	-0.07	-1.61	.11	-0.16 to 0.02
Student sexual harassment	2.79	3.31	0.06	1.35	.18	-0.24 to 1.29	-0.29	-0.69	.49	-1.11 to 0.53
Faculty/staff sexual harassment	1.13	1.35	0.04	0.89	.37	-0.27 to 0.71	-0.21	-1.07	.28	-0.60 to 0.17
Depression symptomatology	18.68	18.67	-0.00	-0.04	.96	-0.43 to 0.41	0.07	0.13	.90	-1.01 to 1.15
PTSD symptomatology	1.22	1.00	-0.16	-4.16	.00	-0.32 to -0.11	0.01	0.09	.87	-0.15 to 0.18
Academic disengagement	2.48	3.22	0.30	8.03	.00	0.56 to 0.92	0.01	0.07	.94	-0.29 to 0.32
Sense of community on campus	28.16	29.51	0.19	4.95	.00	0.82 to 1.89	-0.76	-1.60	.11	-1.69 to 0.17
Sense of safety from interpersonal violence	10.97	11.84	0.25	6.44	.00	0.60 to 1.13	-0.43	-2.17	.03	-0.82 to -0.04

Notes: CI = confidence interval; IPV = intimate partner violence; PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder.

<sup>a</sup>Groups were matched on age, gender, housing status, current relationship status, sexual orientation, and race using 1:(*n*) nearest neighbor matching.



## Discussion

Students are pursuing a social work education during a time that is central to their future development as practitioners and professionals. The current study sheds light on social work students' personal experiences with interpersonal violence during that critical period. Study findings demonstrate that, like other college students, a substantial percentage of BSW, MSW, and PhD social work students have experienced interpersonal violence while at university. These rates of violence were higher than Cantor et al.'s (2015) survey of undergraduate students. Social work students did not significantly differ in victimization experiences from a matched sample of non-social work students, nor were there differences between undergraduate and graduate social workers. This may indicate that identifying as a social work student is not a risk factor itself, but the demographic composition of the student body of social work students as diverse and largely female helps to explain high victimization rates. Many types of violence were significantly correlated with each other, indicating that polyvictimization and the subsequent trauma effects are salient concerns for many social work students. For faculty and college service providers, it is important to keep in mind that a student who is reporting a specific incident of violence may have a history of victimization that she is not sharing but that may still be affecting her outcomes, well-being, and perceptions of the current incident.

Similar to other studies of violence among college populations, social work student experiences of victimization were positively correlated with a range of consequences, including increased depression and PTSD symptomology, more academic disengagement behaviors, a decreased sense of community on campus, and a decreased sense of safety from future interpersonal violence (Brewer et al., 2018; Jordan et al., 2014; Wood, Voth Schrag, & Busch-Armendariz, 2018). Importantly, the extent of psychological violence by an intimate partner and sexual harassment had notable correlations with indicators like student mental health and academic engagement, suggesting that, from an effect perspective, nonphysical forms of victimization should be as concerning to social work educators as physical violence. Sexual harassment by students was as strongly correlated with academic disengagement as depression symptomology and more strongly correlated than PTSD symptomology. Promoting prosocial bystander behaviors among social work students could be an important strategy for supporting social work students who are victims of sexual harassment and decreasing their risk of academic disengagement.

Social work students felt significantly less safe from interpersonal violence victimization than non-social work students. There are several possible reasons for this. Social work education includes exposure to information about the prevalence of interpersonal violence victimization, meaning that students may have increased knowledge of potential risks (Cunningham, 2004). Alternatively, this finding could be an indication of trauma histories that date back prior to university admittance, which may motivate students' choice of academic discipline (Black, Jefferys, & Hartley, 1993). Previous trauma histories may both decrease students' feelings of safety from violence and increase their exposure to social workers, potentially increasing their likelihood of pursuing a social work career (Black et al., 1993). Finally, this finding could be a factor of age and exposure to risk, given that participants in the study are overwhelmingly female and a majority are graduate students. Previously, Smith et al. (2003) found that female-identified participants are at higher risk for interpersonal violence and risk increases with age and exposure to the college environment.

## Implications for social work education

Study findings indicate that students are experiencing violence at the same alarming rates as other students during their time in social work programs. Social work educators and administrators must respond to enhance safety and support among students. As trauma-informed care (TIC) has increased in use with clients, some scholars have posited that trauma-informed education is needed in the social work classroom (Cunningham, 2004). The basic tenant of TIC is the importance of understanding the ways in which a host of traumatic experiences can affect the lives, outcomes, perspectives, and plans of individuals involved in systems of care (Harris & Fallot, 2001). TIC is based in trauma theory, which recognizes the environmental

and generational origins of trauma and resulting effects (Herman, 1992). Applied to the college classroom, educators must understand the context of their students, how that context interacts with the educational environment, and how to build and shift that educational environment to accommodate the needs of trauma survivors as well as the educational goals and outcomes for future social workers. In line with our responsibilities outlined in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) *Code of Ethics*, trauma-informed social work educators talk the talk and walk the walk by recognizing the impact of trauma, while continually conveying respect and compassion; appreciating the complex relationships between poverty, oppression, and trauma; and seeking to avoid overpathologizing students (Levenson, 2017).

Social work students reported experiencing a disturbingly high rate of sexual harassment across the board. Thirty percent of social work students reported experiences of sexual harassment by other students, which is 5% higher than the exposure reported by the population of university students overall (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2017). This raises some specific considerations for social work education. The data cannot delineate between harassment perpetrated by a fellow social work student or by faculty/staff in a given academic unit. However, it is clear that faculty must be on guard against harassment in our classrooms and halls, acting as effective bystanders to harassment in whatever form it is perpetrated and in so doing providing students an example of effective intervention (McMahon, 2015). Given our professional mandate to prepare students to go into practice in a personal interaction-oriented field, there is also a need to prepare our students to identify, address, and respond to harassment in their professional lives, including in field practicum. For sexual harassment in the field, Moylan and Wood (2016) recommend a range of steps to reduce or respond to harassment. These include having active policies in place regarding reassignment of clients from practicum students where sexual harassment has taken place, reviewing harassment policies of field sites as part of agency onboarding, and providing comprehensive safety and harassment education for field sites and instructors along with university faculty and staff.

This work also points to the importance of effective violence prevention efforts of campuses more broadly. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that have implemented public health-style prevention programming (e.g., awareness campaigns and prosocial messaging) and bystander education programs have reported a reduction in violence preparation (Coker, Bush, & Fisher et al., 2016; Petersen et al., 2018). Many of these interventions are aimed at addressing perpetration of SV specifically. Recent research suggests that adaptations of bystander programs for dating violence are effective, and the findings of the current study suggest that adaptations of prevention programs that generalize them to additional forms of violence, including IPV and sexual harassment, are warranted (Coker et al., 2016).

### ***Social work faculty: Dual roles and dual relationships***

Social work faculty have an ethical obligation to avoid dual relationships with their students (NASW, 2017). In the context of trauma work, it is critical to note that working to establish a trauma-informed education environment does not (and should not) mean becoming a trauma therapist. Even for social work faculty who have skills in trauma treatment, as educators roles with students are different and differ from the power structure and frameworks established with clients (NASW, 2017). As such, it becomes the responsibility of the educator to tend their boundaries with students carefully, being able to make referrals for therapy if requested (Zosky, 2013). Faculty can model and encourage self-care and be responsive to requests for accommodations from students (Zosky, 2013).

Trauma-informed responses are especially salient in a legal environment in which many social work faculty may be mandated by their institutions to report any disclosures of student experience of interpersonal violence to institutional officials as part of Title IX policy. Recent Title IX and subsequent government-issued guidance requires universities to address issues that impede safe learning environments and disrupt access to equal education, including addressing interpersonal violence in primary, secondary, and postsecondary contexts (Title IX of the Education Amendments



Act of 1972, 2018). One facet of the law compels, or mandates, reporting of incidents of violence disclosed to faculty by students (Holland, Cortina, & Freyd, 2018).

Though institutions differ regarding who is an officially considered mandated reporter and what types of experiences must be reported, many social work faculty have to report victimization experiences of students (Flahrtey, 2015). This can be particularly problematic in the social work curriculum, which involves self-reflection and integration for ethical practice. Social work faculty have the opportunity to adopt strategies to support survivors of violence while meeting the expectations of campus administrators. Faculty members should be upfront with their status as a mandatory reporter beginning the first day of class and provide documentation and resources in the syllabus and other written material. Students are empowered with more options when they are informed of what faculty, staff, and members of campus security are mandated to report and given information on campus or community resources that are considered confidential (not mandated reporters). Faculty in mentoring or other one-on-one situations also need to be upfront about reporting requirements if they sense that a student might be preparing to disclose a traumatic incident. Finally, when a report is triggered, faculty will be able to balance respect for students' wishes with the context of reporting policies (Parsley, 2016). Asking a survivor about participating in a report and informing him or her about the process going forward will enhance their experience with regard to power and agency and eventually as social work professionals. Beyond departments of social work, training campus security and key student service personnel on strategies for minimizing retraumatization within the reporting experience could positively benefit students across campus.

### ***Limitations***

There are a number of limitations that should be considered in evaluating the outcomes of the current study. First, victimization measures only capture victimization experiences since enrollment in the current institution. Social work students may have a history of victimization that is not captured that may influence their outcomes. Though the study was not advertised as a victimization survey, students may have been more likely to participate in the study if they felt strongly invested in it, including if they had personal experiences with the forms of violence studied, which could distort prevalence findings. The measures included are all cross-sectional, meaning that, though theoretically informed assumptions about directionality between victimization and well-being outcomes are built into the study, definitive statements of causality cannot be made. Participants are majority graduate or nontraditional undergraduate, limiting knowledge about traditionally aged BSW students. More information is needed about how these groups differ in their experiences. Further, participants attend one university system in the same state, so findings related to extent of exposure may not generalize to other university systems or other types of higher education institutions (for example, liberal arts colleges, community colleges).

### ***Conclusion***

The #metoo movement teaches us both the power of collective voice and how far we have to go in building safe spaces for survivors of interpersonal violence. Social work education must be better prepared to respond compassionately and competently to students who are survivors of interpersonal violence, both those who have experienced violence while in school and those who bring historical experiences with them as part of the journey that led them to our profession. It will require further critical thinking about curricular decisions and pedagogical methods as well as a willingness on the part of each faculty person to integrate institutional policy and trauma-informed skills. Increased attention to student experience of violence past and present and furthering of trauma-informed classroom spaces could transform not only social work education but the social work profession and the experience of those who benefit from it. Trauma-informed social work education can set the stage for these first responders to be social change-makers. More survivors might have the experience of their stories being heard and believed, including social work students and practitioners.

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