Ban Fraternities, or Embrace Them? Colleges Debate After Campus Violence

A sexual assault case at Cornell revived a long-running national conversation about whether fraternities and sororities are beneficial or harmful.

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In August 2022, an 18-year-old woman arrived at Cornell University to begin her studies on a sprawling campus featuring dozens of fraternity and sorority houses.

The Ivy League university, she said in a lawsuit against the school last month, declared Greek life "vital" to Cornell and "endorsed these organizations as well-managed, worthy pathways" to friendships on campus and professional successes beyond it.

But Cornell and the Greek groups, she says, also knew well that there was a history of dangerous behavior tied to the campus's fraternities.

She is suing seven members of the Chi Phi fraternity, the fraternity itself, the university and her own sorority. In the lawsuit, she alleges that she was sexually assaulted, says her assailants should have been more severely punished and argues that the organizations did not do enough to protect her. Instead, she says in the lawsuit, when she arrived at Cornell, she was presented with "a glorified — yet materially false and misleading — facade of Cornell University Greek life."

The case has revived a perennial, painful debate on American college campuses about the role of Greek life, and how to manage it when things go wrong. Some are calling for bans on fraternities and sororities at Cornell and elsewhere, pointing to a long history of deaths, hazings and instances of sexual and other violence. Supporters of fraternities and sororities maintain that they are an essential part of higher education, conferring benefits to both students who join and campuses who host chapters.

In a video over the weekend, Cornell's president, Michael I. Kotlikoff, said the university should take "a serious look at the role of fraternities and sororities" on campus. But he has seemed hesitant about a ban. In a virtual meeting with faculty on Tuesday, Dr. Kotlikoff suggested that a ban might "feel like it's a strong statement in the short term, but won't address the problem — and arguably could exacerbate it."

None of the men accused in the Cornell case has been charged with a crime, and all have denied wrongdoing.

Cornell, where in 1873 a student died in what some believe was the nation's first fraternity-related hazing death, is far from the only university to have faced problems related to Greek life on its campus.

The University of Arizona on Monday announced that it had suspended many activities at its 21 interfraternity council chapters after receiving multiple reports of misconduct just weeks into the fall semester.

Since the start of August, prosecutors have said two fraternity houses at Penn State were central to a cocaine distribution ring. The Wisconsin authorities have charged two fraternity members with suspicion of hazing after dozens of pledges were found half-naked and covered in condiments in a hot basement. And a former fraternity leader at Northern Arizona University was sentenced to two months in jail for the hazing-related death of a pledge.



The fraternity chapter accused in the Cornell case, Chi Phi, remains barred from the campus. Heather Ainsworth for The New York Times

Last year, five men were criminally charged after a student at Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., died in a fraternity hazing ritual.

And a year ago in Hillsborough County, Fla., a young woman sued the University of South Florida and a fraternity for failing to keep her safe. She said in the lawsuit that as an 18-year-old student, she was given alcohol until rendered “helpless,” and then sexually assaulted at a Zeta Beta Tau fraternity event in October 2023.

Her lawyer, Andrea Lewis, said the case has some “striking” similarities with the Cornell litigation. But unlike the Cornell case, where prosecutors did not bring charges, the male student she accused of the assault was charged with sexual battery, according to the Hillsborough County court database.

That criminal case is scheduled to begin trial next week, said a spokeswoman for the state attorney’s office that is handling the prosecution. And the civil case is expected to reach trial next year, Ms. Lewis said.

The University of South Florida said in a statement that it does not comment on pending litigation, but that the "health, safety and well-being of the U.S.F. community is our highest priority, and we take the issue of sexual violence seriously."

A spokesman for Zeta Beta Tau denied the allegations, but said it could not otherwise comment on pending litigation.

The fraternity chapter accused in the Cornell case, Chi Phi, remains barred from the campus. The national fraternity's top executive said last week that the Cornell chapter had begun ousting members three days after the woman filed her police report in November 2024.

Champions of Greek life point to research and enrollment statistics suggesting that fraternities and sororities promote belonging in an era of loneliness, as well as improved student retention and graduation rates.

"The feelings of connection to something bigger than yourself, and that bond that's created between young men, is powerful and enduring," said Judson Horras, the president and chief executive of the North American Interfraternity Conference, a trade group.

Mr. Horras said the accused men at Cornell had "clearly violated the fraternal obligation." But he said fraternity members more broadly helped society. Charity work and community service is often a core part of Greek life, for example.

"The positives — the hundreds of thousands of good leadership decisions that are made over time — endure past these very poor decisions that are made. And that staying power of brotherhood and the positive leadership, which doesn't make The New York Times, creates this enduring value," he said.

Critics, however, cite surveys like ones Cornell has conducted for years about sexual assaults on campus. In the 2025 survey, 35 percent of undergraduate women at Cornell reported experiences with nonconsensual sexual contact.

In the same survey, Cornell fraternity houses were reported as the locations for 17 percent of sexual assaults at the university, trailing residence halls and off-campus residences.

About one-third of Cornell undergraduate students are part of Greek life, spread among more than 50 recognized fraternities and sororities.

Beyond Cornell, hundreds of thousands of college students are fraternity or sorority members, according to industry officials, although they still represent a small fraction of overall students.

At Cornell, many sororities are under a national umbrella group that does not allow alcohol in its houses, a rule meant to protect students. But in the civil case, the plaintiff said she had consumed alcohol at her sorority house, which was among those with a ban, and then had attended a party hosted by the sorority at a nearby bar.

It is certainly true that criminal acts, binge drinking, and dangerous behavior occur on college campuses outside of Greek organizations. Most fraternity and sorority chapters are not implicated in major problems, and many push conduct standards that students might not otherwise be exposed to.

Wynn Smiley, the national chief executive of Alpha Tau Omega, lamented how fraternity groups across the country “get broad-brushed quite a bit” by localized episodes.

“I don’t think that’s fair to the hundreds of thousands of fraternity men who would never engage in activity like that, nor would they agree with it,” said Mr. Smiley.

He said that in roughly 30 years as the fraternity’s chief executive, he had never heard of an episode like the one alleged to have occurred at Cornell with “this degree of abhorrent behavior” happening inside a fraternity house.

Still, researchers say that the bonds of brotherhood that are core to fraternity life can also fuel herd thinking and power dynamics that lead to tragic results.

“There is a power differential inherent in fraternities,” said Adam M. McCready, an associate professor at the University of Connecticut who studies Greek life. “Members have to be selected to join, making them seem prestigious and giving existing members more power.“

“When you create a power dynamic between 18- to 22-year-olds, that can lead to problematic outcomes,” said Dr. McCready, who was in a fraternity himself.



The board of Alfred University, in Western New York, voted in 2002 to eliminate its fraternities and sororities, after a student was found dead near his fraternity house. Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Greek life has been the target of abolition campaigns that have sporadically gathered force. In 2020, for example, the murder of George Floyd prompted some students to accuse fraternities and sororities of racism and sexism.

But Greek life has lived on, largely backed by alumni, a crucial donor pool for colleges and universities.

When Tom Gerety was president of Trinity College between 1989 and 1994, he recalled, he could never muster enough board support to shut down Greek life there.

“It was pretty well entrenched,” Mr. Gerety said. “Like in sports, there is an alumni contingent supporting fraternities and it’s very important to them. It’s like trying to abolish football.”

He said that the Greek life system was exclusionary and that the vices and risks of fraternities “far outweighed their virtues.”

Daniel W. Jones, a former chancellor of the University of Mississippi, said that fraternities and sororities, especially in parts of the South, pose extraordinary challenges for administrators.

“The question is not whether you have them — the question is how to manage them,” said Dr. Jones, whose former institution has said nearly half of its undergraduates participate in fraternities or sororities.

Greek life, Dr. Jones said, can offer tremendous benefits to students and the community, helping young people to develop friendships and a sense of belonging. But, he added, “bad things happen, and groups of students do worse things than they would individually.”

And disciplining fraternities, he said, can be tricky.

In 2014, when fraternity members hung a noose around a statue of James Meredith, the Black man who integrated the university in 1962, the fraternity’s national organization stepped in quickly to punish the students and the chapter itself, Dr. Jones recalled.

Several conservative politicians soon called Dr. Jones to complain, accusing him and the university of overstepping.

But some institutions have been able to banish or significantly reshape Greek life.

In 1997, a year after a visiting student fell to his death from the roof of a frat house at Bowdoin College, a liberal arts school in Maine, the school's trustees voted to phase out the college's coeducational fraternities. Fraternity members protested by wearing black armbands.

The board of Alfred University, in Western New York, voted in 2002 to eliminate its fraternities and sororities after a student was found dead near his fraternity house. And a dozen years ago, Wesleyan University moved to make its fraternities coed organizations.

Dawn Wiese, an officer in an insurance company for fraternities, said that studies have shown that "fraternity men were more likely than those not affiliated to intervene when high-risk behavior was occurring," such as alcohol abuse, hazing and sexual misconduct.

And while, "college students sometimes make bad decisions," Dr. Wiese said, "we need to continue to focus on education and prevention, rather than banning Greek life."

It is unclear when, or if, Cornell will propose changes to its Greek system.

In the Tuesday meeting, Dr. Kotlikoff frustrated some faculty members after he seemed lukewarm to the idea of an outright ban.

"We have a certain ability to control things that happen in Greek life," he said, according to a recording of the meeting. "I worry about pushing this into the shadows, into houses which we don't own."

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