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WIDENING THE SCOPE: EXPLORING STUDENT EXPERIENCES RESPONDING TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON CAMPUS

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Research on the issue of sexual violence on college campuses has often focused on perpetrators and survivors of violence, including their actions, experiences, and health outcomes. This project focuses instead on the experiences of college students as third parties that become aware of violence within their peer groups. Semi-structured interviews with 12 Washington University in St. Louis students revealed a variety of nuanced experiences responding to incidents of sexual violence. One common theme among the interviews included a complex process of balancing the needs of all individuals within one's peer group in order to make decisions about how to respond in the aftermath of an assault. Knowledge about the dynamics of sexual violence and campus resources for survivors, as well as group norms and the quality of participants' relationships with other affected parties, impacted the choices students made about how to balance the needs of various individuals. The interviews highlighted the substantial role that third parties play in responding to incidents of sexual violence. Specific conclusions about this response role were combined with participants' perspectives on the experience of navigating campus support systems to suggest new approaches to assault prevention and response on college campuses. These new approaches include a greater focus on providing support to third parties who are impacted by violence, increased training initiatives that focus on giving students the tools to support one another, and developing institutional responses to violence that focus more community level solutions than individual support or sanctions.