Keeping Quiet

Why do nineteen of twenty rapes on U.S. campuses go unreported? An investigative reporter spent nine months finding the answers.

BY LESLIE FRIDAY

Kristen Lombardi's first project for the Center for Public Integrity, "The Hidden Costs of Clean Coal," won a 2009 best online reporting award from the Society of Environmental Journalists.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS HARTLOVE
Journalist Kristen Lombardi has shed light on some very dark places. It was Lombardi, writing in the *Boston Phoenix* in 2001, who broke the horrific story of sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, hidden for decades by the Boston archdiocese. The response, especially from now-adult victims of the abuse, was so powerful that the thirty-one-year-old College of Communication graduate came away convinced her reporting could change people’s lives for the better. The story also lit a fire under competing newspapers: the *Boston Globe*’s investigative team picked up the story, winning a 2003 Pulitzer for its coverage. Lombardi (COM’95) would eventually write more than a dozen articles on the topic, winning recognition from the Poynter Institute and *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Now her persistent legwork has exposed another alarming story: the hugely underreported problem of sexual assault on college campuses. Working for the Washington, D.C.–based nonprofit Center for Public Integrity, which aims to make institutional power more transparent and accountable by producing original investigative journalism about public issues, and acting on tips from victim advocates, Lombardi and colleague Kristin Jones combed police and medical records for nine months. They examined a decade of complaints filed with the U.S. Department of Education, and they surveyed 152 crisis centers and clinics on or near college campuses nationwide. After extensive interviews with rape victims, counselors, police, and university administrators, the pair uncovered some disturbing facts about the reporting and the consequences of sexual assaults on campus.

Lombardi found that one study, paid for by the U.S. Justice Department, estimated that one in five women attending college will be the victim of sexual assault by the time she graduates. Of these, less than 5 percent will report the incident. She learned that many victims don’t report sexual attacks because they blame themselves or they aren’t sure they’re actually victims. She learned that friends often don’t know how to respond, and colleges don’t necessarily teach students how to help if a friend is assaulted. And she learned that administrators at some schools, eager to present a crime-free image, don’t always encourage complete reporting of the number of sexual assaults.

The two journalists published their findings in a series of reports, titled “Sexual Assault on Campus: A Frustrating Search for Justice,” on the Center for Public Integrity Web site.

“This is probably the most difficult thing I’ve ever reported on,” Lombardi says. “No one has worked at connecting dots and showing a bigger picture and possibly exposing systemic problems in schools’ sexual assault reporting.”

**One report commissioned by the Justice Department found that fewer than half of the women who were raped identify the event as rape. Many blame themselves for failing to prevent the attack.**

Lombardi came to the project well prepared. In addition to her research on years of sexual crimes, she had completed a fellowship at the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a Columbia School of Journalism project that teaches journalists how to report on violence, conflict, and tragedy. One of the most important skills they learn at Dart is how to interview victims without traumatizing them again.

She first approached her subjects by phone, sometimes talking to them for as long as four hours. When she felt she’d gained their trust, she met them in person.

“Those conversations really went wherever people
Safety in Numbers

In their series on sexual assault on U.S. college campuses written for the Center for Public Integrity, investigative journalists Kristen Lombardi (COM’95) and Kristin Jones found that the main reason most universities report unrealistically low numbers of sexual assault is the reluctance of victims to come forward.

But another reason campus rapes are underreported, Lombardi found, is that most universities count only those assaults that happen on campus and are reported to police, as is mandated by the Clery Act, which requires all schools receiving federal aid to report crime statistics to the U.S. Department of Education. Those limited criteria allowed three quarters (3,068 of 3,973) of U.S. four-year colleges and universities to report no sexual offenses in 2006, and another 501 to report just one or two.

“…”We’re talking a fair number of big, big schools claiming zero,” says Lombardi. “It just stretches common sense.”

But Lombardi also found sixty-one schools that reported assaults in the double digits. At Harvard, for example, perhaps the most zealous reporter of sexual assaults, police reported forty-one incidents in 2006, fifty-two in 2007, and thirty-five in 2008. That’s because Harvard police include incidents that occur in off-campus apartments and on study-abroad trips and those that are confidentially reported to rape counselors.

Boston University, whose interpretation of Clery Act requirements has been in line with that of most universities, reported three sexual assaults in 2006, nine in 2007, and nine in 2008. Although the numbers do not include off-campus assaults, they do include incidents that occur on abutting public property or on University-owned property that is not on campus, says Thomas Robbins, chief of the BU police department.

Robbins says his department is interested in complete reporting, prompting it recently to reach out to Harvard, to learn how that school harvests numbers from disparate confidential sources without redundancy and overreporting.

“It would be beneficial to have comprehensive numbers,” he says. “We’ve been talking about how to do that. It’s one reason we encourage all victims of crimes to come forward.”

Regardless of the method of reporting, Robbins says, the most important thing is that victims get the physical and emotional help they need.

Margaret Ross, director of behavioral medicine at BU Student Health Services, agrees. “Knowing the actual prevalence of assault will be helpful,” says Ross. “And knowing more about how this is being reported on the campus will help us with our process, but the most important thing for us is to be sure that each student receives the care, expert information, and compassion that he or she needs. Kristen Lombardi’s work, by calling attention to the problems of underreporting, does a great service for all of us who work on university campuses.” LF

WEB EXTRA
Read Kristen Lombardi’s reports on campus sexual abuse at bu.edu/bostonia.
schools continue to prohibit all parties from revealing the proceedings or the outcomes.

Victims say these processes “leave them feeling like victims a second time,” says Lombardi. Yet college administrators say they believe the existing policies provide “a fair and effective way to deal with ultrasensitive allegations,” she writes.

**DENIAL AS A COPING MECHANISM**

Lombardi knew, of course, that accusing someone of rape is difficult and frightening, but she was surprised to learn how many victims have trouble admitting that what happened to them was rape. According to a report commissioned by the Justice Department, fewer than half of college women who are raped identify it as rape, even privately. The alleged assailants were in some cases people they considered friends, and the victims have trouble acknowledging such a betrayal.

Some victims blame themselves for drinking too much, or failing to protect themselves. Many just want to push the painful incident to the back of their mind and get on with their life.

Victims’ reluctance to report campus rape, Lombardi believes, is unlikely to rattle many college administrators. Her research suggests that colleges, competitive and reputation-conscious, are eager to advertise that their communities are safe. In fact, she and Jones assert that some schools conveniently interpret the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), intended to protect a student’s privacy, as justification for concealing accusations of rape. But the opposite is true, says Lombardi. FERPA states that colleges can release names of students found responsible for committing violent acts.

A 2002 federal study found that the nearly one in three schools that underreport crime statistics may be in violation of the Clery Act, which requires that universities receiving federal aid disclose information about crimes on or near campuses.

The series’ release sparked immediate interest. Lombardi spoke on National Public Radio’s *Talk of the Nation* and fielded interviews, from CNN and *Nightline* to college newspapers. But the responses she valued most came from student victims. She says many have e-mailed thanking her for her compassion and care with their stories.

Mallory Shear-Heyman—a former Bucknell University student who was featured in the report—wrote to say the series was “spreading like wildfire” around campus. Her former school has already voted to address mediation practices this spring, a sign that the series is making a difference.

And that, Lombardi says, is the whole point. ■

**KRISTEN LOMBARDI: From Here to There**

Kristen Lombardi never fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming an actress or a television broadcaster.

Fresh out of the University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in mass communication and English, she interned with Fox in the San Francisco Bay area, where she rewrote copy for the morning show anchor.

“It just really struck me that I’d always have to deal with image in a TV news world,” Lombardi says.

The Pittsburgh native started following the station’s investigative reporter, who was doing, she says, “the real fun stuff.”

“Early on I realized that I preferred to be more than a talking head newscaster-type,” she says. “If I was ever going to do anything, it would require something more than an afternoon to put together.”

A down job market led her to pursue a master’s degree at BU’s College of Communication. After graduating from BU in 1995, Lombardi found work at the newspaper chain that is now the Community Newspaper Company, covering communities from Dover to Newton, Massachusetts. Later, at the *Boston Phoenix*, her investigative chops emerged in her reporting of the Boston archdiocese sex scandal.

In 2007, working for New York City’s *Village Voice*, she won an AltWeeklies Award for her series “Death by Dust,” about the link between Ground Zero’s toxic cloud and cancer. Her first project with the Center for Public Integrity, “The Hidden Costs of Clean Coal,” won her a 2009 best online reporting award from the Society of Environmental Journalists.

Dan Kennedy, an assistant professor of journalism at Northeastern University and a former colleague of Lombardi’s at the *Phoenix*, remembers two things about her: she was always wrestling with a large stack of documents, and she never gave up on an interview until she got what she wanted.

“I think that she is really motivated by a strong sense of social justice,” says Kennedy (MET’84). “She doesn’t mind burrowing in and not coming up for air until she’s got something really deep and meaningful.” LF