



Addressing Sexual Assault While Abroad

Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

The following report is based on open source reporting.

Summary

As the summer approaches, tens of thousands of students are gearing up for their summer study abroad programs. According to [Open Doors](#), almost one million U.S. students have traveled abroad for academic credit since 2002. Studying abroad offers the opportunity to explore a new country, culture, and perspective—all under a safety net of an organized program. But study abroad programs, and travel in general, are not without potential vulnerability and danger. While this should not deter any student from traveling or any program from offering an experience abroad, OSAC constituents are encouraged to share with their students personal safety and security best practices, and instruct them to maintain a higher level of vigilance in places that are unfamiliar or make them feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, students, families, and study abroad program directors should be well-versed on the resources available both domestically and abroad following an incident like sexual assault.

Travel Preparation

Prior to the start of the program, program directors and students are encouraged to share their itineraries and lodging information with friends, family, and their home institution. Program directors should coordinate with any third-party security providers, faculty in-country, and any host institutions on any action plans to ensure traveler safety should an incident arise. This coordination should include the feasibility or possibility of obtaining emergency contraception, rape kits, and/or anti-viral medications in a foreign country. Notably, obtaining some medication common in the United States [may be difficult or impossible](#) overseas. Pre-departure training for students should include not only sexual assault awareness and preparation, but also cultural awareness and alcohol/drug standards.

While over half of American students study in [Western Europe](#), students are increasingly traveling to South America, Africa, and Asia—places where the cultures tend to be more conservative. In some countries, victims of rape or sexual assault are not treated the same way we expect authorities to respond in the United States. For example, in 2014, a [Norwegian woman](#) was jailed after reporting being raped in Dubai. She was later charged with unlawful sex (outside of marriage) and of making a false statement. Despite the 2012 [Delhi gang-rape incident](#), in April 2013, courts in India expressed concern that women would begin to abuse the [legal system](#) by claiming rape either to incriminate anyone or to use it as a weapon for vengeance.

If travelers are unfamiliar with local laws or the legitimacy of a host-nation police force, they should review the OSAC [Crime and Safety Reports](#) (CSRs) prior to departure. CSRs will give overviews of and contact information for various law enforcement agencies and medical facilities. CSRs can also discuss vulnerabilities for minority travelers (such as women or those within the LGBT community). It is also highly encouraged for individual travelers, including all participants in a study abroad program, to enroll in [STEP](#), the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program. STEP is a free service to U.S. citizens and nationals traveling abroad that allows individuals to register their trip with the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate.

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Beyond timely notification of safety conditions, including protests and inclement weather, enrolling also allows the embassy/consulate to get in touch with a traveler in case of emergency.

Who is at Risk?

Sexual assault and rape are prevalent globally, and no one is immune. Finding comprehensive studies on sexual assault are also difficult given the emotional toll it can take on someone to report such an incident. While females are more susceptible to these kinds of incidents—in [one study](#) 83 percent of the women in an undergraduate study abroad program reported an unwanted sexual experience—male students should also exercise awareness. In some parts of the world where public transportation is segregated by gender, such as the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, some male students have reported incidents of unwanted physical contact and groping on all-male subway cars.

In a study by [Psychological Trauma](#), researchers found that some factors that may contribute to the prevalence of sexual assault of U.S. students studying abroad include:

- a lack of familiarity with the culture—ensure understanding of host country gender roles, host country's perception and expectations of men and women, and gender stereotypes of Americans in the host country;
- greater reluctance to go to local authorities for help--feelings of shame already lead some individuals to be hesitant to approach authorities in the United States, with an added language barrier it can be even more difficult to report an incident;
- the large number of study abroad programs in major cities—large cities are generally prone to higher crime and safety issues, this includes even large American cities; and
- the legal access to alcohol increasing student drinking rates—some countries have lower drinking age limits compared to the United States., resulting in higher number of scenarios where students are confronted with alcohol. Find the latest OSAC report [here](#) on risks associated with consuming alcohol abroad.

How Can Students Protect Themselves?

While many studies focus on incidents that occur as a result of alcohol or drug use, students should be aware that sexual assault can happen any time and any place, not just at night or in a bar. There are several steps students, and general travelers, can take to minimize the threat against their personal safety:

- They should research the country to be visited; be aware of cultural norms, including gender issues, appropriate dress, interpersonal communication/interactions, and personal space; know the neighborhoods or areas to avoid. Students should not befriend strangers or accept food/beverages from them. They should immerse themselves in the culture or experience of being abroad, but do so in a responsible manner commensurate with how they would act at home. If traveling in a group, students should stay together. If traveling alone, they should stay in populated and illuminated areas, and maintain regular contact with friends/family.
- Students should try not to look like tourists. Even though some assailants are not looking to target an American student specifically, the outward appearance of being wealthy (flashing an expensive camera, mobile device, jewelry, maps, currency, etc.) or foreign could lead to being targeted. They should try to blend in as much as possible.

- Students should always be aware of their surroundings and not walk with earbuds, headphones, or other distractions. They should trust their instincts and not let strangers into their personal space. If they feel uncomfortable, they should leave or get help immediately, preferably with a trusted companion and preferably remain in areas where others are present. If someone is making unwanted advances, it is okay to say “no.” Students should not open a residence door if uncomfortable or alone.
- Students should keep a list of resources and contacts (including numbers to U.S. embassies and consulates) available, such as by programming them into a cell phone or having a physical copy on their persons.

What Should Students do After an Incident?

If students suffer sexual assault abroad, they should contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate to determine appropriate next steps. Alternatively, they or their families can also call the Department of State in the U.S. at 1-888-407-4747 (from the United States or Canada) or 202-501-4444 (from overseas). Consular officers are available around the clock to help the students obtain medical care, explain the local criminal justice process, and connect students to local and U.S.-based resources. A full list of consular resources is available [here](#).

Embassy or consulate staff can help the victim understand whether police agencies may handle an investigation differently—slower (or not at all), less delicately, or otherwise—than police in the United States. Regardless, documentation of as much information as possible, as quickly as possible is very important. Many foreign law enforcement agencies will not begin to investigate unless a report has been filed. If possible, students should ask for a copy of the police report. Note that consular officers cannot investigate crimes or provide legal advice.

Students should seek medical assistance if necessary. The embassy/consulate staff can provide a list of reputable resources in the area. Consular staff can also contact students’ family and friends to send payment for medical fees, or may in some cases provide a reimbursable loan to cover limited emergency medical funding.

Although the physical trauma of sexual assault may be temporary, the emotional/psychological stress can take much longer to heal. Students studying or traveling abroad can also obtain help by contacting [RAINN](#) (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network), [SASHAA](#) (Sexual Assault Support and Help for Americans Abroad), and the [International Directory of Domestic Violence Agencies](#). Many of these organizations offer crisis centers that allow students to call, email, or chat online with someone. (Note: the agencies and organizations listed in this report have not necessarily been vetted by the U.S. Department of State or other federal agencies).

A number of U.S. states offer some level of services that not only assist in compensation for services obtained overseas, but also psychological counseling or help once a student has returned to the United States. Please reach out to the nearest embassy and/or consulate for further information on possible eligibility. If eligible, most compensation programs require the victim file a report at the time of the incident and to provide a copy with their application, underscoring the importance of filing a police report while abroad.

What Can Program Directors do After an Incident?

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Program directors can do several things after an incident to help students. Some suggestions include:

- Directors should be supportive and take the report seriously. They should listen, but don't press for details if the student is reluctant to share. If appropriate, directors can talk about what to expect moving forward, let the student decide on a course of action but should avoid "why" questions, such as, "Why don't you want to seek help?" There may be a level of psychological or emotional trauma involved with the incident.
- If students need immediate medical or psychological care, program directors should help the student seek care using the university's pre-determined security providers or host institution's emergency care, if available. They can also contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate to obtain a list of reputable providers, many of which have English-speaking staff. Program directors can discuss options such as pressing criminal charges, evacuation, or counseling. The program should have an evacuation plan in place in case students suffer from severe trauma, are unable to obtain anti-viral medication, or need counseling where none is available locally.
- If the home institution requires it and the assaulted students agree, program directors should file a report with the home institution. If the perpetrator is a fellow student (not a foreign national), program directors can discuss with the assaulted student whether they want to file charges or a report with their home institution. Program directors should familiarize themselves with local laws if charges are filed in a foreign country and what that means for perpetrators who are fellow students (e.g., jail time, court hearings, fines, etc.).
- Whether a report is filed locally in-country or with the home institution, program directors should ensure students are aware that school administrators and/or law enforcement may follow up to ask questions or investigate the incident. This may affect the student's decision to ultimately file a report, but remember to respect that decision.
- Program directors can offer continued assistance, counseling, and resources upon return to the United States.

As always, OSAC is available to offer any guidance or consultations prior to departure or to help facilitate communication with the U.S. diplomatic presence responsible for the location where your students might be.

For travel to the Western Hemisphere: OSACWHA@state.gov

For travel to Africa: OSACAF@state.gov

For travel to Europe: OSACEUR@state.gov

For travel to the Middle East and North Africa: OSACNEA@state.gov

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