Florida PTA Proposed Resolution

Response to Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools

Submitted by:

Florida PTA Resolutions and Legislation Committees

Note that this resolution proposal has been submitted concurrently to Florida PTA and to National PTA.

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Response to Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools

Whereas, Research shows that over 40% of middle and high school students are victims of sexual violence or sexual harassment and these acts are vastly under reported, and

Whereas, Research indicates that school is the most common location of peer sexual victimization, and

Whereas, Sexual violence or sexual harassment have devastating effects on adolescents, negatively impacting their emotional and physical well-being, and depriving them of equal and free access to an education, and

Whereas, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (“Title IX”), 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1681et seq., prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity. Under Title IX, discrimination on the basis of sex includes sexual harassment or sexual violence. However, there is a lack of compliance with Title IX Federal law which requires schools to take immediate action to eliminate harassment and sexual violence, prevent its occurrence, and address its effects, now therefore be it

Resolved, That Florida PTA and its constituent associations urge and support compliance with Title IX provisions concerning sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and be it further

Resolved, That Florida PTA and its constituent associations encourage and collaborate with school administrations and community partners to present awareness and prevention programs that address sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, including the responsibilities of school districts and the rights of sexual violence and sexual harassment victims under Title IX.

Rationale

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is the landmark civil rights legislation that bans sex discrimination in education, including sexual violence. When students suffer sexual assault and harassment, they are deprived of equal and free access to an education. The law requires schools to “take immediate action” to eliminate sexual harassment or sexual violence, “prevent its recurrence, and address its effects”. (Office of Civil Rights)

Yet 40 years after the adoption of Title IX, sexual harassment and sexual violence in our schools remains a problem with research showing that over 40% of middle and high school students have been victimized. Sexual violence in any form is harmful to children and can affect their physical and emotional health as well as their academic success.

In keeping with the Parent Teacher Association’s longstanding history of advocating for safe learning environments, PTA must take an active role to raise awareness and support sexual harassment and sexual violence prevention strategies including the enforcement of Title IX provisions concerning the sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools.

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EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Adolescents' Experiences of Sexual Assault by Peers: Prevalence and Nature of Victimization Occurring Within and Outside of School

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Abstract This study examined adolescent peer-on-peer sexual assault victimization occurring within and outside school. The sample consisted of 1,086 7th through 12th grade students, with a mean age of 15. Most of the respondents were White (54%) or Black (45%), and approximately half of respondents were female (54%). A modified version of the Sexual Experiences Survey was used to assess opposite sex sexual victimization in 7th through 12th grade students. Rates of peer sexual assault were high, ranging from 26% of high school boys to 51% of high school girls. School was the most common location of peer sexual victimization. Characteristics of assault varied by location, including type of victimization, victims' grade level, relationship to the perpetrator, type of coercion, and how upsetting the assault was. Distinctions between sexual assault occurring in and out of school are conceptualized with literature on developmental changes in heterosexual relationships and aggression.

Keywords Sexual assault · Peers · Schools · Violence · Victimization

Sexual assault victimization, defined as any form of unwanted sexual contact obtained through violent or non-violent means (U.S. Department of Justice 2008), continues at alarmingly high rates among adolescents. The National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS; Rennison 2002), which provides data on sexual assault reported to law enforcement agencies, indicates that sexual assault is most prevalent among adolescents in contrast to any other age group, with 33% of all victims falling within the ages of 13–17. Ninety-six percent of all offenders of sexual assault were male, and 91% of all victims were female. It is important to note, though, that prevalence rates based on reported incidents are likely underestimates of the problem; only half of all adolescent victims will tell anyone about the incident (Davis et al. 1993; Davis and Lee 1996) and only 6% will report the incident to authorities (Ageton 1983). Accordingly, the high rates of adolescent assault based on NIBRS data are likely a gross *underestimation* of the problem.

Estimates provided by community-based studies, which include reported and non-reported incidents, vary widely depending upon the measure of sexual assault used. Studies based on a single item measure of sexual assault (e.g., "Have you ever been sexually assaulted?") typically obtain much lower prevalence rates for both victimization and perpetration (Crowell and Burgess 1996; Poitras and Lavoie 1995). In contrast, more thorough measures of sexual assault (e.g., Sexual Experiences Survey; Koss and Gidcyz 1985) obtain much higher prevalence rates for both victimization and perpetration (Crowell and Burgess 1996). These thorough measures include multiple questions to get at a variety of sexual behaviors (e.g., petting, kissing, intercourse) coerced through a variety of methods (e.g., verbal pressure, use of authority, violence). Studies using these more thorough measures of sexual assault indicate that approximately half of adolescent girls and 15% of adolescent boys have been sexually assaulted (Maxwell et al. 2003; Poitras and Lavoie 1995). Lower rates of

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victimization were found in all studies using the less rigorous measures of sexual assault (Kilpatrick et al. 2003); and higher rates of perpetration have been found in other studies (Lanier 2001; Vicary et al. 1995; Davis et al. 1993). Although community-based estimates of adolescent acquaintance assault are variable and a result of inconsistent assessment across studies, these estimates indicate that adolescent sexual assault is more widespread than the picture presented by the NIBRS data.

The majority (66%) of adolescent assault is perpetrated by an acquaintance of the victim (NIBRS; Rennison 2002). Research on adolescent acquaintance assault has primarily focused on sexual victimization within dating relationships; this body of literature typically examines emotional, physical, and sexual assault together under a broader rubric of "dating violence." Prevalence rates for adolescent dating violence vary from 9–77% for girls and 6–67% for boys (Ackard and Neumark-Sztainer 2002; Bergman 1992; Schubot 2001;Vicary et al. 1995); the wide range of estimates is likely due to variation in the definition of violence, with some studies measuring personal insults (e.g., "put down my looks") and others measuring only the most serious forms of violence, such as physical or forced sex. Adolescent girls engage in aggressive behaviors toward dating partners at rates that are comparable to, or exceed, those for boys when considering verbal, emotional, relational, physical and sexual aggression (Chase et al. 2002; Linder 2002). However, when examining just sexual victimization, adolescent girls are more likely than their male counterparts to be the recipient rather than the aggressor of violence in dating relationships (Foshee 1996).

There are many other types of peer acquaintance relationships besides dating relationships in which sexual assault occurs. The few studies differentiating among types of acquaintance relationships indicate that 31% (Smalls and Kerns 1993) to 62% (Ageton 1983) of adolescent girls' acquaintance assault is committed by a boyfriend; acquaintance sexual assault is also committed by friends, friends of friends, and peers victims met in a social context (e.g., party). Although there is a common feature among all of these relationships—specifically that consenting social interaction occurs prior to assault—the victim's knowledge of the perpetrator can vary significantly among these acquaintance relationships. Assault within a long-term romantic relationship can provide the victim with considerable information about the nature and disposition of a sexual aggressor; in contrast, assault committed by someone the victim just met provides the victim minimal information about the aggressor. Thus, there appears to be considerable heterogeneity among assault cases that occur between adolescent acquaintances.

The few studies specifically focusing on victimization during adolescence and differentiating the type of acquaintance relationships (Ageton 1983; Smalls and Kerns 1993) provide the most accurate information on the correlates and consequences of sexual assault by peers. More than half of the cases involved verbal persuasion, and approximately a third involved pushing, slapping, or mild roughness and approximately one tenth involved physical beating or choking (Ageton 1983). Rape occurred more often within dating relationships than other type of acquaintance relationships (Smalls and Kerns 1993). These findings suggest that differences in the type of acquaintance relationship between adolescent victim and perpetrator are associated with the types of aggression used during the assault.

Although it is likely that many of these incidents of peer-on-peer sexual assault take place within the school context, few studies have examined the prevalence of sexual assault occurring within versus outside of school. One exception is the American Association of University Women's (AAUW 2001) study of harassment within school. Questions pertaining to sexual harassment in this study included items involving physical contact of a sexual nature, which fall within the Department of Justice's definition of sexual assault (U.S. Department of Justice 2008). Based on these physical sexual harassment items from the AAUW study, it appears that sexual assault within the school context is disconcertingly high. Among adolescent girls in the AAUW study, 29% reported being touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way, 7% reported being forced to kiss, and 3% reported being forced to do something sexual other than kissing. Although lower than rates for girls, adolescent boys also reported being sexually assaulted by peers in school: 20% reported being touched, grabbed or pinched in a sexual way, 7% reported being forced to kiss, and 5% reported being forced to do something sexual other than kissing. This study provides initial evidence of substantial rates of sexual assault within school contexts.

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Even though little is known about adolescent sexual assault occurring within schools, the AAUW report, as well as numerous other studies on sexual harassment, indicates that peer-on-peer sexual aggression within schools is commonplace. Sexual harassment is typically defined as non-physical sexual contact, including sexual remarks, jokes, gestures, looks, showing sexual pictures, messages, or notes, and spreading sexually- related rumors. Estimates of the number of middle and high school students who report being sexually harassed within school has ranged from 83–92% for girls and 57–79% for boys (AAUW 2001; Felix and McMahon 2006; Fineran and Bennett 1998; Lee et al. 1996). Moreover, within school sexual harassment has been associated with a variety of negative outcomes among its victims, including absenteeism, decreased quality of school performance, loss of friends,

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truancy, and internalizing and externalizing psychological symptoms (AAUW 2001; Lee et al. 1996; PCSW 1995; Stein et al. 1993). Such findings indicate that sexual aggression occurring within the school setting has significant negative implications for the victims.

There has been an increased concern over sexual harassment and assault occurring on secondary school campuses as a result of recent court cases that found schools liable for failing to protect students from victimization by other students (e.g., Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education 1999). There is also a growing awareness that sexual aggression occurring in school has negative ramifications on the victim's attendance, success, and attachment to school (Duffy et al. 2004), which is particularly disconcerting given that involvement in school can serve as a protective factor for adolescent health risk behaviors, such as substance use (Beyers et al. 1999). However, the push for school sexual aggression prevention efforts are in absence of a solid understanding of the nature of sexual violence that is occurring within schools, particularly when considering sexual aggression that meets the definition of sexual assault (i.e., involving physical contact). Consequently, it is critical both in terms of the schools' legal liability and in terms of students' psychological and academic wellbeing to gain a better understanding of the extent and nature of sexual aggression occurring within the school setting.

How might the school context impact the prevalence and nature of adolescent sexual aggression? The school setting is arguably the primary setting in which adolescents socialize with other peers their age. Youth may choose to socialize with friends outside of school; however, within school, they are required to come in contact with a variety of peers that they may or may not view favorably or be on friendly terms. In addition to the increased contact with other peers, there can be minimal adult supervision on school premises at times, which may further increase the likelihood of peer-on-peer aggression. For example, the lack of adult supervision has long been considered a risk factor for bullying and physical victimization occurring on school grounds, with bullying most likely to occur in locations where teachers are not present, such as locker rooms, school buses, and hallways (Glover et al. 2000). With the high degree of peer contact occurring on school grounds, coupled with opportunities for minimal adult supervision, it is likely that the school setting increases the odds for peer-on-peer sexual aggression. However, the lack of adult supervision outside of the school environment changes as youth transition through adolescence, with adult supervision increasing for boys but decreasing for girls during the transition from early to late adolescence (Jacobson and Crockett 2000). These findings suggest that peer-on-peer sexual violence is more likely to occur on school grounds (when contrasted to other locations) during early adolescence for females and later adolescence for males. Moreover, although the frequency of sexual aggression is arguably higher on school grounds than other locations, research on physical aggression among adolescents suggests that less severe forms of aggression may occur within the school setting. For example, school climate has been found to be a stronger predictor of less serious youth violence than of serious misconduct (Welsh 2000). Thus, previous research on violence, school setting, and adult supervision suggests that the school context may impact the prevalence and nature of peer-on-peer sexual assault; however, the impact may not be the same for young and older adolescents and for male and female adolescents.

Hypotheses

The purpose of the current study was to examine the prevalence of adolescent acquaintance sexual assault among middle and high school students occurring within and outside school grounds. Based on the fact that the school setting provides one of the primary settings in which youth come in contact with each other, and based on previous research documenting the high rates of sexual harassment on school grounds (AAUW 2001), we hypothesized that peer-on-peer sexual assault would be more likely to occur on school grounds in contrast to other locations. However, given the change over the course of adolescence in adult supervision in the home environment, we hypothesized that the prevalence of sexual assault in the school environment relative to other contexts would change over the course adolescence, with a higher risk for assault occurring at school (in contrast to other contexts) during early adolescence for girls and a higher risk for assault occurring at school (in contrast to other contexts) during later adolescence for boys. Furthermore, given that peer-on-peer physical violence on school grounds has been found to be less severe than violence off school grounds (Welsh 2000), we hypothesized that victims of sexual assault on school grounds would report being less upset by the event than victims of sexual assault occurring outside of the school context.

Method

The study used a cross-sectional web-based self administered survey of students from a school district in southeastern Michigan. The university subject review board approved the protocols for this study and a Certificate of Confidentiality from NIH was obtained. All

students enrolled in the 7–12th grades during 2005 were recruited to participate. The survey included 418 questions that asked about students' alcohol, tobacco, illicit and prescription drug use; their academic performance; and instances of interpersonal violence. Of the 1,594 7–12th grade students within the school district, 1,160 (72.8%) returned consent forms in which parents provided permission for their children to participate. Ultimately, 93.6% ($n = 1086$) of students with parental permission completed the survey, with absenteeism being the primary reason for not completing the survey. The final response rate of 68.1% was calculated using guideline #2 of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (2007).

The school district is located near a large Midwest metropolitan area and draws from four distinct communities: an upper middle class community (median income $81,000), two middle-class communities (median incomes $46,000 and $49,000), and an economically impoverished community (median income $22,000). Based on data provided by the school district, approximately 46% receive free/reduced-price lunch. The majority of the students in the school were black (58%), with a large minority of white (39%), and a few from other racial/ethnic groups (3%).

Students and their parents were notified about the upcoming study in a letter sent from their school via U.S. Mail. Because most of the respondents were under 18 years of age, active parental consent was obtained for all minors who participated. Students returned consent forms to their teachers, who in turn, gave the consent forms to the research team. Prior to the administration of the survey, parents were invited to view the survey via the web on their own or school computers.

The survey was conducted over the Internet from computer labs at the respective schools. Students were excused from one class period in order to report to the computer lab for the survey session. The school administrators scheduled survey sessions on a class-by-class basis over the data collection period, although make-up sessions were provided. The web-survey was maintained on a hosted secure Internet site running under the secure sockets layer (SSL) protocol to insure respondent data were safely transmitted between the respondent's browser and the server. Students were given a piece of paper with a unique pre-assigned PIN numbers; these numbers allowed students access to the survey without any identifying information. Following the completion of the survey, students were provided with the contact information for school-based counseling services as well as community-based organizations. School officials and parents were unable to access any personally identifiable information connected with the data. The above web-based survey method was selected as a means to collect data because similar computer-based surveys have been shown to increase reporting of highly sensitive and illegal behaviors relative to hardcopy surveys (Lessler et al. 2000; Turner et al. 1998) and because it provides an easy way to test large groups of students in a relatively short period of time.

Sample

The sample used for this study included 399 middle school students (i.e., grades 7th and 8th) and 687 high school students. Fifty-four percent ($n = 576$) were female and 46% were male ($n = 490$). Fifty-two percent ($n = 565$) were White, 45% were Black ($n = 484$), and the remaining 3% consisted of Hispanic ($n = 14$), Asian American ($n = 16$), or American Indian/Alaska Native ($n = 5$). The demographic characteristics varied from data provided by the school district, with a lower percentage of African-Americans included in our sample. Age ranged from 12 to 19 years, the average age of respondents was 14.81 ($SD = 1.72$).

Instruments

Demographic Characteristics

Respondents were asked about basic demographic information, including gender, race, age, and grade level.

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault

Information on sexual assault was measured with the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss and Gidcyz 1985). The SES is a self-report survey instrument consisting of 10 items designed to obtain information about degrees of sexual aggression, ranging from sexual harassment through sexual acts involving physical contact, including penetration. Previous research using adult samples report the internal consistency of these items are .74 for victimization among women and .89 for perpetration among men, and a test-retest consistency within a 1 week time period was .93 (Koss and Gidcyz 1985). An adolescent version of the SES has been established and validated (Cecil and Matson 2006). The adolescent modified version refers to the perpetrator as a peer rather than a parent, to distinguish childhood sexual abuse. As with the adult version, respondents are asked about various types of victimization that occur with various types of coercion. Items that do not involve physical contact are defined as sexual harassment, whereas items involving physical contact are defined as sexual assault. Previous research indicates that the adolescent version of the assault summary score has a high level of internal consistency (.80), as measured by the KR-20, and has satisfactory concurrent validity (Cecil and Matson 2006).

For the present study, the adolescent version of the SES was used. SES items that did not involve physical contact were defined as sexual harassment, where as items involving physical contact were defined as sexual assault. Respondents also were asked to indicate the type of coercion used by the perpetrator, ranging from verbal pressure to physical force (see Table 1 for a list of items). Adolescents who were 16 years of age or older were asked directly about oral sex and sexual intercourse. Following these items, adolescents of all ages were asked whether "something else" happened and asked to describe what happened. Open-ended responses then were grouped into the categories of: (1) kissing, hugging, or sexual touching, (2) oral sex, (3) attempted rape, and (4) rape. If respondents indicated that something else happened but did not describe the event, responses were included in the fifth category of "something else sexual." In the present study, the SES items had an internal consistency of .80.

Sexual Assault Characteristics: How Upsetting

Students who reported sexual assault were asked to select the most upsetting assault experience and were given additional questions pertaining to that event. Specifically, respondents were asked "How upsetting the event was this for you?" and given the following response options: "not at all bothered," "bothered a little bit," "somewhat upsetting," "very upsetting."

Type of Coercion

Respondents were asked to indicate whether any of the following was used as a means of coercion: "overwhelming you with continual arguments and pressure?" "Showing displeasure (e.g., sulking, making you feel guilty, swearing, getting angry) until he/she got his/her way?" "By giving you alcohol or drugs?" or "By threatening or using some kind of physical force?" Respondents were allowed to select more than one form of coercion.

Relationship to Perpetrator

Respondents were also asked "How well did you know this person?" and given the following response options: "someone I just met," "someone I knew before, but not well," "friend," "casual date," "boy/girlfriend," or "other."

Location of Sexual Assault

Finally, respondents were asked, "Where did this happen?" and asked to select all that apply from the following response options: "My house or apartment," "Someone else's house or apartment," "At a party," "At school," "Other," and "Rather not say." For analyses that examined whether sexual assault took place on school grounds, a categorical variable was created by coding all "At school"

Table 1 Prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault by grade level and gender

Sexual victimization	Females		Males	
	Middle school (n = 193–197)[a] % (n)	High school (n = 109–362) % (n)	Middle school (n = 180–185) % (n)	High school (n = 98–287) % (n)
Sexual harassment				
Stared at in a sexual way	48.7% (94)	65.4% (233)	33.7% (61)	33.2% (95)
Sexual jokes	42.0% (81)	56.8% (205)	26.8% (49)	23.7% (68)
Sexual/obscene phone calls	18.3% (36)	19.4% (70)	14.1% (26)	11.6% (33)
Sexual/obscene messages	9.6% (19)	16.9% (61)	13.7% (25)	11.2% (32)
Sexual assault				
Kissed, hugged, touched	37.1% (72)	50.7% (182)	28% (51)	25.9% (74)
Attempted rape	1.0% (2)	1.2% (2)	0	0
Oral sex[b]	–	5.5% (6)	–	4.1% (4)
Rape[b]	–	11.8% (13)	–	3.1% (3)
Something else sexual	7.2% (14)	11.2% (20)	3.8% (7)	2.7% (5)
Any sexual assault	39.9% (77)	52.5% (189)	28.2% (51)	26.3% (75)

Note: Respondents could report multiple forms of sexual victimization

[a] Sample sizes varied per item because only respondents who were 16 years of age or older were asked questions about oral sex and sexual intercourse

[b] Questions pertaining to oral sex and rape were not asked of middle school students

responses as a value of 1 and all other response options, excluding "Rather not say," as a value of 0.

Analysis Strategy

Frequencies were used to provide descriptive information on the rate of sexual harassment and assault for middle and high school girls and boys. Binary logistic regression models in which grade, gender, and their interaction was regressed on each of the binary sexual harassment and assault items. The main effects were first examined with a series of regressions in which each predictor variable was examined separately. Next, all of the significant main effects were included in one model to determine redundant explanation of variance. For the interaction effects, the main effect for each variable was added to the equation first, followed by the interaction term. Binary logistic regression models in which an assault characteristic variable, grade, gender, and all two- and three-way interactions were regressed on whether the assault occurred in or outside of school. Analysis of variance was used to determine whether these groups differed in how upset they were by the experience.

Results

Rates of Sexual Harassment and Assault

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Table 1 presents the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault for middle and high school students. Among middle school girls, over half (58%) reported having been sexually harassed; most common forms of harassment included being "stared at in a sexual way" and being the "recipient of sexual jokes." Approximately 40% of middle school girls reported being sexually assaulted by peers. One-third of middle school girls reported having been "kissed, hugged, or sexually touched," and one-tenth reported being "made to do something else sexual." More high school than middle school girls reported being assaulted, ($\chi^2(1) = 8.0$, $p < .01$) and harassed ($\chi^2(1) = 12.71$, $p < .001$. Three out of every four high school girls reported being sexually harassed; again, most common forms of harassment were being "stared at in a sexual way" and being the "recipient of sexual jokes." Over half of high school girls reported being sexually assaulted (53%). Most common forms of assault involved being "kissed, hugged, or sexually touched" (51%), but a sizable minority reported having been forced to engage in other sexual behaviors, including oral sex (6%), rape (12%), or attempted rape (1%), or something else sexual (11%).

Rates for middle and high school boys were lower than their female counterparts in terms of both sexual harassment ($\chi^2(1) = 67.57$, $p < .001$) and assault ($\chi^2(1) = 7.22$, $p < .01$). Approximately 40% of both middle and high school boys reported having been sexually harassed; as with girls, most common forms of harassment were being "stared at in a sexual way" and being the "recipient of sexual jokes." Slightly more than one-forth of boys (middle school = 28%, high school = 26%) reported being sexually assaulted by peers, most often in the form of being "kissed, hugged, or sexually touched" (middle school = 28%, high school = 26%). A small number of boys reported being raped (3%) or something else sexual (middle school = 4%, high school = 3%).

Intercorrelations among the predictor variables (Table 2) show that being female was related to most types of victimization and being in high school was related to being stared at, receiving sexual jokes, and being kissed or sexually touched. Binary logistic regressions were conducted to determine whether there were differences in the rates of harassment and assault based on grade and gender (Table 3). For being "stared at in a sexual way" and "sexual jokes," the main effects of gender, grade level, and their interactions were significant. Thus, the likelihood of being harassed in these ways was three times higher for girls than boys and almost one and a half times higher for high school students than middle school students. Furthermore, the significant interaction term indicates that high school girls were twice as likely as middle school girls to report these forms of sexual harassment. In terms of sexual or obscene phone calls, girls were almost twice as likely as boys to be harassed and high school girls were more than twice as likely as other groups to be the recipient of sexual or obscene messages via the computer.

Of the four types of sexual abuse, logistic regressions were unable to be performed on two types, oral sex and sexual intercourse, because of the low frequency of these types of assault. Ten respondents reported forced oral sex; of these 10 cases, 60% were high school girls ($\chi^2 = 23.44$, $p < .001$). Rape was reported at a slightly higher rate, specifically 15 cases, and again, the majority (73%) of these cases occurred among high school girls ($\chi^2 = 14.21$, $p < .01$). There were significant main and interaction effects (see also Table 3) when grade and gender were regressed upon assault in the form of "kissing, hugging, and sexually touching." Girls were more than twice as likely as boys to experienced forced kissing, hugging, or sexual touch; moreover, high school girls were more than twice as likely as middle school girls to report this type of assault. In terms of being forced to do "something else sexual," there was a significant main effect for gender indicating that girls were three times as likely as boys to report this type of assault.

Chi-square tests indicated that the extent to which the experience was upsetting for the victim differed for male

Table 2 Intercorrelations for type of assault and predictor variables

	GL[a]	G[b]	SASW[c]	SJ[c]	S/OPC[c]	S/OCM[c]	K, T, ST[c]
Grade level (GL)[a]	–						
Gender (G)[b]	.04	–					
Stared at in sexual way SASW)[c]	.10**	.26***	–				
Sexual jokes (SJ)[c]	.08*	.27***	.57***	–			
Sexual/obscene phone calls (S/OPC)[c]	.00	.09**	.36***	.37***	–		
Sexual/obscene computer messages (S/OCM)[c]	.05	.04	.33***	.32***	.54***	–	
Kissed, hugged, sexually touched (K, H, ST)[c]	.07*	.19***	.51***	.51***	.40***	.35***	–
Something else sexual[c]	–.02	.11**	.27***	.24***	.42***	.35***	.32***

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

[a] Middle school = 0, High School = 1

[b] Male = 0, Female = 1

[c] No = 0, Yes = 1

Table 3 Binary logistic regression results predicting the prevalence of types of sexual harassment and assault based on gender, grade level, and their interaction

Type of sexual aggression	Gender[a]			Grade level[b]			Gender × Grade level		
	B (*SE*)	Wald	Odds ratio	*B* (*SE*)	Wald	Odds ratio	*B* (*SE*)	Wald	Odds ratio
Stared at in sexual way	1.12 (.13)	70.77**	3.07	.36 (.18)	7.20**	1.45	.69 (.28)	6.35**	2.00
Sexual jokes	1.22 (.14)	76.4**	3.37	.30 (.14)	4.3**	1.34	.73 (.29)	6.54**	2.08
Sexual/obscene phone calls	.60 (.18)	10.5**	1.80	.05 (.18)	.07	.95	.29 (.38)	.59	1.33
Sexual/obscene computer messages	.28 (.19)	2.02	1.38	.26 (.20)	1.60	1.30	.88 (.42)	4.5*	2.42
Kissed, hugged, sexually touched	.93 (.14)	45.48***	2.53	.26 (.14)	3.30	1.29	.71 (.29)	6.14*	2.03
Something else sexual	1.13 (.32)	12.10***	3.08	–.09 (.28)	.11	.91	.59 (.66)	.81	1.81

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ Number of cases in analyses ranged from 805 to 1002

[a] Male = 0, Female = 1

[b] Middle school = 0, High School = 1

and female students ($\chi^2 = 53.67$, $p < .001$). Female students reported being more upset by the assault, with 47.2% reporting that it was somewhat or very upsetting and only 13.2% of males reporting this degree of distress. How upsetting the assault was also differed for middle and high school students ($\chi^2 = 25.86$, $p < .001$). High school students tended to report being more upset, reporting that it was somewhat or very upsetting (middle school = 30%, high school = 38.4%) or bothered a little bit (middle school = 27%, high school = 40.8%).

W2

[Peer-on-peer sexual assault most often occurred on school grounds (44%).] followed by someone else's house or apartment (21%), the respondent's house (10%), or parties (9%; see Table 4). Sixteen percent ($n = 47$) of assault occurred at other unspecified locations. The location of assault differed for high school and middle school students ($\chi^2 = 16.7$, $p < .001$). Over half (54%) of assaults reported by middle school students occurred at school in contrast to 39% of assaults reported by high school students. In contrast, high school students were more likely than middle school students to report assaults occurring at their house, someone else's house, or parties. Almost half (45.8%) of adolescent acquaintance assault was committed by a friend, followed by someone the victim knew but not well (18.5%), a girl/boyfriend (15.4%), someone the victim just met (8.2%), and a casual date (2.5%). There were no significant gender or grade level differences for the perpetrator of the assault.

Table 4 Location and assault characteristics by gender and grade level

Location of assault	Middle school % (*n*)	High school % (*n*)	Total % (*n*)
My house	7.4% (7)	11.2% (23)	10.0% (30)
Someone else's house	14.9% (14)	24.3% (50)	21.3% (64)
At a party	2.1% (2)	12.1% (25)	9.0% (27)
[School	54.3% (51)	39.3% (81)	44.0% (132)]
Other	21.3% (20)	13.1% (27)	15.7% (47)
Total	100% (94)	100% (206)	100% (300)

Sexual Assault in and Outside of School

Table 5 presents the frequency and characteristics of only the most upsetting assaults occurring in and outside of school for middle and high school girls and boys. Having been kissed, hugged, or sexually touched constituted the majority of reported upsetting sexual assault for both in and out of school experiences (66.7–98.2%). Friends were the most frequently reported perpetrators. This finding also appeared to vary by gender and grade level, with rates ranging from 31.8% for middle school males assaulted outside of school to 62.7% of high school females assaulted in school.

Table 6 presents the intercorrelations of variables used in predicting assault in school versus out of school. Table 7 presents the betas, standard errors, Wald statistics, and odds ratio for the logistic regressions predicting assault occurring in school versus out of school, in terms of the victim characteristics (grade level, gender), assault characteristics, and their interactions. Characteristics of the assault and victim were first entered into the regression equation separately. The one main effect positively characterizing sexual assault in school was perpetration by a friend: sexual assault in school was twice as likely as assault out of school to be perpetrated by a friend. Other significant effects described out of school assault, in contrast to in school assault, including being more likely to be perpetrated by a boy/girlfriend, more likely to involve the use of arguments and drugs as forms of coercion, and being more upsetting for the victim. Moreover, being a high school student, in contrast to a middle school student, increased the likelihood of assault occurring out of the

Table 5 Adolescent experiences of sexual victimization, by gender, location, and grade level

	Adolescent girls				Adolescent boys			
	Middle school		High school		Middle school		High school	
	Out of school % (*n*)	In school % (*n*)	Out of school % (*n*)	In school % (*n*)	Out of school % (*n*)	In school % (*n*)	Out of school % (*n*)	In school % (*n*)
Type of most upsetting sexual assault								
Kissed, hugged, touch	75% (21)	90% (27)	72.5% (74)	98.2% (55)	666.7% (16)	100% (13)	68.8% (22)	90.9% (20)
Oral sex	N/A	N/A	2% (2)	0	N/A	N/A	0	0
Sexual intercourse	N/A	N/A	10.8% (11)	0	N/A	N/A	9.4% (3)	4.5% (1)
Something else sexual	25% (7)	10% (3)	14.7% (15)	1.8% (1)	33.3% (8)	0	21.9% (7)	4.5% (1)
Relationship to perpetrator								
Just met	3.1% (1)	10.5% (4)	8.3% (9)	6.8% (4)	4.5% (1)	15.4% (2)	18.8% (6)	4.5% (1)
Knew, not well	3.1% (1)	15.8% (6)	17.4% (19)	25.4% (15)	22.7% (5)	30.8% (4)	18.8% (6)	27.3% (6)
Friend	40.6% (13)	44.7% (17)	39.4% (43)	62.7% (37)	31.8% (7)	38.5% (5)	34.4% (11)	54.5% (12)
Casual date	6.3% (2)	2.6% (1)	2.8% (3)	0	4.5% (1)	7.7% (1)	0	0
Girl/Boyfriend	21.8% (9)	18.4% (7)	16.5% (18)	3.4% (2)	22.7% (5)	7.7% (1)	21.9% (7)	4.5% (1)
Other	18.8% (6)	7.9% (3)	15.6% (17)	1.7% (1)	13.6% (3)	0	6.3% (2)	9.1% (2)
Type of force								
Arguments								
Yes	17.6% (6)	13.9% (5)	38% (41)	22.8% (13)	41.7% (10)	8.3% (1)	29% (9)	23.8% (5)
No	82.4% (28)	86.1% (31)	62% (67)	77.2% (44)	58.3% (14)	91.7% (11)	71% (22)	76.2% (16)
Displeasure								
Yes	22.9% (8)	19.4% (7)	37.8% (42)	29.8% (17)	33.3% (8)	25% (3)	28.1% (9)	47.6% (10)
No	77.1% (27)	80.6% (29)	62.2% (69)	70.2% (40)	66.7% (16)	75% (9)	71.9% (23)	52.4% (11)
Drugs								
Yes	11.1% (4)	2.7% (1)	8.8% (10)	1.8% (1)	8.3% (2)	0	6.1% (2)	4.8% (1)
No	88.9% (32)	97.3% (36)	91.2% (104)	98.2% (55)	91.7% (22)	100% (12)	93.9% (31)	95.2% (20)
Physical force								
Yes	17.1% (6)	13.5% (5)	20.4% (22)	15.8% (9)	8.3% (2)	25% (3)	9.1% (3)	9.5% (2)
No	82.9% (29)	86.5% (32)	79.6% (86)	84.2% (48)	91.7% (22)	75% (9)	90.9% (30)	90.5% (19)
How upsetting	2.24 (1.09)	2.17 (.97)	2.84 (1.05)	2.46 (.8)	1.3 (.7)	1.69 (1.18)	1.73 (.88)	1.73 (.46)

Note: Respondents were asked to identify the most upsetting assault experience and describe characteristics of this. In a few cases, new reports of sexual victimization were made at this point in the survey and some respondents refused to answer. Thus, rates may differ from those in Table 1

Table 6 Intercorrelations for location of assault and sexual assault characteristics

	Location[a]	GL[b]	G[c]	CbyA[d]	CbyD[d]	PbyF[d]	PbyG/B[d]
Grade level (GL)[b]	–.13*	–					
Gender (G)[c]	–.01	.04	–				
Coercion by arguments[a,d] (CbyA)	–.19**	.11*	–.01	–			
Coercion by drugs[a,d] (CbyD)	–.14*	0	.03	.19**	–		
Perpetrated by friend[a,d] (PbyF)	.15**	.06	.06	–.11	0	–	
Perpetrated by girl/boyfriend[a,d] (PbyG/B)	–.18**	–.11*	–.01	.10	–.04	–.39***	–
How upsetting (HU)[d]	–.13*	.23***	.41***	.21***	.01	–.12*	–.08

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

[a] Location: Out of School = 0, In School = 1

[b] Grade Level: Middle School = 0, High School = 1

[c] Male = 0, Female = 1

[d] No = 0, Yes = 1

Table 7 Binary logistic regression results predicting in-school versus out-of-school assault

Characteristic of assault/victim	*B* (*SE*)	Wald	Odds ratio
Main effects			
Coercion by arguments[a]	−.87 (.30)	8.18**	.42
Coercion by drugs[a]	−2.14 (.77)	7.77**	.12
Perpetrated by friend[a]	.61 (.26)	5.64*	1.83
Perpetrated by girl/boyfriend[a]	−.91 (.39)	5.65*	.40
How upsetting	−.26 (.13)	4.19*	.77
Female[b]	.03 (.29)	.02	1.04
High school student[a]	−.99 (.29)	11.37***	.37
Interaction effects			
Female and high school student	2.64 (.91)	8.48**	13.97
Female and how upsetting	.67 (.35)	3.68*	1.96
High school and how upsetting	.61 (.30)	3.97*	1.83

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ Number of cases in analyses ranged from 240 to 253

[a] No = 0, Yes = 1

[b] Male = 0, Female = 1

school. There were no significant differences between in school and out of school assault in terms of being perpetrated by a casual date, someone who knew the victim, but not well, or someone who the victim just met. Furthermore, there were no significant differences between in school and out of school assault in terms of the use of showing displeasure or use of physical force.

All characteristics that predicted assault occurring in and out of school were included simultaneously in a regression model. Variables that were significant in the bivariate analyses continued to be significant in the regression model with the exception of being perpetrated by a boy/girlfriend, coercion through arguments, and being upset by the experience. For each of these three variables, the inclusion of one of the other two variables eliminated its significance, indicating that all three variables overlapped in their explanation of in school versus out of school assaults.

The moderating effects of gender and grade level on the relationship between the assault characteristics and location of assault were examined by including interaction effects of gender (or grade level) and the assault characteristic. Three interaction terms were significant: being a high school female, being female and finding the experience upsetting, and being a high school student and finding the experience upsetting. These findings indicate that out of school assault most often occurred for high school girls who found the experience to be upsetting.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to document the rates and characteristics of adolescent acquaintance sexual assault occurring within and outside the school environment. Corroborating previous research on the prevalence of adolescent sexual assault committed by peers (e.g., Maxwell et al. 2003; Poitras and Lavoie 1995), high rates of sexual harassment and assault were found among middle and high school students, regardless of where the assault occurred. Expanding beyond previous studies, this research more clearly delineates differences between middle and high school students in the prevalence of adolescent sexual assault committed by peers. We found that approximately 50% of high school girls reported being assaulted, with one-fourth of high school girls experienced less invasive forms of violence (e.g., forced kissing, making out, being fondled) and the other fourth experienced invasive forms of assault, including rape, attempted rape, and forced to

perform fellatio by peers. Although sexual assault was less prevalent than for high school girls, middle school girls reported high rates of sexual assault by their peers. One-third of middle school girls experienced less invasive forms of assault (i.e., kissing, hugging, sexual touching), and 10% reported more invasive assault. One-fourth of all boys reported being sexually assaulted, regardless of whether they were middle or high school students. All but 2% of these cases involved less invasive forms of assault. Given the distinctions among these groups in the prevalence of assault, and in particular the prevalence of invasive forms of assault, it is not surprising that they also differed in how upset they were by the experience. Half of the boys (53%) reported not being bothered at all by the incident in contrast to 15% of the girls. Conversely, half of the girls (48%) reported being somewhat or very upset by the experience in contrast to 13% of the boys. Although the rates of assault were high for both boys and girls in the study, they were particularly high and damaging for the girls.

Approximately half of all peer-on-peer sexual assault in this study was perpetrated by a friend. Perpetrators also included someone the victim knew but not well, a girl/boyfriend, and someone the victim just met. Our findings contrast with previous research that reported boy/girlfriends were the most common perpetrator of acquaintance assault among adolescents. It may be that the nature of acquaintance assault has changed from previous generations. Although 62% of adolescent assault was committed by a boyfriend or a date in the late 1970s (Ageton 1983), estimates from the 1990s (Smalls and Kerns 1993) indicate that only 31% of acquaintance perpetrators were boyfriends, whereas 22% were friends, and 14% were known peers. Our study indicates that only 15% of acquaintance assault was perpetrated by a boy/girlfriend. Such changing trends may reflect the more casual nature of romantic and sexual encounters of contemporary youth (Manning et al. 2006). It is important to note that any speculations on the changing trends of acquaintance sexual assault among adolescents are tentative due to the dearth of studies on adolescent assault that differentiate among the types of acquaintance relationships. Regardless, our study points to the importance of future research to recognize distinctions in the types of adolescent peer relationships and their implications for adolescent sexual assault.

The majority of acquaintance sexual assault in this study occurred on school grounds, although this figure was significantly higher for middle school students (54%) than high school students (40%). The different rates for middle and high school students do not appear to be due to the fact that assault that “moves” from in to out of school as adolescents transition to high school. In contrast, the frequency of assault occurring in school appears to remain constant during the transition from middle to high school, or in the case of girls, the frequency of assault actually increases during the transition to high school. Instead, sexual assault is less likely to occur on school grounds for high school students because the increase in out of school assault from middle to high school is more dramatic than the increase for in school assault. Out of school assault among high school students was most likely to occur at someone else’s house, the victim’s house, or parties. Although the number of cases of peer-on-peer assault occurring in school remained constant (for boys) or increased (for girls) from early adolescence to later adolescence, it appears as though there is an increase (for boys and girls) in the number of cases of assault occurring outside of the school setting as youth transition through adolescence.

Even though more frequent, assault occurring on school grounds appears to be less severe than assault occurring outside of school. Assault occurring in school was less upsetting than assault occurring out of school, although half of adolescent girls report that being assaulted in school was somewhat or very upsetting. Even though boys also experience in school assault, 91% reported that being assaulted in school did not bother them at all or bothered them a little bit. Slightly less than half of in school assault (45%) involves the aggressor’s display of displeasure, such as sulking, making the victim feel guilty, or getting angry, and one-third involves the aggressor’s use of continual arguments. Alarmingly, 14% of in school sexual assault involves the threat or use of physical force to coerce the victim. Although in-school assault is more common among high school students, one in four middle school students reported being assaulted in school, most often in the form of being kissed, hugged, or sexually touched. These findings suggest that there are significant differences in assault occurring in versus outside of school in terms of the frequency and nature of aggression.

The school context appears to be an ideal location to initiate prevention efforts of peer-on-peer sexual aggression. Currently there are numerous dating violence prevention programs that can be delivered within the school setting (see Wekerle and Wolfe 1999 for a review). These programs, which were based upon adult dating violence prevention programs but modified for the younger age group, seek to educate youth on the characteristics and warning signs of dating violence, to counter beliefs that blame the victim, and to describe normal relationship behaviors. Generally, these programs have demonstrated desired change in attitudes and behaviors. However, it is important to note that such programs might not fully address all types of peer-on-peer adolescent sexual assault given their limited focus on violence within dating relationships. Findings from the current study suggest that adolescent peer-on-peer sexual assault is most likely to be

committed by a friend of the opposite sex than a boy/girlfriend. Although future research is needed on the relationship dynamics that contribute to sexual assault between opposite sex friends, it is likely that such dynamics differ from the dynamics of dating relationships that foster sexual aggression within this context. It is plausible that research on men's misunderstanding of women's sexual intentions (Abbey 1987), which has been used to understand acquaintance sexual assault among adults, may provide a theoretical framework for developing effective prevention efforts of adolescent peer-on-peer sexual assault. Adolescent dating violence prevention programs that are currently delivered in the school setting may be able to address a wider range of adolescent sexual violence if they were to incorporate material into the program that specifically focused on assault occurring within non-dating acquaintance relationships.

There are limitations to this study that should be noted. The quality of data produced from a web-based version of the Sexual Experiences Survey has not been tested systematically and may have affected our findings. Moreover, generalizations are constrained since the sample was drawn from one school district and the survey relied on the self-report of students. Students with poor school attendance were likely underrepresented in this sample because the survey took place during school and an active consent returned to the school was required for participation. Low attendance may explain why our sample contained a lower percentage of African American respondents when compared to statistics provided by the school district. Thus, findings from this study need to be replicated with other student populations.

Furthermore, it is critical for future research to include other factors that are associated with sexual assault, such as history of childhood sexual victimization and family-of-origin substance abuse, to determine the complex relationships these characteristics have adolescent sexual assault among adolescents. It is likely that adolescents who are victimized by their peers during adolescence likely have a history of previous abuse, including childhood sexual assault. Future studies that examine pre-existing characteristics of both victims and perpetrators can provide a more nuanced understanding of peer-on-peer adolescent sexual violence.

Regardless of these limitations, this study provides valuable information on the prevalence, characteristics, and nature of acquaintance sexual assault among adolescents. Findings from this study indicate that peer-on-peer sexual assault is most likely to occur on school grounds and between friends; however, the location, type of force, and type of relationship between victim and perpetrator changes over the course of adolescence. Furthermore, this study provides school administrators a better understanding of the nature and scope of sexual assault that occurs on secondary school campuses, which can be used to inform legal liability concerns and how to target prevention efforts. The difficulty of examining sensitive topics such as sexual assault within schools has hampered our understanding of adolescent sexual assault as it occurs among the wider community (Vicary et al. 1995). This study provides a rare picture of sexual victimization among adolescents, particularly given that such a small percentage of adolescent assault is reported to adults or authorities (Kilpatrick and Saunders 1997).

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CROSSING THE LINE

Sexual Harassment at School

By Catherine Hill, Ph.D.,
and Holly Kearl, M.A.

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A student is groped on the way to class.

Kids call a student "gay" and "faggot" and just won't quit.

A demeaning sexual rumor about a student goes viral in cyberspace.

Sexual harassment has long been an unfortunate part of the climate in middle and high schools in the United States. Often considered a kind of bullying, sexual harassment by definition involves sex and gender and therefore warrants separate attention. The legal definition of sexual harassment also differentiates it from bullying.

Based on a nationally representative survey of 1,965 students in grades 7–12 conducted in May and June 2011, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School* provides fresh evidence about students' experiences with sexual harassment, including being harassed, harassing someone else, or witnessing harassment. The survey asked students to share their reactions to their experience with sexual harassment and its impact on them. It also asked them about their ideas for how schools can respond to and prevent sexual harassment.

JUST PART OF THE SCHOOL DAY

W1

Sexual harassment is part of everyday life in middle and high schools. [Nearly half (48 percent) of the students surveyed experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010–11 school year, and the majority of those students (87 percent) said it had a negative effect on them.] Verbal harassment (unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures) made up the bulk of the incidents, but physical harassment was far too common. Sexual harassment by text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means affected nearly one-third (30 percent) of students. Interestingly, many of the students who were sexually harassed through cyberspace were also sexually harassed in person.

Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed, by a significant margin (56 percent versus 40 percent). Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed both in person (52 percent versus 35 percent) and via text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means (36 percent versus 24 percent). This finding confirms previous research showing that girls are sexually harassed more frequently than boys (Sagrestano, 2009; Ormerod et al., 2008; AAUW, 2001) and that girls' experiences tend to be more physical and intrusive than boys' experiences (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). Being called gay or lesbian in a negative way is sexual harassment that girls and boys reported in equal numbers (18 percent of students).

Witnessing sexual harassment at school was also common. One-third of girls (33 percent) and about one-quarter (24 percent) of boys said that they observed sexual harassment at their school in the 2010–11 school year. More than one-half (56 percent) of these students witnessed sexual harassment more than once during the school year. While seeing sexual harassment is unlikely to be as devastating as being the target of sexual harassment, it can have negative effects, such as reducing students' sense of safety. Witnessing sexual harassment at school may also "normalize" the behavior for bystanders.

W1

[The prevalence of sexual harassment in grades 7–12 comes as a surprise to many, in part because it is rarely reported. Among students who were sexually harassed, about 9 percent reported the incident to a teacher, guidance counselor, or other adult at school (12 percent of girls and

[1]Of students who said that they were sexually harassed, 13 percent chose "none" when asked which experience of sexual harassment had the most negative effect on them.

5 percent of boys). Just one-quarter (27 percent) of students said they talked about it with parents or family members (including siblings), and only about one-quarter (23 percent) spoke with friends.[2] Girls were more likely than boys to talk with parents and other family members (32 percent versus 20 percent) and more likely than boys to talk with friends (29 percent versus 15 percent).[3] Still, one-half of students who were sexually harassed in the 2010–11 school year said they did nothing afterward in response to sexual harassment.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT NEGATIVELY AFFECTS GIRLS

Girls were more likely than boys to say that they had been negatively affected by sexual harassment—a finding that confirms previous research by AAUW (2001) and others. Not only were girls more likely than boys to say sexual harassment caused them to have trouble sleeping (22 percent of girls versus 14 percent of boys), not want to go to school (37 percent of girls versus 25 percent of boys), or change the way they went to or home from school (10 percent of girls versus 6 percent of boys), girls were more likely in every case to say they felt that way for "quite a while" compared with boys. Too often, these negative emotional effects take a toll on students' and especially girls' education, resulting in decreased productivity and increased absenteeism from school (Chesire, 2004). Thus, although both girls and boys can encounter sexual harassment at school, it is still a highly "gendered phenomenon that is directly and negatively associated with outcomes for girls" (Ormerod et al., 2008).

W3

"THAT'S SO GAY"

Gender harassment is a significant part of the sexual-harassment problem in schools. In this type of harassment, students are targeted for failing to follow norms that are typical for their gender. For example, a boy who wears colorful clothing might be called gay, and a girl who plays sports might be called a lesbian. In this type of harassment, students police other students' behavior and enforce gender stereotypes.

Boys were most likely to identify being called gay as the type of sexual harassment most troubling to them. Reactions varied, however, with some boys saying that they laughed it off, while others expressed embarrassment, sadness, or fear as a result of the experience. For girls, being called a lesbian was also a common occurrence, particularly for female athletes. Reactions to this form of sexual harassment varied as well, with some students undisturbed but others upset by the experience.

A VICIOUS CYCLE

Harassers come in all shapes and sizes, but the AAUW survey revealed overarching patterns. Nearly all the behavior documented in the survey was peer-to-peer sexual harassment. Boys were more likely than girls to say they sexually harassed other students (18 percent versus 14 percent). Most students who admitted to sexually harassing another student were also the target of sexual harassment themselves (92 percent of girls and 80 percent of boys). Almost one-third (29 percent) of students who experienced sexual harassment of any type also identified themselves as harassers. Only 5 percent of students who had never experienced sexual harassment identified themselves as harassers.

"NO BIG DEAL"

Many of the students who admitted to sexually harassing others didn't think of it as a big deal (44 percent), and many were trying to be funny (39 percent). Only a handful of students who harassed others did so because they

[2]These estimates of the number of students who talked with their parents about a sexual-harassment incident may be higher than other estimates because the referenced event was the experience that had the most negative effect on the student. In other surveys, students were asked to recall the most recent experience.

[3]Respondents could select more than one category. For example, a student could say that she or he spoke with a parent and talked with a friend.

wanted a date with the person (3 percent) or thought the person liked it (6 percent). Thus, sexual harassment does not usually appear to be a misunderstanding. Few harassers see themselves as "rejected suitors," and many appear to be misguided comedians or simply students who are unaware, or unwilling to recognize, that their actions may bother others. These findings suggest that prevention efforts need to address when humor crosses the line and becomes sexual harassment. Moreover, for some students, understanding that sexual harassment can indeed be a big deal for other students is a necessary first step.

STUDENTS SPEAK OUT

Students offered ideas for reducing sexual harassment in their school, including designating a person they can talk to (39 percent), providing online resources (22 percent), and holding in-class discussions (31 percent). Allowing students to anonymously report problems was a top recommendation (57 percent), as was enforcing sexual-harassment policies and punishing harassers (51 percent). These suggestions should spur strategies and approaches for responding to and preventing sexual harassment in schools.

This report concludes with a discussion of promising practices that are making a difference in schools, along with recommendations for how administrators, educators, parents and other concerned adults, students, and community groups can contribute to efforts to make middle and high schools free from sexual harassment.

Originally coined in reference to behavior in the workplace (MacKinnon, 1979), the term *sexual harassment* also refers to unwanted sexual conduct at school. In the school setting, sexual harassment includes unwanted sexual behavior that interferes with a student's educational opportunities.

Sexual harassment at school can include making verbal or written comments, making gestures, displaying pictures or images, using physical coercion, or any combination of these actions. It can take place in person or through electronic means such as text messages and social media. School staff can be harassers, but student peer-to-peer sexual harassment makes up the bulk of sexual harassment at middle and high schools (Eckes, 2006). Students who sexually harass other students are likely to have been sexually harassed themselves (Fineran & Bolen, 2006).

Harassment based on a victim's failure to conform to gender norms is recognized as sexual harassment. Anti-gay and -lesbian slurs are frequently used in gender harassment, but any student who is perceived as failing to conform to social gender norms can be the target. For example, girls may be called "lesbian" if they appear "masculine," and boys may be called "gay" or "fag" if they seem "feminine." Conversely, harassers may call girls who mature earlier than their peers "slut" or "whore" if the harasser deems them to be "too sexual" or wants to fuel rumors about their alleged sexual behavior. Gender harassment is not necessarily sexual in intent or action, but it does address the targeted student's sexuality and is used as a general pejorative to manipulate or control other students. While it also happens in high school, gender harassment is especially common in middle school (Lichty & Campbell, 2011). The courts have recognized gender harassment as a part of sexual harassment, and thus it is subject to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, a law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex at all schools that receive federal funding (Graves, 2011).

Definition of Sexual Harassment

"Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, which can include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Thus, sexual harassment prohibited by Title IX can include conduct such as touching of a sexual nature; making sexual comments, jokes, or gestures; writing graffiti or displaying or distributing sexually explicit drawings, pictures, or written materials; calling students sexually charged names; spreading sexual rumors; rating students on sexual activity or performance; or circulating, showing, or creating e-mails or Web sites of a sexual nature."

—U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights

TITLE IX AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT SCHOOL

Considered by the courts as a form of sex discrimination under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual behavior that interferes with a student's right to receive an equal education. Sexual assault, rape, dating violence, and other forms of sexual violence are considered extreme forms of sexual harassment and are subject to criminal prosecution. In some areas, state or local laws prohibit sexual harassment in schools. When race and sex are involved, sexual harassment is also subject to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits racial discrimination.

A "Dear Colleague" letter from the Obama administration (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2010) made it clear to schools that any harassment motivated by a student's gender is considered unlawful under Title IX. The directive includes harassment of students who are perceived by their peers as not conforming to stereotypical feminine or masculine behavior or attire. Harassment may involve behaviors directed toward a student of the same or different sex.

W4

Title IX protects students against two types of sexual harassment: "quid pro quo" ("this for that") and "hostile environment." When someone with power, usually a teacher or administrator, abuses her or his power to coerce a student into sexual activity in exchange for a good grade or participation in a school activity, the behavior is considered quid pro quo harassment. This kind of exchange is unlawful whether the student resists or acquiesces.

The vast majority of sexual harassment at school falls into the category of hostile-environment harassment, which includes unwanted sexual conduct that is "sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive" to limit a student's participation in an educational program or activity. The courts recognize school liability for peer-to-peer sexual harassment, but the standard for proving a school's liability is high.

In *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1997/1999), the U.S. Supreme Court determined that four factors are required for a finding of a Title IX violation: (1) school officials must have actual knowledge; (2) officials with the authority to take remedial action instead show "deliberate indifference," which makes students vulnerable to harassment; (3) the harassment must have been severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive; and (4) the harassment must have had the effect of denying the victim's participation in educational programs or activities. The right of school administrators to punish online bullying and sexual harassment by students was recently upheld in *Kowalski v. Berkeley County Schools* (2011). Thus, schools do have responsibility for school-based cyber-harassment, regardless of location; however, the courts have set the bar high for students and parents to hold schools accountable.

Title IX also requires schools to appoint a Title IX coordinator tasked with implementing sexual-harassment policies and ensuring gender equity in virtually all areas of school life, including sports.]

BULLYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment in school is sometimes considered a form of bullying (Ashbaugh & Cornell, 2008; Brown et al., 2007). Indeed, both terms refer to harming a peer or subordinate at school or work. Both bullying and sexual harassment can have negative psychological effects that interfere with education or work, and a few behaviors, such as calling someone gay or lesbian in a negative way, are sometimes considered bullying or sexual harassment or both. Distinguishing between the terms is important because they have different definitions and are regulated by different laws. Too often, the more comfortable term *bullying* is used to describe sexual harassment, obscuring the role of gender and sex in these incidents (Stein & Mennemeier, 2011). Schools are likely to promote bullying prevention while ignoring or downplaying sexual harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2007).

As stated before, sexual harassment at school is unwanted sexual behavior (in person and online) that interferes with a student's education. Bullying is usually defined as repeated unwanted behavior that involves an imbalance of power through which the bully intends to harm the bullied student or students (Espelage & Swearer, 2011). Bullying is not necessarily sexual in nature, and the bully may pick a victim for any or no reason. The victim may be chosen simply because she or he is a convenient target for the bully.

Sexual harassment and bullying differ in the typical age of the involved students. Bullying occurs throughout childhood, whereas sexual harassment typically begins with adolescence. Researchers have found that sexual harassment can begin as early as elementary school, but the prevalence increases in higher grades as more students enter puberty (Petersen & Hyde, 2009). Sexual harassment at younger ages is not typically about sex itself but about gender identity. A study of middle and high school students in Canada found that sexual harassment at

school appeared to increase from 6th grade to 10th grade, after which it leveled off (Pepler et al., 2006).

Sexual harassment and bullying are also regulated by different laws. As explained earlier, sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Since Title IX is a federal law, all schools that receive federal funding are regulated by it. In contrast, no federal law exists for bullying, although most states have anti-bullying legislation.

Since state laws and their effectiveness vary, numerous organizations, including AAUW, advocate for a federal anti-bullying law. In April 2011 the Safe Schools Improvement Act was introduced in both the U.S. House (H.R. 1648) and Senate (S. 506). If enacted, this law would amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to require schools receiving federal funds to adopt codes of conduct specifically prohibiting bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity.[4]

CYBER-BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

The use of social media and texting is nearly ubiquitous among teenagers. By 2008 nearly all teenagers (93 percent) were online, and young people spent more time using media than doing any other single activity besides sleeping (Roberts & Foehr, 2008, as cited in Pascoe, 2011). Between 20 and 40 percent of youth ages 12 to 17 report having experienced some form of cyber-bullying (Tokunaga, 2010). For bullies and harassers, the Internet and social media are attractive stomping grounds. Anonymity, instantaneousness, the ability to escalate quickly, and intrusiveness are features of the Internet and social media that can enable or increase bullying and sexual harassment (Chaffin, 2008). A lack of specific physical locale may also convince bullies or harassers that they are beyond the school's legal reach—as they sometimes are.

Sexual harassment is acknowledged to be a prevalent aspect of cyber-bullying, although it is not generally reported separately (Shariff & Strong-Wilson, 2005). Researchers have argued that the sexual (and potentially embarrassing) nature of cyber-harassment results in underreporting relative to other forms of abuse (Bhat, 2008).

SUMMARY

Sexual harassment in education defies simple definition. Legally, sexual harassment can be defined as unwanted sexual behavior that is sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive to interfere with a student's education. Yet, as discussed in the next chapter, even incidents that appear "minor," such as sexual comments and jokes or being called gay or lesbian, may have a profound impact on the emotional well-being of some students. Feeling sick to one's stomach or being unable to concentrate at school may not be sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive for legal action, but it can certainly affect the educational experience. Sexual harassment in middle and high schools can be a problem long before it reaches the level of legal action.

[4]The proposed law would require states to submit data on bullying and harassment to the U.S. Department of Education, which would provide Congress with a report every two years. Additionally, the proposed law would allow schools to use funding under the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act to provide professional development for staff to learn how to prevent bullying and harassment, how to intervene effectively when incidents occur, and how to implement student education programs.

W2 [Sexual harassment is widespread in middle and high schools. Young and colleagues (2008) found that 40 to 50 percent of students had experienced some form of sexual harassment in a single school year.[5] When a longer period of time is examined, the rates of sexual harassment are understandably higher. In AAUW's previous research, more than 80 percent of students reported that they had experienced sexual harassment at least once in their school career (AAUW, 1993, 2001).] A broader definition of sexual harassment can also increase estimates of prevalence. Despite these differences, however, patterns emerge. Researchers often find that girls are more likely than boys to experience sexual harassment (Young et al., 2008). Some researchers claim that sexual harassment is so common for girls that many fail to recognize it as sexual harassment when it happens (Leaper & Brown, 2008; Pepler et al., 2006). Physical harassment is less common than verbal harassment, but it tends to have stronger negative effects on students (AAUW, 2001). Taunts about being gay are common in middle and high schools, often with negative effects on targeted youth (GLSEN, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

This report addresses the prevalence, frequency, and impact of sexual harassment in middle and high schools. AAUW commissioned Knowledge Networks to conduct a nationally representative online survey of students in grades 7–12 on the subject of sexual harassment. In fall 2010 AAUW created a survey based on previous surveys used for AAUW reports published in 1993, 2001, and 2005, as well as on advice from AAUW Advisory Board members.

This survey differs from previous AAUW surveys in the time period it covered and the structure of the questions about the effects of sexual harassment on students. Past surveys asked students to consider any sexual harassment that they might have encountered over their entire school

Definition of Sexual Harassment

In AAUW's survey, sexual harassment was defined as unwelcome sexual behavior that takes place in person or electronically. If everyone involved likes and agrees to the sexual behavior, it is not sexual harassment. The survey asked students whether they had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment during the 2010–11 school year.

Types of Sexual Harassment

In AAUW's survey, students were asked whether they had experienced the following types of sexual harassment.

IN PERSON

- Having someone make unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures to or about you
- Being called gay or lesbian in a negative way
- Being touched in an unwelcome sexual way
- Having someone flash or expose themselves to you
- Being shown sexy or sexual pictures that you didn't want to see
- Being physically intimidated in a sexual way
- Being forced to do something sexual

THROUGH TEXT, E-MAIL, FACEBOOK, OR OTHER ELECTRONIC MEANS

- Being sent unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or pictures or having someone post them about or of you
- Having someone spread unwelcome sexual rumors about you
- Being called gay or lesbian in a negative way

[5] AAUW (1993, 2001) previously used the time frame of the entire school career to estimate the prevalence of sexual harassment. This study uses a single school year as the duration for the study. Studies that refer to a single school year tend to have lower rates of prevalence than do studies that ask students about any experience with sexual harassment over the course of their school career.

career. This survey asked respondents to consider any sexual harassment that they might have encountered in the 2010–11 school year. This change was expected to show a reduced prevalence of sexual harassment at school.

The subject of emotional and educational impacts was also treated differently. In past AAUW surveys, questions about the impact of sexual harassment referred to the student's most recent experience with it. This AAUW survey asked students to identify the experience that had the most negative effect on them. This change was expected to show an increase in the number of students who identified negative emotional or educational effects.

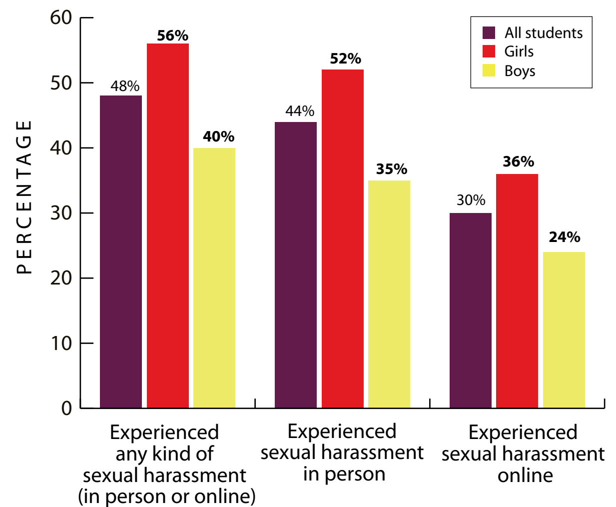
This new survey also included questions regarding sexual harassment by text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means that were not included in earlier surveys. The wording of the questionnaire was also altered to reduce the time required for completion.

Knowledge Networks was selected to conduct the survey because the company has recruited the first online research panel that is representative of the entire U.S. population (see Appendix A). Documentation regarding its methodology, including address-based sampling, data-collection procedures, weighting, and Institutional Review Board-bearing issues is available on the AAUW website. Statistical significance testing was conducted at the 95 percent level of confidence for income and gender differences.

PREVALENCE

About half (48 percent) the students in grades 7–12 experienced some form of sexual harassment at school during the 2010–11 school year. Nearly half the students (44 percent) encountered sexual harassment in person,

Figure 1. Students Who Experienced Sexual Harassment during the 2010–11 School Year, by Gender



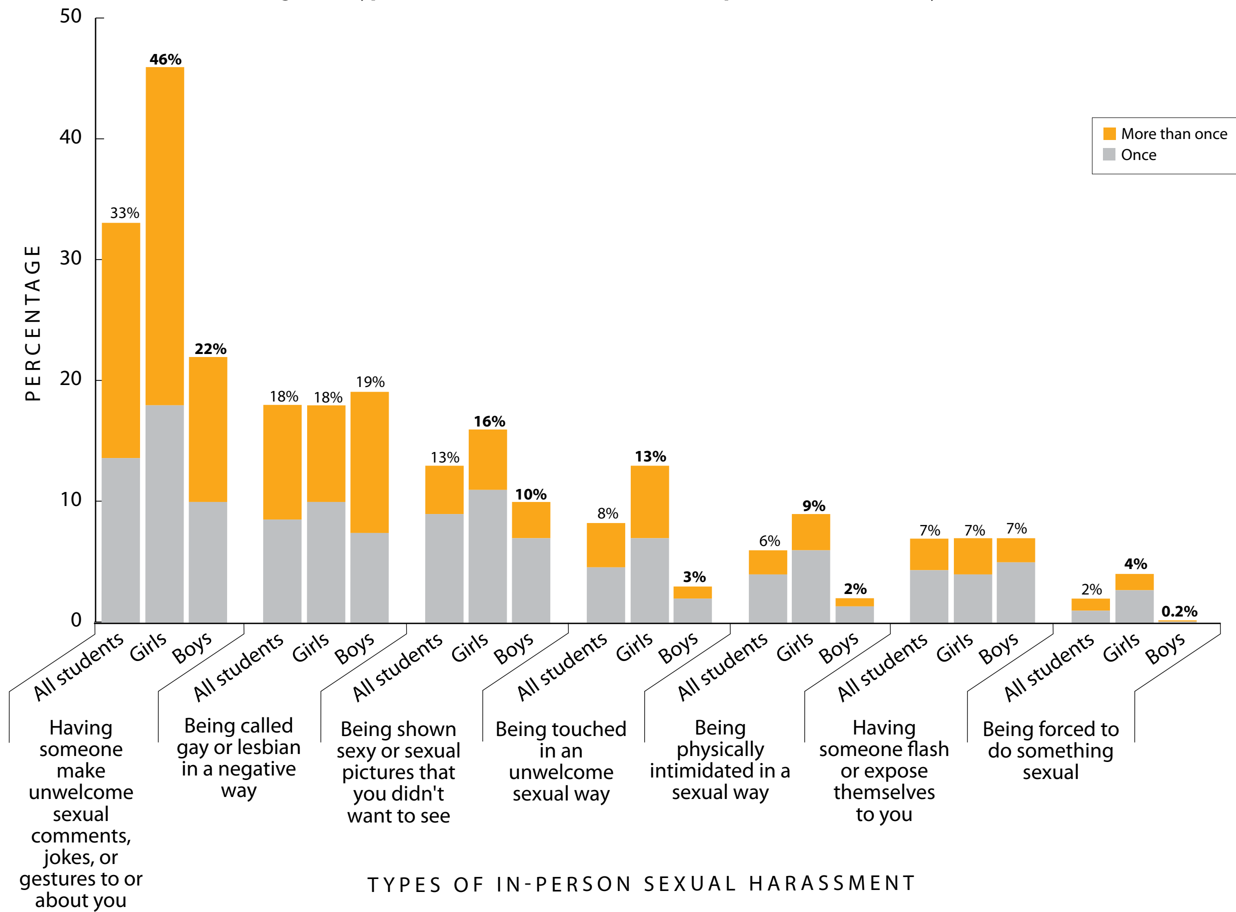
Notes: Students were asked if they had experienced any of 10 types of sexual harassment since the beginning of the school year. **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents (n=1,965 students), 1,002 girls and 963 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

and 30 percent encountered sexual harassment through texting, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means. Many experienced sexual harassment both in person and electronically.[6]

As figure 1 shows, girls were more likely than boys to experience sexual harassment (56 percent versus 40 percent). The gender gap holds true for both in-person harassment (52 percent versus 35 percent) and electronic harassment (36 percent versus 24 percent).[7]

As figure 2 shows, unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, and gestures were the most common type of sexual harassment, and one-third of students (33 percent) encountered them at least once in school year 2010–11. Almost one-

[6]Because many students experienced both in-person and online harassment, the totals cannot be added together.
[7]In May and June 2011, 1,002 girls and 963 boys completed the AAUW survey online. Responses were weighted to reflect the U.S. population for age, gender, race-ethnicity, region of the country, and other factors. The percentages shown in this report are based on weighted data.



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents (n=1,965 students), 1,002 girls and 963 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

fifth of students (18 percent) were called gay or a lesbian in a negative way, and 13 percent said that they had been shown sexy or sexual images that they didn't want to see.

Girls were more likely than boys to encounter most forms of sexual harassment. Girls were much more likely to experience unwanted sexual jokes, comments, or gestures (46 percent versus 22 percent). Girls and boys were about equally likely to be called gay or lesbian in a negative way (18 percent of students). Girls were more likely to say that they were shown sexy or sexual pictures that they did not want to see (16 percent of girls versus 10 percent of boys) and that they had been touched in an unwelcome sexual way (13 percent of girls versus 3 percent of boys). Girls were also more likely to say that they had been physically intimidated in a sexual way (9 percent of girls versus 2 percent of boys) and were forced to do something sexual (4 percent of girls versus less than 1 percent of boys). Girls (7 percent) and boys (7 percent) were equally likely to say that someone flashed or exposed him- or herself to them.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT BY AGE, RACE, AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

About 48 percent of 7th graders—both girls and boys—who took AAUW's survey reported facing sexual harassment during the 2010–11 school year. With age, however, a gender gap emerges. For 12th graders who took the survey, a 23 percentage point gender gap existed between girls and boys, with 62 percent of girls but only 39 percent of boys reporting that they had experienced sexual harassment during the school year.

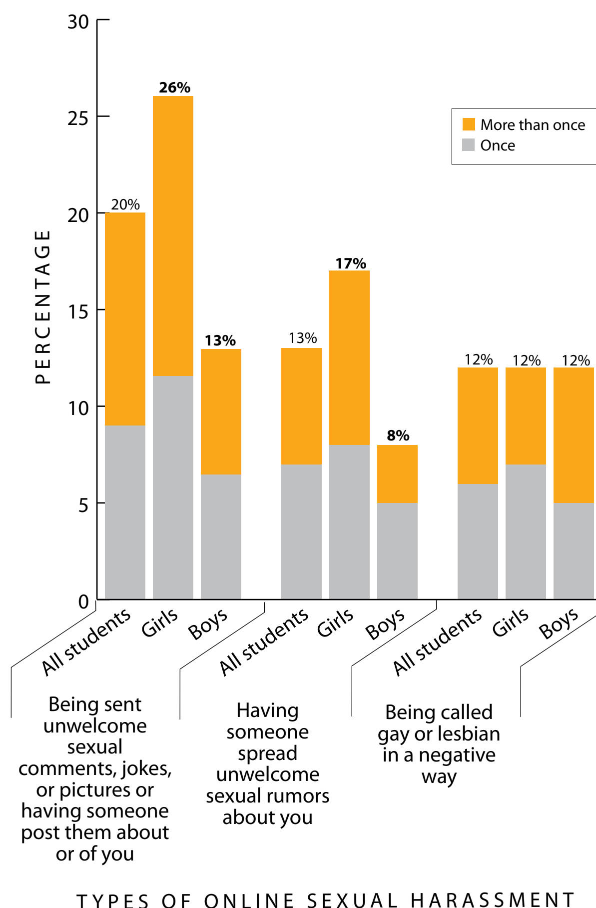
AAUW found no statistically significant differences in prevalence of sexual harassment among students of different racial-ethnic groups, which may be due to the limited sample size. In terms of socioeconomic status, students from upper-income households (with an annual income of $60,000 and more) and students from lower-income households (with an annual income of less than $60,000) were equally likely to report each type of sexual harassment, with one exception: Students from lower-income families were more likely to report being touched in an unwelcome way than were their peers from higher-income households.

CYBER-HARASSMENT

Overall, cyber-harassment was less prevalent than in-person sexual harassment. More than one-third of girls (36 percent) and nearly one-quarter of boys (24 percent) reported experiencing cyber-harassment (see figure 1). Twenty percent of students received a text message, e-mail, or post with unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or pictures during the 2010–11 school year (see figure 3). Twelve percent of students were called gay or lesbian in a negative way through texting, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means. Thirteen percent of students had sexual rumors spread about them through electronic means.

Many students who were sexually harassed online were also sexually harassed in person. Students who were sexually harassed both in person and electronically were most likely to be negatively affected by their experiences with sexual harassment.

Figure 3. Cyber-Harassment of Students, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents (n=1,965 students), 1,002 girls and 963 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

STUDENT HARASSERS

A majority of harassed students (54 percent) identified one male student as their harasser, and 12 percent of harassed students said that they were harassed by a group of male students. In contrast, only 14 percent of students said the harasser was one female student, and 5 percent said that they were harassed by a group of female students.

Eleven percent of harassed students said that their harassers were a group of both female and male students.

Not surprisingly, most students don't see themselves as harassers; however, 16 percent of students surveyed (14 percent of girls and 18 percent of boys) admitted that they had sexually harassed another student, either in person or online. Fifteen percent of students had sexually harassed someone in person, and 10 percent had sexually harassed another student through texting, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means.

The majority of male harassers said that they had sexually harassed a male student; more than two-thirds (72 percent) indicated that they sexually harassed a boy, and less than one-fifth (19 percent) said that they sexually harassed a girl.[8] Among female harassers, the difference is closer. One-half of female harassers (50 percent) said that they sexually harassed a boy, and 41 percent said that they sexually harassed a girl. Because girls reported higher rates of sexual harassment than boys did, this finding raises questions. Why didn't boys or girls admit to sexually harassing girls when more girls than boys said they had been sexually harassed? Why does it seem to be more acceptable to sexually harass boys? These questions are critical to developing new strategies for prevention of sexual harassment for both genders.

Students who admitted to sexually harassing other students said that they were most likely to sexually harass other students verbally. Calling someone gay or lesbian in a negative way was the most frequently mentioned type of sexual harassment, with 12 percent of students committing it in person and 7 percent of students committing it through text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means.

Student Voices: What Happened

"A boy tried to unzip my pants."
—8th-grade girl, Mexican-Native American

"A friend of a friend said I was known to give oral sex to any male who wanted or needed it because everyone knows and suspects I am gay."
—10th-grade boy, Hispanic

"They spread rumors I was gay because I played on the basketball team."
—8th-grade girl, African American

"I was called a whore because I have many friends that are boys."
—9th-grade girl, white

"They had a picture of my face attached to an animal having sex and had the words WHO'S NEXT written next to it . . . referring to my girlfriend."
—12th-grade boy, white

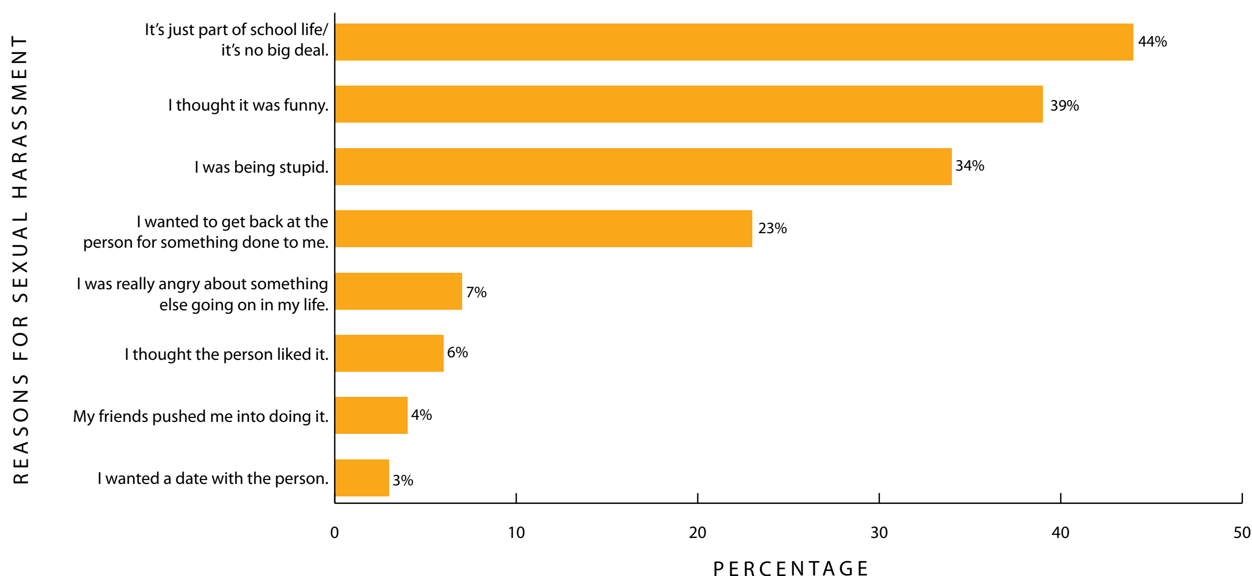
"They tried to corner me in the soccer goal to touch my [private parts]."
—7th-grade girl, white

"I was told I was gay because of the way I had dressed for a school spirit week event."
—8th-grade boy, Asian American

"Someone had lewd photos on their phone—they asked if I wanted to see them and even though I said no, they showed them to me anyway."
—12th-grade girl, African American

[8]These numbers do not equal 100 percent due to rounding and the inclusion of categories other than a male or female student. Additional options included harassing a group of students (mixed-sex, male, or female) as well as an "other" category. A small number of students did not answer the question.

Figure 4. Why Students Sexually Harassed Other Students



Notes: Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had harassed someone in person or online since the beginning of the school year (n=290 students), 135 girls and 155 boys in grades 7–12. Categories were not mutually exclusive, and students could choose more than one reason.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

Sexual harassment is not simply a matter of perpetrators and victims. Of the 16 percent of students who admitted to sexually harassing others, the vast majority said they had been sexually harassed themselves (92 percent of girls and 80 percent of boys). Asked why they sexually harassed another student, about 23 percent said they were retaliating for something that had been done to them.

These results confirm previous research on student harassers. For example, Fineran and Bolen (2006) found that about half of the girls who were sexually harassed were also harassers themselves. Espelage and Holt (2007) found that bullies who are also victims were more likely than other students to report high levels of anxiety and depression. These studies indicate that bullying has adverse effects not only on victims and witnesses but on perpetrators as well. Although harassers and victims may be well defined in a particular incident, over the course of a school year, many students will be both harassed and harasser.

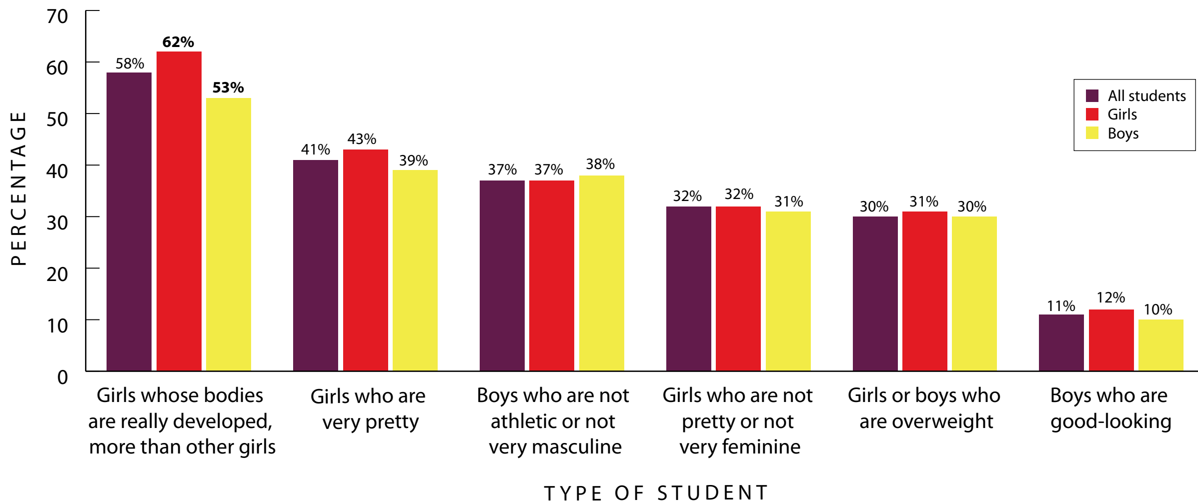
REASONS FOR SEXUAL HARASSMENT

As figure 4 shows, many students who admitted to sexually harassing others didn't think of it as a big deal (44 percent), and many were trying to be funny (39 percent). Revenge or getting back at the person for something done to them earlier was a rationale offered by 23 percent of students. Only a handful of students said they wanted a date with the person (3 percent) or thought the person liked it (6 percent). Few harassers appeared to be "rejected suitors," and many seemed to be misguided comedians or simply students who were unaware, or unwilling to recognize, that their actions may have been a big deal to others. At least one-third (34 percent) of harassers described their past behavior as stupid, suggesting that they might not intend to repeat it in the future.

STUDENT ATTITUDES

According to survey respondents, what types of students are most at risk for sexual harassment at school? Respondents considered boys who are not athletic or not

Figure 5. Attributes of Students Likely or Very Likely to Be Sexually Harassed at School as Identified by Peers, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents (n=1,965 students), 1,002 girls and 963 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

very "masculine" more likely to be sexually harassed (37 percent) than boys who are considered "good-looking" (11 percent).

For girls, those who stand out as "too sexual" or "too masculine" are at risk for sexual harassment, according to their peers. More than half the students (58 percent) said that girls whose bodies are more developed than those of other girls are likely or very likely to be sexually harassed at school. Pretty girls were considered to be at high risk by 41 percent of students, and 32 percent of students believed that girls who are not pretty or not very "feminine" are sexual-harassment targets at school. About 30 percent of students believed that girls and boys who are overweight would be likely or very likely targets.

As figure 5 shows, only boys who are considered good-looking by their peers are at relatively low risk for sexual harassment. Girls, however, find themselves in an even more precarious position. Those who fulfill feminine standards of beauty are at high risk for sexual harassment, yet girls who are viewed as too masculine or not pretty are also at risk. These results reinforce the complexity of predicting who may be the victim of sexual harassment in middle and high schools, as unwanted sexual attention and the policing of gender norms are both part of sexual harassment.

Finally, students were asked their opinions about sexual harassment. Generally, students appear to know right from wrong. The vast majority of students know that it is not okay to tease girls who act masculine (90 percent) or boys who act feminine (89 percent). They know that students don't bring sexual harassment on themselves (91 percent). Girls and boys agree with these principles in equal numbers, and the recognition of these basic values is heartening.

SUMMARY

Sexual harassment is widespread, with nearly half (48 percent) of the students surveyed encountering some form of sexual harassment during the 2010–11 school year. Sexual harassment by texting, e-mail, Facebook, and other forms of electronic communications affected almost one-third of students (30 percent), and many of these students were also subjected to in-person sexual harassment. In other words, sexual harassment appears to be a normal, albeit undesirable, part of school.

A sizeable minority (18 percent of boys and 14 percent of girls) admitted that they sexually harassed another student during the 2010–11 school year. Most harassers felt that their actions were no big deal, and many were trying to be funny. Many stated that they were being stupid, which suggests that they view their actions as a mistake. Yet, students who admitted to being harassers are only a subsection of students who sexually harass others. The majority of sexual harassment remains unclaimed, suggesting either that the harassers are unaware of how others perceive their behavior or that they are unwilling to admit to it, even in an anonymous online survey.

Understanding the prevalence of different types of sexual harassment is essential for crafting efforts to respond to and prevent it. Yet sexual harassment is also defined by the reactions of targeted students and by its short- and long-term effects.

Understanding the impact of sexual harassment on students is helpful in determining where to focus prevention efforts. It is also critical in legal contexts, since establishing an impact on the student's educational experience is a required first step in any Title IX action.

THE MOST NEGATIVE EFFECTS

To understand the effect of sexual harassment on students, the AAUW survey asked students who had experienced sexual harassment to identify one incident during the 2010–11 school year that had the most negative effect on them. This experience was then used as the reference for questions about students' reactions to sexual harassment and its impact on them. Verbal and written forms of sexual harassment were more common than physical harassment, however, so most students listed them as the experience that had the most negative effect. Several gender differences were clear in the responses.

As figure 6 shows, girls were more likely than boys to identify unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures as having had the most negative effect on them (36 percent versus 16 percent). In part, this is because more girls than boys faced that type of sexual harassment (46 percent versus 22 percent). Having sexual rumors spread electronically about them had the second most negative impact on girls (17 percent versus 11 percent of boys), and that behavior was the fourth most common form of sexual harassment experienced by girls (17 percent versus 8 percent for boys).

Boys were most likely to cite being called gay in a negative way in person as their most negative experience of sexual harassment. Girls and boys were equally likely to experience this type of sexual harassment (18 percent of students surveyed), but 21 percent of boys and only 9 percent of girls identified being called gay or lesbian as their worst experience of sexual harassment.

Boys appear to be less affected than girls by sexual harassment. Seventeen percent of boys who had been sexually harassed selected "none" when indicating what form of sexual harassment had the most negative effect on them. In comparison, only 10 percent of sexually harassed girls said that none of their experiences with sexual harassment had a negative effect on them. This finding is supported by other studies. For example, Young and colleagues (2008) found that boys were more likely than girls to say that sexual-harassment incidents did not bother them. The difference may be attributed to the types of sexual harassment that girls and boys experience. The intensity of these experiences may also vary. Finally, for girls, sexual harassment often reinforces or subtly reminds them of the gender-power imbalance that exists in most societies (Ormerod et al., 2008; Gådin & Hammarström, 2005; Lichty & Campbell, 2011).

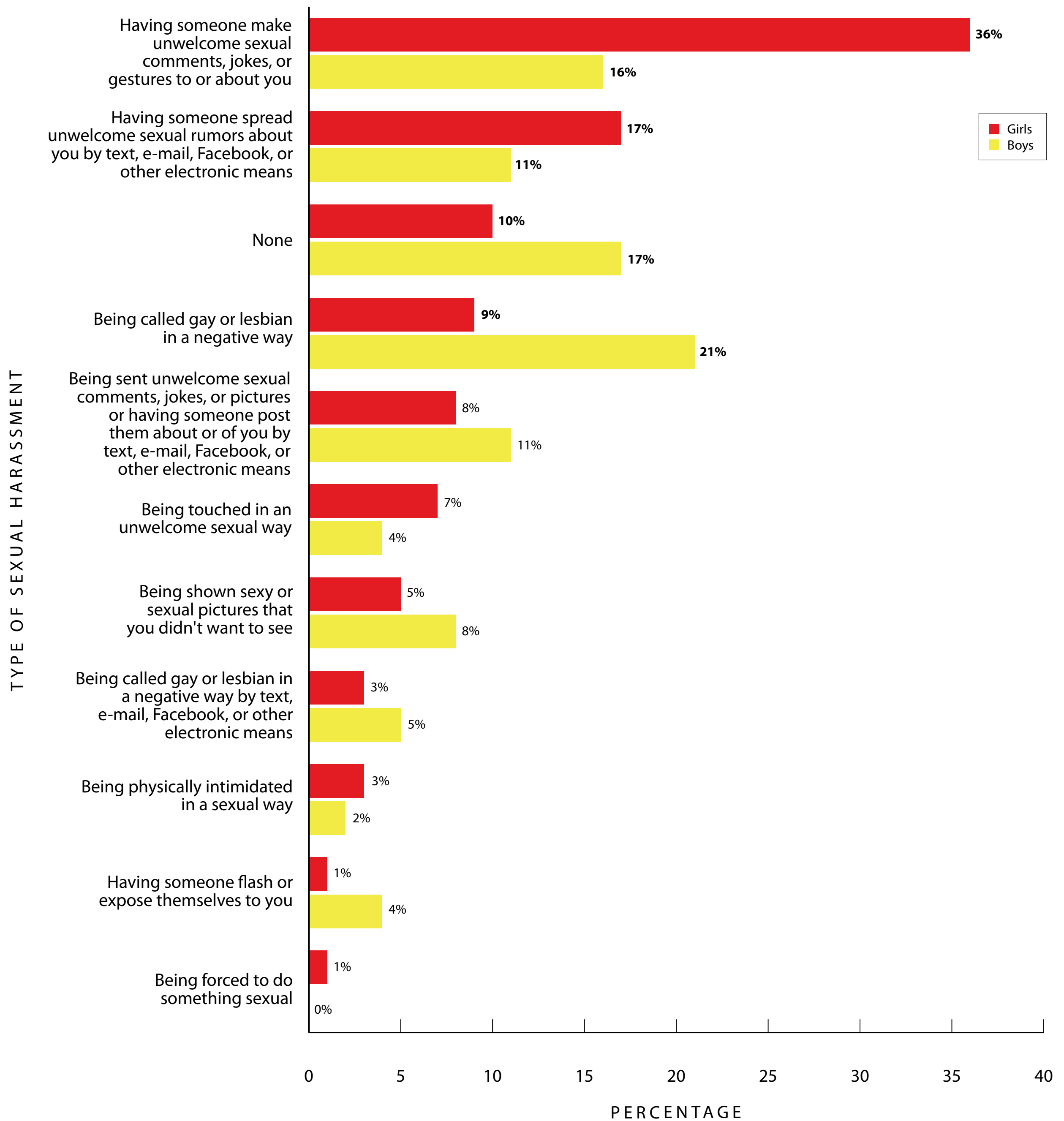
IMPACT: GENDER DIFFERENCES

Individuals have different emotional responses to sexual harassment, in part due to differences in the kind of sexual harassment they encountered. Differences in personality, culture, and gender also affect students' response. For some student victims, sexual harassment may be no big deal, whereas others might find the experience embarrassing, upsetting, or worse.

Girls are more likely than boys to say that they have been negatively affected by sexual harassment (AAUW, 1993, 2001; Fineran & Bolen, 2006), although the 2009 National School Climate Survey, by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (Kosciw et al., 2010), found that the emotional toll can be high for boys who are not straight.

The gender of the harasser also affects outcomes. Felix and McMahon (2006) found that being sexually harassed by a boy was more strongly related to behavior problems for both male and female victims than was being sexually harassed by a girl. These emotional impacts often lead to educational problems, such as difficulty concentrating on schoolwork, absenteeism, and poor academic performance (Chesire, 2004).

Figure 6. Sexual Harassment Incidents That Had the Most Negative Effect on Students, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment in person or online since the beginning of the school year (n=931 students), 541 girls and 390 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

W3

Student Voices: How Harassed Students Felt

"I was sent a website to look up and I did and it was to a porn site. It was very upsetting to me."

—7th-grade girl, white

Being called gay by other students made a student "feel bad and I tried to get away anyway I could. I felt threatened for my personal safety."

—9th-grade boy, white

A student was shown sexual photos she did not want to see. She said, "I felt bad for my friend who was in the pictures and uncomfortable that the pics were sent around."

—11th-grade girl, Asian American

Being called a lesbian was "very hurtful."

—12th-grade girl, Mexican American

"Everyone was saying I was gay, and I felt the need to have to run away and hide."

—9th-grade boy, white

Being touched in an unwelcome, sexual way made a student "feel sad and very scared."

—10th-grade girl, Asian American

After being the target of sexual rumors, a student said she "tried to ignore it" but then "thought of suicide."

—8th-grade girl, white

"I didn't like [being the target of unwelcome rumors]. It hurt me. Some of my friends still question me about the rumors."

—10th-grade boy, African American

"An 8th-grade guy passed by me and said, really softly, 'What's up, sexy?' and then kept on walking. It really creeped me out."

—7th-grade girl, white

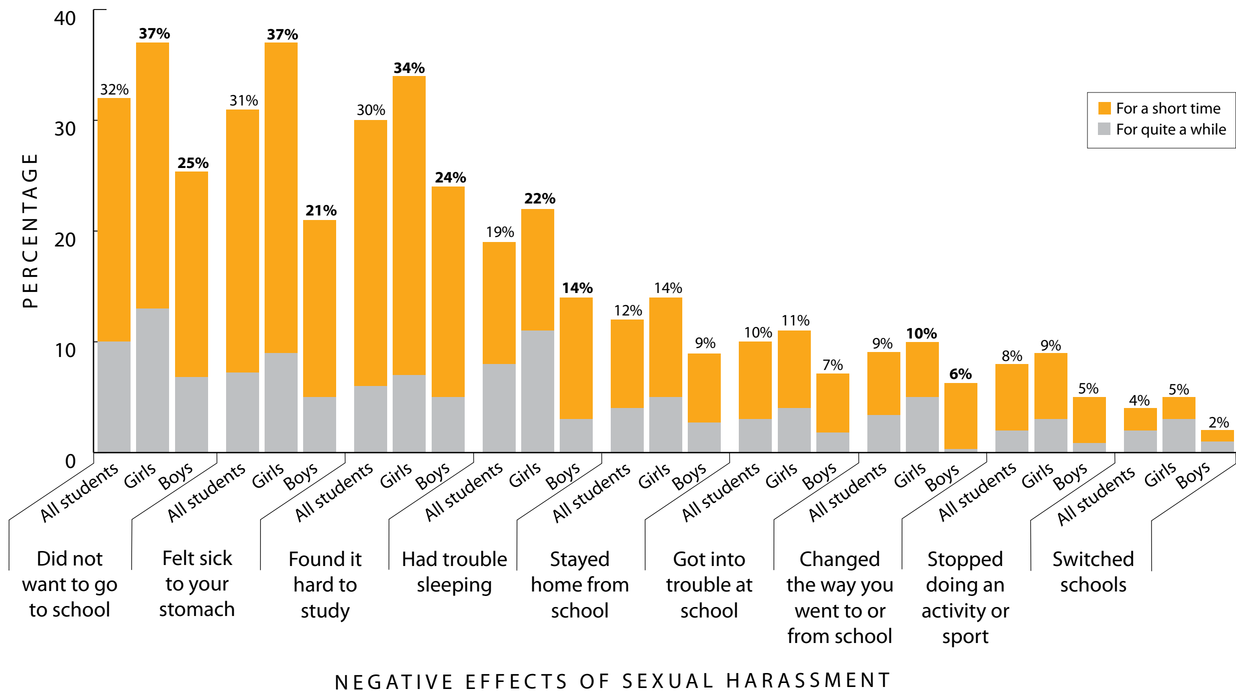
[The AAUW survey found that nearly half of all students (48 percent) in grades 7–12 experienced sexual harassment during the 2010–11 school year, including 56 percent of girls and 40 percent of boys, and for most of them, the incident or incidents had a negative effect.

The emotional toll of sexual harassment was the most noticeable (see figure 7). One-third (32 percent) of harassed students said they did not want to go to school as a result of the sexual harassment, including 37 percent of girls and 25 percent of boys. Another third (31 percent) of students said they felt sick to their stomach as a result of the sexual harassment (37 percent of girls and 21 percent of boys). Thirty percent of students said sexual harassment caused them to have a hard time studying (34 percent of girls and 24 percent of boys). Trouble sleeping was a problem for 19 percent of students, including 22 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys. Girls were more likely than boys to say they had a hard time sleeping for quite a while, rather than a short time.

For many students, sexual harassment also affected their school experience. Getting into trouble at school as a result of sexual harassment was the outcome for 10 percent of students. Nine percent of students said they changed the way they went to or from school (10 percent of girls and 6 percent of boys). Eight percent of students quit an activity or sport. When a boy in 8th grade was called gay multiple times, he "stopped middle school hockey." A 10th-grade girl who was called a lesbian, among other forms of sexual harassment, said, "I take different hallways in school to avoid people."

A small but important minority of students said that sexual harassment significantly affected their education. Twelve percent of students said they stayed home from school because of sexual harassment. Four percent of students changed schools. Verbal as well as physical harassment can lead to educational impacts. For example, after being called a whore by "almost everyone" at her school and being sexually harassed both online and in person, an 8th-grade girl said she "looked into switching schools."]

Figure 7. Student Reactions to Sexual Harassment, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had experienced a negative impact from being sexually harassed since the beginning of the school year (n=804 students), 484 girls and 320 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

IMPACT: INCOME DIFFERENCES

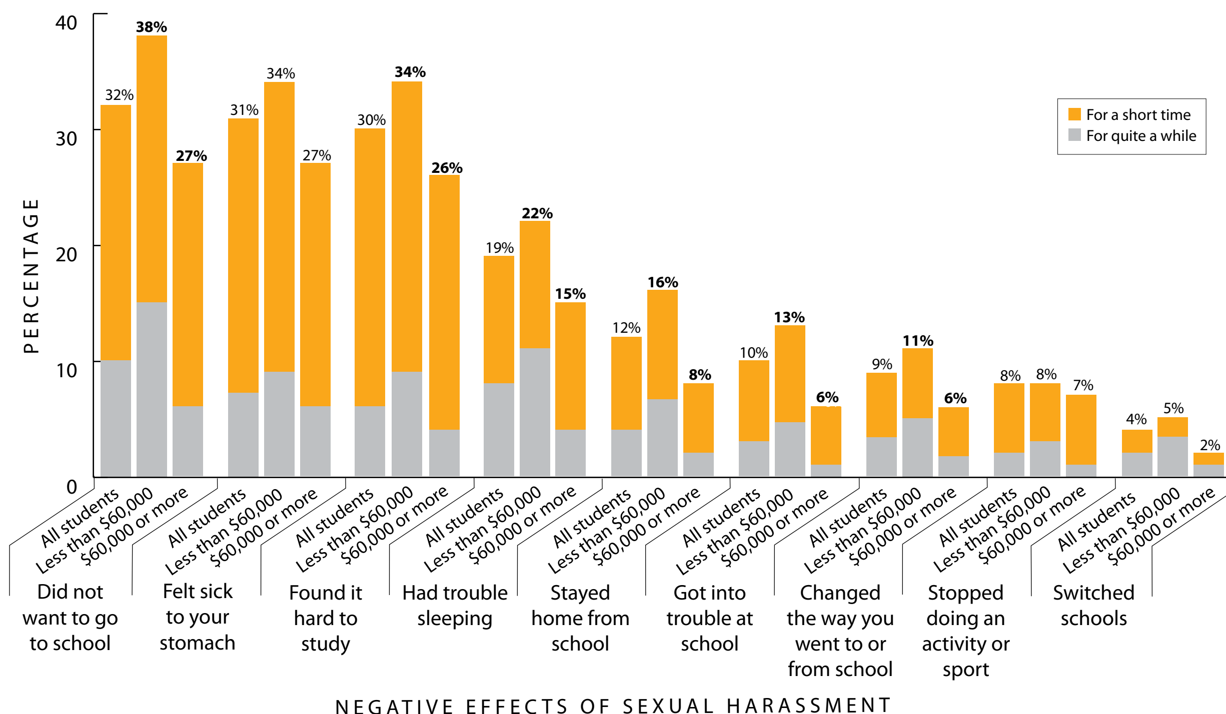
The impact of sexual harassment appears to vary by income as well as gender (see figure 8). In nearly every category, students from moderate- or low-income homes were significantly more likely to say sexual harassment had a negative impact on them than were students from homes in which income was $60,000 and higher.[9] For example, 38 percent of lower-income students but only 27 percent of higher-income students said they did not want to go to school because of a sexual-harassment experience. Of the 12 percent of students who said they stayed home because of a sexual-harassment experience, two-thirds were from a household with an income under $60,000. The connection between socioeconomic status and sexual harassment is an area in which further research and analysis are necessary.

IMPACT: RACIAL DIFFERENCES

The sample sizes for African American and Hispanic students are too small to make definitive conclusions about how sexual harassment affects different racial groups, but the findings suggest that students of color may be affected more than white students are. Notably, African American students were more likely than their white counterparts to stop doing an activity or sport, get into trouble at school, and find it hard to study because of sexual harassment. Hispanic students were more likely than white students to stay home from school because of sexual harassment.

[9]Low- and moderate-income households are defined as those with incomes below $60,000; moderate-high-income households are defined as those with household incomes of $60,000 or higher. Knowledge Networks collected income information in increments of $10,000. The figure of $60,000 was selected as closest to the national median income for a family with children in 2010 ($57,085) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Questions about family income were posed to parents, not to students.

Figure 8. Student Reactions to Sexual Harassment, by Annual Household Income



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant differences between higher-income and lower-income students at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had experienced a negative impact from being sexually harassed since the beginning of the school year (n=804 students), 378 students from households with an annual income of less than $60,000 and 426 students from households with an annual income of $60,000 or more in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

Student Voices: Responses to Sexual Harassment

"A guy sent me a picture of his butt with no clothes on it. I just ignored it and then blocked him from my Facebook account."

—11th-grade girl, white

"The person made a comment that he would like to see me naked but I told him that was not funny and not to say that again."

—10th-grade girl, African American

A student who was called gay wrote, "I can't tell teachers, they don't care."

—8th-grade boy, white

"This boy who was my friend kept touching my butt and I kept telling him to stop. Then he touched my boob and I went to the office and told them."

—7th-grade girl, white

When random people ran up to him and called him gay, a student said, "I told my friends and laughed it off."

—8th-grade boy, Asian/white

After experiencing unwanted touching, a student told her mom and said, "My mom called the school."

—7th-grade girl, Hispanic

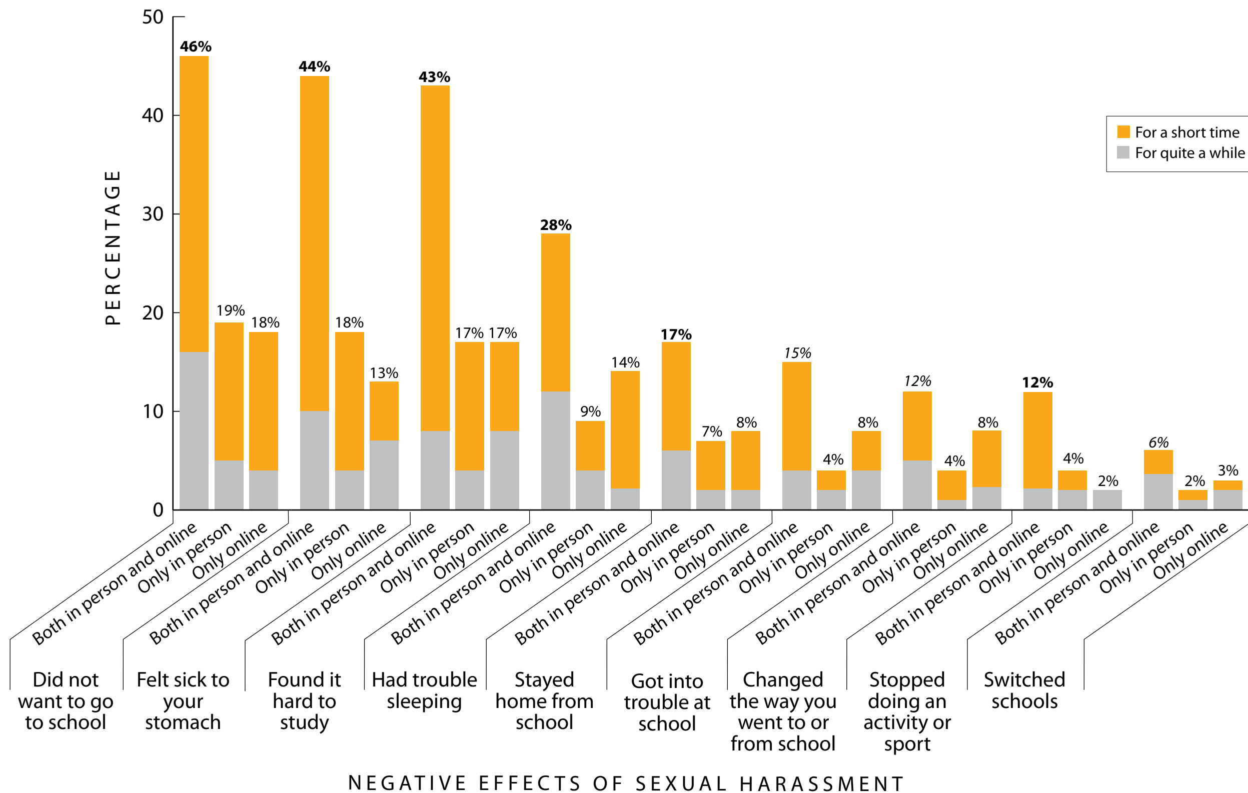
"The person sent me a Facebook chat saying I was gay and stupid and I told my mom and deleted the person from my friends list."

—7th-grade girl, white

A student who was the target of a homophobic slur said, "I just deal with it and make a joke. If someone says, 'Are you in the closet?' I'll say, 'How did you know I was in the closet getting dressed?'"

—11th-grade boy, white

Figure 9. Student Reactions to Being Sexually Harassed, in Person, Online, or Both



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant differences between students who experienced sexual harassment both in person and online and the other two categories at the 95 percent level. *Italicized* numbers indicate statistically significant differences between students who experienced sexual harassment both in person and online and students who experienced harassment only in person at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had experienced a negative impact from being sexually harassed since the beginning of the school year (n=804 students), 383 students who had been sexually harassed both in person and online, 340 students who had been harassed in person only, and 81 students who had been harassed online only in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

African American and Hispanic students were more likely than white students to change the way they go to or from school and switch schools in response to sexual harassment. This suggests a need for further research on the intersection of race and sexual harassment.

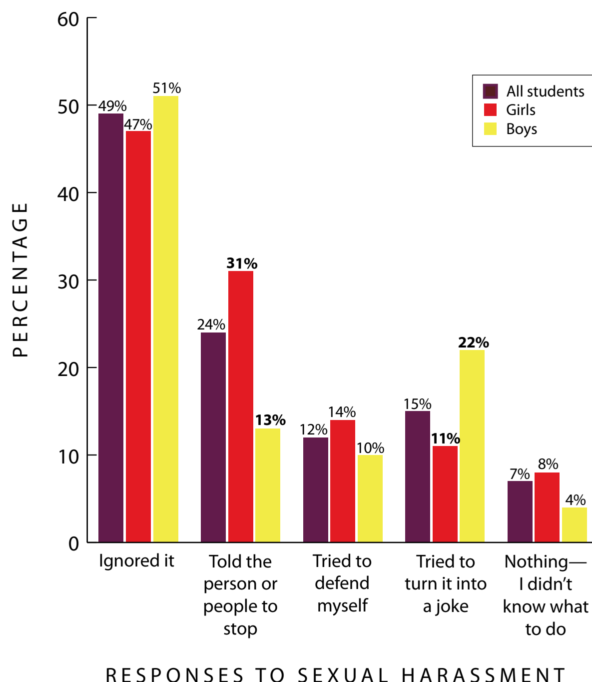
IMPACT: ONLINE AND IN-PERSON SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Students who faced sexual harassment both online and in person were much more likely than those who faced it only online or only in person to say it affected them (see figure 9). For example, 46 percent of students who had experienced sexual harassment both online and in person said they did not want to go to school as a result of the sexual harassment, compared with 19 percent who were sexually harassed only in person and 18 percent who were sexually harassed only online. Of students who were sexually harassed both online and in person, 43 percent found it hard to study, compared with 17 percent of those who had been sexually harassed only in person or only online. Thus, facing sexual harassment through multiple avenues increased the likelihood that it would affect a student's ability to learn.

RESPONDING TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT

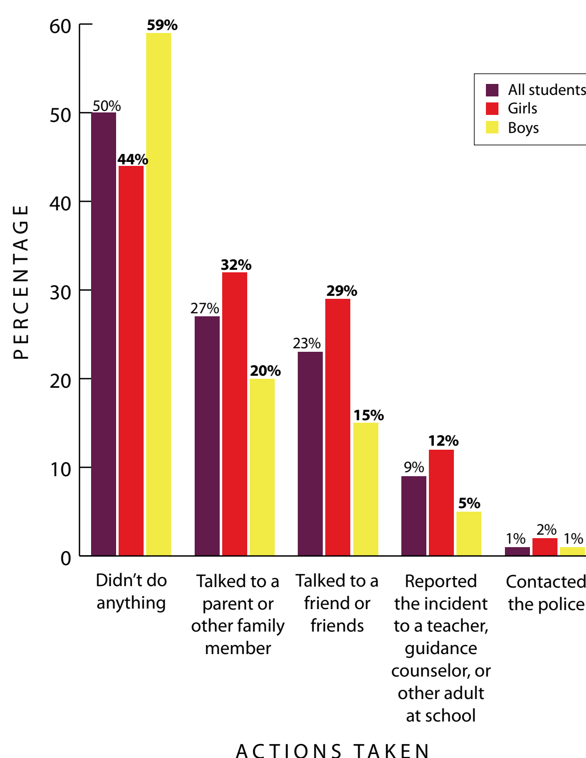
Students had different reactions when they experienced sexual harassment (see figure 10).[10] About half of both girls and boys reported that they ignored it (49 percent).

Figure 10. Student Responses to Sexual Harassment at the Time of the Incident, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had experienced a negative impact from being sexually harassed since the beginning of the school year (n=804 students), 484 girls and 320 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

Figure 11. Actions Students Took after Being Sexually Harassed, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had experienced a negative impact from being sexually harassed since the beginning of the school year (n=804 students), 484 girls and 320 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

This is unsurprising since ignoring a harasser may feel like the easiest response or the default response for students who are unsure what to do. Many parents and teachers even counsel students to ignore harassers.

The next most common responses to sexual harassment varied. Almost one-third of girls (31 percent) but only 13 percent of boys told the harassers to stop. Nearly one-fourth of boys (22 percent) but only 11 percent of girls said they tried to turn the sexual harassment into a joke.

The difference in these responses likely reflects the differences in the kinds of sexual harassment experienced by girls and boys. A higher percentage of girls than boys encountered unwanted sexual attention, such as unwelcome sexual touching and unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures. It's logical then that more girls would have a forceful response, like telling someone to stop. Many boys listed being called gay in a negative way as having the most negative effect on them. Boys might use humor to try to deflate or deflect that unwanted behavior.

Statistically similar percentages of girls and boys said they tried to defend themselves against the harasser, yelled for help, or did nothing when the sexual harassment occurred, because they didn't know what to do.

[10]Students could select more than one response on the survey.

AFTER SEXUAL HARASSMENT

After being sexually harassed, 50 percent of students did nothing about it, including 44 percent of girls and 59 percent of boys (see figure 11).[11] Girls were much more likely than boys to talk with someone about what happened or to report it. Nearly one-third of girls (32 percent) but only 20 percent of boys said they talked to a parent or other family member. Twenty-nine percent of girls but only 15 percent of boys talked to their friends about what happened.

Only 9 percent of students (12 percent of girls versus 5 percent of boys) reported the incident to a teacher, guidance counselor, or other adult at school. The differences by gender may be attributable to the differences in the type of sexual harassment that girls and boys experienced. Boys may also feel less comfortable seeking help or talking about their experiences than girls do.

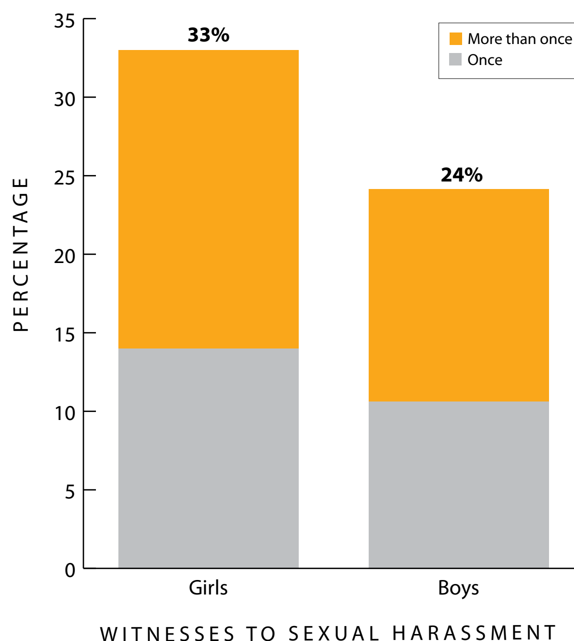
The AAUW findings confirm previous research about students' reporting of sexual harassment. Kosciw et al. (2010) found that more than half of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students who had experienced sexual harassment in the prior year did not report it to school staff or parents.[12] Students' reasons included doubts that anything would change, fears that they would make the situation worse, concerns about the staff member's reaction, and beliefs that the incident was not severe enough to report.

WITNESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment often takes place where other students are likely to be witnesses. One-third of girls (33 percent) and almost one-quarter of boys (24 percent) said that they had witnessed sexual harassment at school (see figure 12).

More girls than boys tried to help another student who was being sexually harassed (24 percent of girls versus 17 percent of boys). Students were more likely to take action if they also had been sexually harassed. In fact, two out of three students (68 percent) who tried to help another student who was being sexually harassed had experienced sexual harassment themselves.

Figure 12. Witnessing Sexual Harassment in School, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents (n=1,965 students), 1,002 girls and 963 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

Among students trying to help, 60 percent told the harasser to stop (see figure 13). Just over half of the students (54 percent) checked to see if the sexually harassed person was okay. Slightly less than one-quarter of students (24 percent) who tried to help someone reported the harasser to a teacher, guidance counselor, or school employee, and 22 percent told their parents or a family member.[13]

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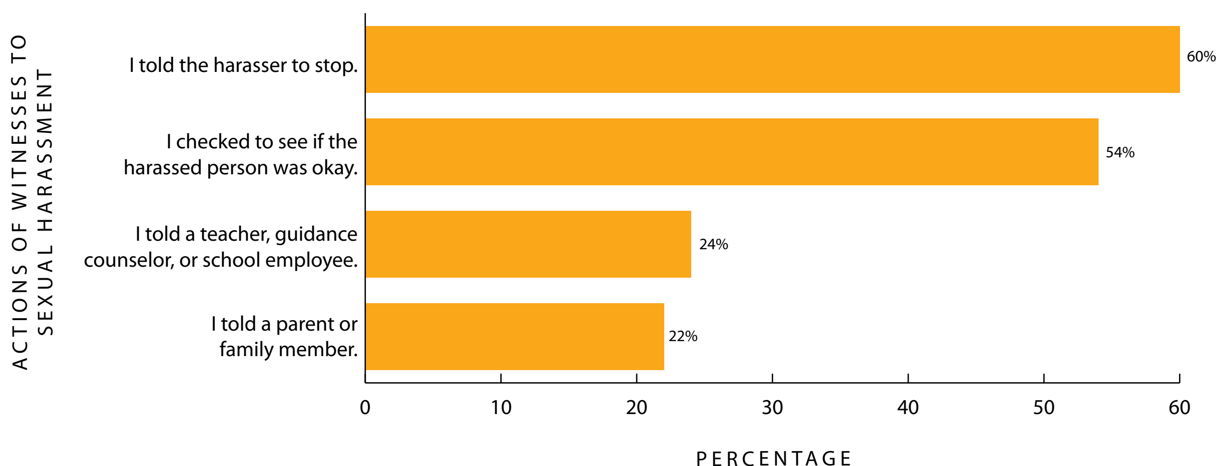
[11] Students taking the survey could select more than one response.
[12] Kosciw et al. used a sample consisting of 7,261 students between the ages of 13 and 21. Students were from 2,783 unique school districts in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The largest number of students were in grades 11 and 12.
[13] Students taking the survey could select more than one response.

Figure 13. Actions Students Took to Help a Student Being Sexually Harassed at School



Notes: This question was posed only to students who said that they had tried to help another student who was being sexually harassed at school. Base=survey respondents who said they tried to help another student (n=380 students), 227 girls and 153 boys in grades 7–12. No statistically significant gender differences existed in the percentage of students who chose each of these answers.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

Of students who witnessed sexual harassment but did nothing (12 percent of the total students surveyed), the most common reason for not intervening was being unsure what to do (36 percent). Twenty-eight percent of students who witnessed sexual harassment but did nothing said they did not think they could make a difference. Just over one-quarter (26 percent) said that they didn't think of it as sexual harassment at the time. Thirteen percent of students worried that they would be sexually harassed if they did something, while 9 percent of students were afraid of being physically hurt. Girls and boys were about equally likely to give these reasons for not acting.

SUMMARY

Most students who experienced sexual harassment felt that it had a negative effect on them. Many students said that they felt sick to their stomach or had trouble sleeping. Some students had trouble concentrating on their homework, and others said that they missed class, quit a school activity, or changed schools. Children from moderate- or low-income families were more likely than children from higher-income families to experience these negative effects.

Girls were more likely than boys to experience physical and emotional symptoms as a result of sexual harassment. For girls, unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures, as well as sexual rumors on the Internet, had the most negative effect. For boys, the incident that caused the most negative effect was being called gay in a negative way in person, followed by unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures.

Very few students talked to teachers or other adults at school about sexual harassment. When faced with sexual harassment, most students did nothing at the time or afterward. Responses by those who did take action included talking to a teacher, guidance counselor, friend, or family member about what happened.

When students witnessed sexual harassment and stepped in to help, they were most likely to tell the harasser to stop or to see if the sexually harassed person was okay. Many students who witnessed sexual harassment did nothing simply because they did not know how to respond, did not think it would make a difference, or feared that they would become targets themselves.

Sexual harassment continues to be a common problem in middle and high schools, affecting the educational experience of millions of children. Sexually harassed students who took part in the AAUW survey reported having trouble studying, not wanting to go to school, and feeling sick to their stomach. Some students stayed home from school. Sexual harassment led others to skip classes, drop activities, or even change schools. Girls were especially negatively affected because they faced a higher rate of sexual harassment than boys did, including the most physical forms of sexual harassment.

Fortunately, everyone can help address and prevent sexual harassment. Students surveyed offered ideas for reducing sexual harassment, from allowing students to report problems anonymously to holding school-based workshops on the topic (see figure 14). This chapter contains specific guidance about what school administrators, teachers, parents and other concerned adults, students, and community members can do to prevent and address sexual harassment. A few promising practices for stopping sexual harassment are also highlighted. Appendix B lists organizations and government agencies that address sexual harassment.

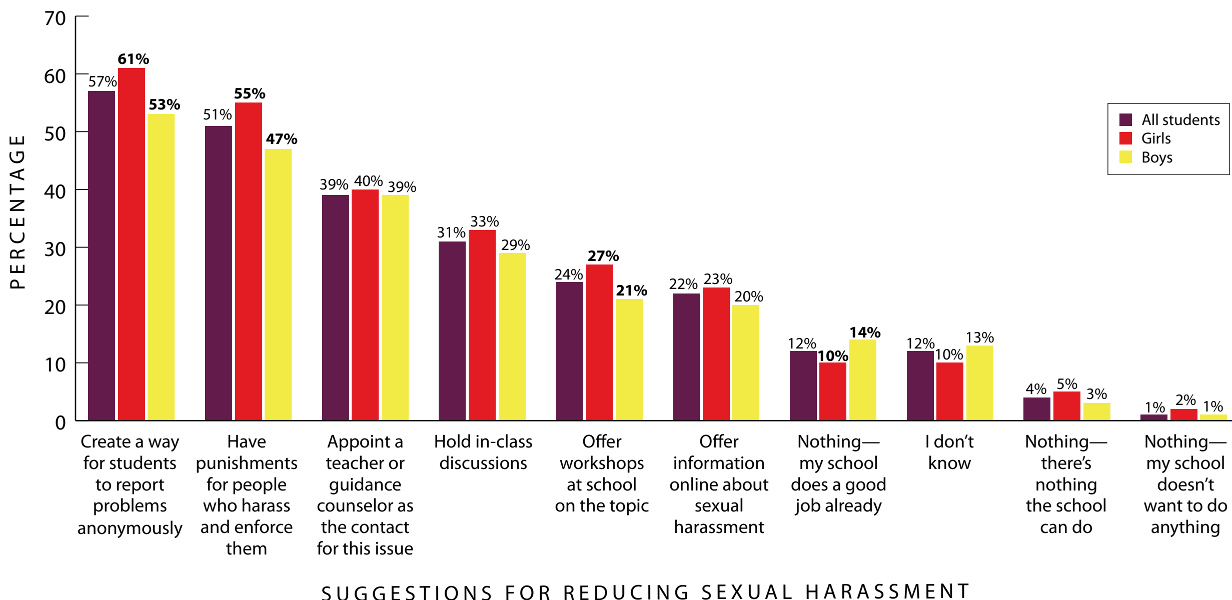
ADMINISTRATORS: MAKE PREVENTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT A PRIORITY

W4

[Only 12 percent of students surveyed felt that their school did a good job addressing sexual harassment, and more than two-thirds of those students had not been sexually harassed during the 2010–11 school year. Of the remaining students, nearly all thought that their schools could and should do something about sexual harassment.

Strategies for addressing sexual harassment at school are most effective when they come from the top. Studies show that if administrators such as principals tolerate sexual harassment or do nothing to address it, teachers and students have less incentive and less support to do anything about it (Lichty & Campbell, 2011; Meyer, 2008).

Figure 14. Student Suggestions for Reducing Sexual Harassment at School, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents (n=1,965 students), 1,002 girls and 963 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

Administrators can make a difference by ensuring that their school enforces Title IX and that students are aware of the protections the law provides.]

Under Title IX, each school should have a designated coordinator to handle official sexual harassment complaints and other Title IX violations. The first step for administrators is to appoint a Title IX coordinator. More than one-third of students (39 percent) said it would be useful if schools had such a person assigned to help with sexual harassment. Most students (57 percent), especially 12th graders, also wanted a way to anonymously report sexual harassment problems. Creating a reporting mechanism would increase students' willingness to report the problem. A Title IX coordinator could help create such a system.

To be effective, the Title IX coordinator needs training, time, and resources to handle sexual-harassment complaints and other gender equity issues. The coordinator's name and contact information must be posted and easily accessible to students. The Title IX coordinator must provide appropriate help to students who contact her or him. Schools must have a clear policy regarding sexual harassment and published procedures that automatically occur when sexual harassment is reported. This policy should make clear the school's commitment to report to authorities the sexual harassment that appears to violate a student's civil rights under Title IX or that otherwise may reflect criminal behavior. Without this component, students will lose faith in the system, and administrators have no guidance on appropriate intervention. More than half the students (51 percent) advocated for enforced punishments for harassers.

Studies show that changing the cultural norms about sexual harassment at a school can take years (Pepler & Craig, 2008). Consequently, administrators must have patience if they see no immediate evidence that the sexual-harassment initiatives are working.

What School Administrators Can Do

- Enforce Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972.
- Address sexual harassment in the school's official agenda.
- Create and publicize a sexual-harassment policy, and send a copy of it to parents.
- Provide clear guidelines about how staff should handle sexual harassment when it is reported to them.
- Provide staff with the time and financial resources necessary to follow school sexual-harassment guidelines.
- Organize a school assembly on sexual harassment, and involve students in the planning and implementation.
- Post or distribute information about sexual harassment, including what it is, what the school's policy is, and what students can do if they experience or witness it. Invite students to create posters, or use the ACLU's fact sheet "Gender-Based Violence and Harassment: Your School, Your Rights."
- Designate a person to administer the school's sexual-harassment policy and receive complaints. Let all students know who the person is, and tell students what to do if they experience or witness any kind of sexual harassment.
- Provide training on sexual harassment for both staff and students.

Source: Sandler & Stonehill, 2005; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Cross et al., 2004.

EDUCATORS: RESPOND AND EDUCATE

One of the main ways teachers and guidance counselors can help students is by learning how to respond appropriately to sexual harassment when they witness it and when students report it.

Teachers can use simple methods to address and prevent sexual harassment in their classrooms. They can serve as role models for students by exhibiting nonharassing, respectful behavior and by challenging discriminatory comments and behavior exhibited by anyone in school, including harmful gender stereotyping and discriminatory jokes. They can create a code of conduct for their classroom that prohibits sexual harassment and hold students accountable for adhering to that code. They can also incorporate sexual-harassment issues into the curriculum.

Respond

W1

Very few students reported sexual harassment to their teachers, guidance counselor, or Title IX coordinator. During the 2010–11 school year, fewer than 10 percent of students said they reported sexual harassment to educators when they experienced it, and only 24 percent reported it when they witnessed it. When students report sexual harassment, they are showing great faith in the educators with whom they choose to speak. Educators must respond appropriately, with sensitivity and patience, and they must provide students with information about their rights.

W4

Of course, educators need to lead by example. In several studies, students noted that even when sexual harassment happens right in front of teachers, few teachers do anything about it. When educators ignore their personal and professional obligations as adults and as school authorities, they create a culture in which sexual harassment is acceptable and students feel that they cannot trust teachers to help them (Sandler & Stonehill, 2005). As one survey respondent, an 8th-grade girl, said, “The teachers need to notice more. They sometimes see [sexual harassment], but they don’t do anything.” A 9th-grade girl who experienced unwanted touching said, “Teachers should pay attention in class and believe students when they ask to be moved.”

Educators can respond in many ways when they observe sexual harassment. As long as they do not ignore the situation, treat it as a joke, or encourage the harasser, their response will likely make a difference in stopping the situation and preventing future instances of sexual harassment.

How Educators Can Respond When Students Report Sexual Harassment

- Listen to the students carefully and respectfully.
- Avoid voicing judgment or using victim-blaming language.
- Answer questions fully. Freely acknowledge when an answer is unknown, and then find the answer and share it with the students.
- Advise students to record the incident in writing, including as much detail as possible about what happened and listing anyone who saw the incident (or offer to transcribe what they dictate).
- Advise students about their rights and options.
- Assist students as necessary if they choose to report the harasser to school officials.
- Assist or check up on students as they take the next steps and remind them to report any future sexual harassment.

Source: Smith et al., 2011.

How Educators Can Respond When They Observe Sexual Harassment

- Name the behavior, and state that it must stop immediately.
- Suggest an appropriate alternative to an offensive word or phrase and advise students to use it going forward.
- Use the incident as a reason for talking to students about sexual harassment, what it is, and why it’s not okay.
- Follow the school policy for handling sexual harassers.

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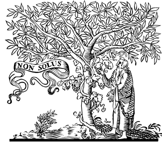

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Impact of Sexual Harassment Victimization by Peers on Subsequent Adolescent Victimization and Adjustment: A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine gender differences in prevalence and types of sexual harassment victimization experienced in grade 9 and how it contributes to relationship victimization and psychological adjustment 2.5 years later.

Methods: A total of 1734 students from 23 schools completed self-report surveys at entry to grade 9 and end of grade 11. Self-report data were collected on victimization experiences (sexual harassment, physical dating violence, peer violence, and relational victimization) and adjustment (emotional distress, problem substance use, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, maladaptive dieting, feeling unsafe at school, and perpetration of violent delinquency). Separate analyses by sex were prespecified.

Results: Sexual harassment victimization was common among boys (42.4%) and girls (44.1%) in grade 9, with girls reporting more sexual jokes, comments, and unwanted touch than among boys, and with boys reporting more homosexual slurs or receiving unwanted sexual content. For girls, sexual harassment victimization in grade 9 was associated with elevated risk of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, maladaptive dieting, early dating, substance use, and feeling unsafe at school. A similar pattern of risk was found for boys, with the exception of dieting and self-harm behaviors. Adjusted odds ratios (AOR) indicated these students were significantly more likely than nonharassed students to report victimization by peers and dating partners 2.5 years later (AOR for boys and girls, respectively; all $p < .01$), including sexual harassment (AOR: 2.45; 2.9), physical dating violence (AOR: 2.02; 3.73), and physical peer violence (AOR: 2.75; 2.79). Gr 9 sexual harassment also contributed significantly to emotional distress (AOR: 2.09; 2.24), problem substance use (AOR: 1.79; 2.04), and violent delinquency perpetration (AOR: 2.1; 3.34) 2.5 years later (boys and girls, respectively; all $p < .01$).

Conclusions: Sexual harassment at the beginning of high school is a strong predictor of future victimization by peers and dating partners for both girls and boys, and warrants greater prevention and intervention efforts. © 2009 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Sexual harassment; Youth; Victimization

Sexual harassment is typically defined as a form of unwanted or unwelcome sexual attention, and is considered a form of gender-based violence [1]. Sexual harassment among youth encompasses acts that are sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive to limit a student's ability to participate in or benefit from an education program or activity, or that create a hostile or abusive educational environment [2]. Such harassment can take physical forms such as a pulling at clothing, rubbing up against another person, or grabbing/pinching, as well as verbal forms such as sexual comments, jeers, rumor spreading, or sexual jokes.

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Sexual harassment has been recognized for many years as being a problem in the workplace, university campuses, and military settings, where studies show that about two in five women and one in six men report at least one incident in the past 2 years [3]. Although sexual harassment is gender based by nature, women experience it differently from men. Women are more likely to report being objectified, put down, or treated differently because of their gender [4], whereas men experience vulgar and homophobic comments, presumably to enforce traditional gender role stereotypes [1]. Most students also experience some forms of sexual harassment during high school, either occasionally (59%) or often (27%), with girls experiencing more frequent and severe forms than boys [5,6]. Even when the timeframe of questions about unwanted sexual behaviors and harassment is narrowed from ‘‘ever’’ (i.e., lifetime prevalence) to the past 2 weeks, 15% of high school students report being subjected to unwanted and personally upsetting sexual harassment [7].

Despite awareness of the frequency of sexual harassment, there is little available research on the forms of harassment experienced by adolescent boys and girls or how it may affect them differently over time. Although an atmosphere of sexual harassment is unhealthy and alienating, further study is needed to determine the effects of such acts on girls' and boys' interpersonal adjustment, especially over time. In the only longitudinal study of this issue, sexual harassment among grade 8 students predicted adjustment problems 3 years later [8]. Younger girls and boys who associated with deviant peers were more likely to be the victims of sexual harassment. Moreover, girls who reached pubertal development earlier were at increased risk for sexual harassment, most likely because of inappropriate attention by others. Of particular concern was the finding that girls who reported higher victimization in the eighth grade also had increased problems with substance use, lower self-esteem, and symptoms of depression 3 years later. These findings suggest that, similar to findings with adults, sexual harassment is a risk factor for psychological problems among youth.

Students' experiences of abuse by peers in high school have a significant influence on their antisocial behavior and psychological adjustment [9,10]. Because victimization is highly stable, many of the same youth experience ongoing abuse from peers that contributes to their further mistreatment and adjustment problems, which may be especially relevant for boys who do not fit the rigid and conventional notion of masculinity [11,12]. Therefore, we conducted the present study of sexual harassment beginning in grade 9 (the first year of high school for this sample), because this is a time when many students are subjected to verbal and physical taunts and aggression from both their own classmates and older students. As they attempt to navigate entry into peer groups, many are faced with decisions and conflicts that pose a risk to their emotional well-being and are bombarded with negative gender-based messages [13]. We considered sexual harassment as a developmental risk factor, and anticipated that it could interfere with social adjustment and emotional well-being and lead to further victimization in peer and dating relationships. Our primary objectives were to document the types and prevalence of sexual harassment experienced by boys and girls, and the negative outcomes associated with such experiences in the short and longer term. Given the gendered context of sexual harassment and that girls report more harassment and related distress than boys, we examined the short- and longer-term risks and outcomes separately for boys and girls.

Methods

Study participants and design

Students (N = 1897) from 23 high schools participated in this study, which was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the University of Western Ontario. Data were collected as part of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a school-based intervention program to reduce adolescent dating violence and related risk behaviors. Sexual harassment victimization was assessed at the beginning of grade 9 and again 2.5 years later at the end of grade 11, along with other self-reported behaviors described below.

Demographic information was collected from the parents of participating students with a take home questionnaire in grade 9 (return rate = 65%, n = 1225). The majority of participants' parents were Caucasian (89%), married (82%), employed (86%), and had some post-secondary education (73%). However, a low return of this survey does not make these data representative of our sample in general. Indeed, the students in this study were much more diverse in ethnicity and family status.

Measures

Sexual harassment victimization. Sexual harassment was assessed using a modified version of the AAUW Sexual Harassment Survey of unwanted verbal and physical forms of sexual attention or harassment [5]. The original survey was modified to ask specifically if another teen or classmate had done any of the unwanted acts to him or her in the past 3 months at school, using a dichotomous (yes/no) response scale. Six behaviors of the original 14 were removed based on low relevance or low frequency within high school samples [1,5]. Items included verbal, nonverbal, and physical forms of harassment, shown in Table 1. Because the total item distribution was positively skewed, sexual harassment victimization was dichotomized into absent (no or one experience) or present (two or more experiences).

Physical dating violence and peer violence. Physical dating violence victimization was assessed with four items from the Conflict in Adolescent Relationships Inventory (CADRI), a self-report measure with established convergent/divergent validity [14]. Students indicated (yes or no) to behaviors they had experienced in the past year from a boyfriend/

Table 1
Sexual harassment victimization experiences in grade 9 for boys and girls

Type of harassment[a]	Girls	Boys	χ^2 (1)	p
Someone made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks at me	452/954 (47)	318/897 (35)	27.08	<.01
Someone touched, grabbed or pinched me in a sexual way	302/954 (32)	225/894 (25)	9.53	<.01
Someone brushed up against me in a sexual way	262/952 (28)	275/895 (31)	2.30	.13
Someone spread sexual rumors about me	126/955 (13)	106/896 (12)	0.78	.38
Someone called me a ‘‘gay’’, ‘‘fag’’, ‘‘dyke’’, ‘‘lezzie’’, ‘‘queer’’ or similar terms	219/954 (23)	298/893 (33)	24.82	<.01
Someone pulled at my clothing in a sexual way	161/951 (17)	141/894 (16)	0.45	.50
Someone showed, gave, or left me sexual pictures, photographs, messages, or notes	90/955 (9)	143/891 (16)	18.35	<.01
Someone made comments about or rated the parts of my body that makes me a boy or girl	238/948 (25)	144/891 (16)	22.33	<.01

Data are n/N (%).
[a] Items from the American Association of University Women Survey.

girlfriend ‘‘while you were having an argument, angry at one another, or having a fight.’’ Presence of physical abuse was based on endorsement of one or more times (e.g., ‘‘he pushed, shoved, or shook me’’). Physical peer violence victimization was assessed with one item (yes/no) that asked students whether they had been hit, slapped, or punched by a peer with the intention of harm in the past 3 months. Youth also completed a delinquent behavior inventory developed by the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth [15]. Eight items were chosen to reflect engagement in violent delinquency (e.g., ‘‘fought with someone to the point where they needed care for their injuries’’). Presence of violent delinquency perpetration (i.e., two or more forms of violent delinquency) was based on prior established cutoffs [16]. Peer relational victimization was assessed with five items from the Self-Report of Aggression and Social Behaviors survey [17]. Students indicated (1 = not at all true; 5 = very true) the extent to which they experienced some form of rumour/gossip spreading or social exclusion in the past 3 months, and those who reported 4 or 5 on one or more items were scored as positive.

Emotional distress and suicidal thought/self-harm. Twelve items from the depression and anxiety subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory [18] were combined to form a measure of emotional distress. Youth indicated (0 = not at all; 4 = extremely) the extent to which they experienced each symptom over the past 7 days. Responses were dichotomized as present or absent, and summed to form a total distress score (α =.89). Students were categorized as experiencing emotional distress if they endorsed five or more of the 12 items based on instrument norms and the current distribution of scores. Suicidal thought was assessed with one item (yes/no) asking students if they had considered suicide at any time over the past 3 months. Self-harm was assessed with one item (yes/no) asking students if they had hurt themselves on purpose (cut yourself, burned yourself, etc.) without intending to kill themselves in the past 3 months.

Maladaptive dieting behaviors. Four items from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey [19] asked students if they had engaged in any maladaptive dieting behaviors to lose weight in the past 30 days, including the following: purging; taking pills, powders, or liquids; fasting; and restriction of food. Maladaptive dieting was dichotomized based on the presence of one or more dieting behaviors.

Problem substance use. Experience with alcohol and illicit drugs was assessed with the NLSCY [19] and converted to a dichotomous problem substance use score based on the presence of any one of four criteria: drinking 1–2 days a week or more; having five or more drinks at one time in past 30 days; using marijuana 1–2 days a week or more; or having tried any other illicit drug in the past three months.

Sexually active and early dating. Students indicated whether they ever had consensual sexual intercourse (yes/no). Early dating was assessed with one item, asking students how old they were when they first started seeing (dating) someone, and dichotomized based on starting dating at 12 years of age or younger (i.e., presence of early dating).

Feeling unsafe at school. This variable was coded positive for respondents who indicated they felt unsafe at school on one or more days over the past 30 days.

Procedure

Data were collected in October 2004 (T1: grade 9) and 2.5 years later in May, 2007 (T2: grade 11). All grade 9 students were eligible and there were no exclusion criteria. A research assistant explained the study to each class and distributed research information, consent/assent forms, and a demographic survey to send home to parents. During school hours, students completed an on-line survey in the computer room or library under supervision by research staff and teachers. This procedure was identical at T1 and T2. Students were assured that their responses were confidential, were assigned a unique identifier for follow-up, and received help-seeking information.

Data analyses

Chi-square analyses were used to identify other risks associated with sexual harassment victimization in grade 9, by

gender. A logistic regression model predicting sexual harassment victimization at T2 was then examined, controlling for demographic variables, baseline scores, and grade 9 intervention status based on the associated RCT. Grade 9 intervention status was included in the model to control for any effects the associated prevention program may have had on any of the outcomes in this study. This model was repeated for related T2 outcomes of relationship victimization and psychological adjustment. Given the gendered-nature of sexual harassment victimization, separate logistic regression analyses were conducted for boys and girls. Adjusted odds ratios (AOR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) are reported for all analyses, with type I error rate set at $p < .01$.

Results

The parent consent–youth assent rate was 75%, with a combined return rate (yes or no) of 82%. Longitudinal analyses included only students who provided data at both waves (1734/1897; retention rate 92%; 51% female). Of the 334 students who had changed schools at T2, 186 were located and completed the on-line survey at their new school. The remaining students lost to follow-up refused to participate (n = 29) or could not be located (n = 119). The subsample of students lost to follow-up did not differ from the full sample on baseline measures.

Risk factors associated with sexual harassment in grade 9

A sizable number of students ($n = 790/1822$; 43%) was classified as experiencing sexual harassment in grade 9. Although rates were the same for girls (44.1%) and boys (42.4%), types of harassment experiences differed (Table 1). Girls were more likely than boys to experience being the recipient of sexual jokes, comments, and unwanted touch, while boys were more likely to be subjected to homosexual slurs or given sexual pictures and notes. Boys and girls reported similar rates of being brushed against in a sexual way, being the victim of rumors, and having their clothing pulled in a sexual way.

Sexual harassment victimization was associated with several significant risk factors at T1. Notably, for girls, sexual harassment victimization was associated with elevated risk of all study outcomes, as shown in Table 2 (i.e., suicidal thoughts, self harm, maladaptive dieting, early dating, substance use, and school safety). Significant odds ratios (ORs) ranged from 2.03 (CI: 1.57–2.65) for maladaptive dieting, to 5.88 (CI: 2.52–13.72) and 5.03(CI: 3.5–7.21) for self-harm and suicidal thoughts, respectively, indicating a two- to almost sixfold increase of such risk factors among girls experiencing sexual harassment. With the exception of dieting and self-harm behaviors a similar pattern of risk was found for boys, with substance use and suicidal thoughts being the highest risk factors (OR 2.94, CI: 2.23–3.89 and 2.75, CI: 1.64–4.6, respectively). In all cases, the magnitude of the impact was smaller for boys than girls.

Impact of sexual harassment victimization on grade 11 victimization and adjustment

Boys and girls who reported sexual harassment victimization in grade 9 were 2.5 to 3 three times as likely to report it again 2.5 years later, supporting the view that such experiences tend to continue (boys: AOR: 2.45, CI: 1.8–3.32; girls: AOR: 2.9, CI: 2.25–3.42) (Table 3). Table 3 also indicates that sexual harassment in grade 9 was associated with higher risk for other forms of relationship violence in grade 11. For boys, sexual harassment victimization at T1 was associated with higher risk of physical dating violence victimization (AOR: 2.02 CI: 1.19-3.48), physical peer violence victimization (AOR: 2.75, CI: 1.59–4.76), and peer relational victimization (AOR: 1.49, CI: 1.09–2.02) at T2. A comparable pattern for girls was found, with the exception of peer relational victimization: (AOR: 3.73, CI: 2.27–6.61; 2.79, CI: 1.61–4.82; for physical dating violence and physical peer violence, respectively).

Finally, sexual harassment at T1 contributed to risk for several other problem outcomes 2.5 years later, over and above the continuity associated with these problems (i.e., controlling for T1 functioning). For girls and boys, emotional distress, problem substance use and violent delinquency perpetration were all significantly predicted by T1 sexual harassment victimization (Table 3). For boys, sexual harassment victimization at T1 was associated with an elevated risk at T2 for emotional distress (AOR: 2.09 CI: 1.46–3.0), problem substance use (AOR: 1.79 CI: 1.29–2.48), and violent delinquency perpetration (AOR: 2.1 CI: 1.39–3.16). A similar pattern was found for girls: emotional distress

Table 2
Risk factors associated with sexual harassment victimization in grade 9, by gender

	Boys (n = 878)		Girls (n = 939)	
	OR (95% CI)	*p*	OR (95% CI)	*P*
Suicidal thoughts	2.75 (1.64–4.6)	<.01	5.03 (3.5–7.21)	<.01
Self-harm	2.40 (0.99–5.9)	<.05	5.88 (2.52–13.72)	<.01
Maladaptive dieting	1.00 (0.73–1.41)	.95	2.03 (1.57–2.65)	<.01
Early dating	2.60 (1.94–3.48)	<.01	3.19 (2.42–4.21)	<.01
Substance use	2.94 (2.23–3.89)	<.01	4.68 (3.51–6.24)	<.01
Unsafe at school	1.99 (1.5–2.65)	<.01	2.13 (1.6–2.84)	<.01

*p Values refer to χ^2 analysis examining sexual harassment versus no sexual harassment group by dichotomous outcomes.

(AOR: 2.24 CI: 1.59–3.16), problem substance use (AOR: 2.04 CI: 1.5–2.77), and violent delinquency perpetration (AOR: 3.34 CI: 1.27–8.78).

Discussion

Sexual harassment victimization is prevalent among youth entering high school, occurring at equivalent rates for girls (44%) and boys (43%) in the present study. However, the nature of sexual harassment victimization differed for boys and girls, with girls experiencing more unwanted comments, gestures, and touch, and boys experienced more homosexual slurs and being shown or given unwanted sexual pictures, photos, messages, or notes. At the same time, the overlap across items should not be discounted, as significant numbers of both boys and girls reported each type of harassment.

This research extends previous work on sexual harassment in a number of ways. First, it documents the negative impact for both boys and girls. Historically, sexual harassment victimization has been viewed as a form of violence experienced primarily by girls, with significantly more negative outcomes for girls than boys [8]. Although our results indicate that the immediate impact and longer-term outcomes associated with sexual harassment victimization are often stronger and more negative for girls, the experience of sexual harassment victimization for boys should not be overlooked. Sexual harassment experienced by boys was also associated with risk for virtually all outcomes assessed in this study, with the exception of unhealthy dieting and self-harm. In addition, our findings point to the importance of studying sexual harassment victimization over time. Sexual harassment victimization at the start of high school was associated with elevated risk, in terms of other forms of victimization and psychological adjustment difficulties 2.5 years later. These results add substantially to our knowledge about the longer-term impact and effects of sexual harassment victimization in an adolescent sample.

With previous studies reporting rates of sexual harassment victimization as high as 80% (depending on the timeframe), some authors have suggested that such interactions between teens in schools are an accepted (if not welcomed) component of adolescent lives [20]. Nonetheless, results from this study and others strongly suggest that boys and girls are distressed by gender-based harassment. The presence of sexual harassment victimization in this study was associated with a range of risks for both boys and girls. For girls, an elevated risk of all outcomes under study (i.e., suicidal thoughts, self-harm, maladaptive dieting, early dating, substance use, and school safety) was associated with sexual harassment victimization. Consistent with previous research demonstrating that adolescent girls who experience repeated sexual harassment are more likely to attempt suicide [21], our findings show that the impact of sexual harassment victimization in girls is severe, and was reflected in odds ratios as high as 5.88 for self-harm (e.g., cutting behaviors) and 5.03 for suicidal thoughts. When sexual harassment frequently occurs in adolescent girls' lives, they may be at risk for dysfunctional and abusive relationships in adulthood, in part because they come to expect demeaning behaviors as normal in heterosexual relationships [22,23].

Although most research on sexual harassment victimization among youth attempts to describe the impact cross-sectionally, this study contributes to a more precise knowledge of the long-term impact of sexual harassment victimization by studying the issue longitudinally. We found that sexual harassment victimization in grade 9 was associated with higher risk for other forms of relationship violence, such as physical peer violence and sexual harassment victimization at grade 11 for both boys and girls, and dating violence and peer relational aggression for boys. These findings indicate additive risk for these outcomes as the analyses controlled for prior victimization experiences. Moreover, sexual harassment victimization in grade 9 contributed to risk for emotional distress, substance use, and violent delinquency 2.5 years later, over and above the continuity associated with these problems. It may not be enough to ensure that sexual harassment stops; additional supports may be required to reduce the impact over time.

The longitudinal pattern was similar for boys and girls in that emotional distress, problem substance use and violent delinquency perpetration were all significantly predicted by grade 9 sexual harassment victimization, with adjusted odds ratios ranging from 1.79 (problem substance use for boys) to 3.34 (violent delinquency perpetration for girls). The

Table 3
Logistic regression of the contribution of sexual harassment victimization in grade 9 to relationship victimization and psychological adjustment outcomes in grade 11, by gender

Grade 11 outcomes	Boys		Girls	
	Adjusted OR (95% CI)	*P*	Adjusted OR (95% CI)	*p*
Relationship victimization				
Sexual harassment victimization	2.45 (1.8–3.32)	<.01	2.9 (2.25–3.42)	<.01
Physical dating violence	2.02 (1.19–3.48)	<.01	3.73 (2.27–6.61)	<.01
Physical peer violence	2.75 (1.59–4.76)	<.01	2.79 (1.61–4.82)	<.01
Peer relational victimization	1.49 (1.09–2.02)	<.01	1.32 (.96–1.82)	.08
Psychological adjustment				
Emotional distress	2.09 (1.46–3.0)	<.01	2.24 (1.59–3.16)	<.01
Problem substance use	1.79 (1.29–2.48)	<.01	2.04 (1.5–2.77)	<.01
Violent delinquency perpetration	2.1 (1.39–3.16)	<.01	3.34 (1.27–8.78)	<.01

Odds ratios (ORs) adjusted for demographic variables, baseline scores, and intervention or control status.

violent delinquency finding is noteworthy, given that most studies tend to focus on internalizing and substance-related outcomes. This finding suggests that girls who experience sexual harassment are not simply distressed but over time may also act out in a highly aggressive manner. Sexual harassment victimization, however, did not predict peer relational victimization for girls 2.5 years later. Although girls in the present sample did report more peer relational victimization at both time points than did boys (not presented here), peer relational victimization was not significantly predicted by T1 sexual harassment victimization. The literature on sexual harassment victimization shows that girls are often victimized by boys, whereas boys who experience sexual harassment are also victimized by boys (e.g., homosexual/homophobic slurs). Peer relational victimization is often same-sex peers spreading rumors, exclusion, and other similar behaviors, so it may not be predicted for girls by earlier accounts of sexual harassment likely committed by boys.

Study limitations

Despite the methodological strengths of the present study, a few important limitations should be noted. The dichotomization of sexual harassment victimization does not capture the severity, chronicity, or subjective impact of such experiences. Although there was overlap in types of behaviors experienced by boys and girls, it is difficult to know whether a particular behavior is experienced in the same way (e.g., whether being grabbed in a sexual manner is experienced the same by boys and girls). Other researchers have found that girls perceive these types of harassing experiences as more harmful and upsetting than do boys [24] and receive ‘‘qualitatively more severe, physically intrusive, and intimidating forms of harassment’’ [26]. Given the context of gender role socialization that occurs in high school and the developmental stage of high school students, gender differences in how sexual harassment is experienced and how it affects adjustment are not surprising. Similarly, sexual minority youth, those from minority ethnic groups, or those with child maltreatment backgrounds might experience higher rates or different forms of sexual harassment as well as more adverse effects because of heightened vulnerability [2]. It may be possible that youth who have had earlier experiences of child abuse or sexual harassment may have had more negative outcomes than youth who first experience sexual harassment victimization in grade 9, factors not controlled for in this study. Future research in this area would benefit from a greater understanding of the mediators or mechanisms through which sexual harassment influences relationship victimization and psychological adjustment for both boys and girls more than 2 years later.

Conclusions

During the past several years, schools and organizations have conducted significant work on the issue of sexual harassment, establishing schoolwide policies making it clear that sexual harassment is illegal and unacceptable behavior. The development of effective policies and prevention strategies should be a high priority for all school districts. The delivery of school-based programs that build healthy, positive relationships among children and youth and that create a school climate that supports gender equality and other forms of diversity can be effective prevention strategies [25]. Moreover, the importance of professional development training opportunities for educators to challenge the view that sexual harassment is simply ‘‘boys being boys’’ needs to be addressed. Although many of these behaviors are not as visible or extreme as other forms of violence, this study shows that these acts of ‘‘everyday violence’’ are likely to have significant impact on the lives of youth and have the potential to cause physical and psychological harm throughout their high school years. Strategies to educate youth about the nature and harm of sexual harassment and related behaviors (e.g., dating violence, unsafe sex, etc.) are warranted.

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U.S. Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Dear Colleague Letter: Sexual Violence Background, Summary, and Fast Facts, April 4, 2011http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-201104.pdf

Dear Colleague Letter: Sexual Violence Background, Summary, and Fast Facts
April 4, 2011

Sexual Violence Statistics and Effects

W1
- [Acts of sexual violence are vastly under-reported.[1] Yet, data show that our nation's young students suffer from acts of sexual violence early and the likelihood that they will be assaulted by the time they graduate is significant. For example:
  - Recent data shows nearly 4,000 reported incidents of sexual battery and over 800 reported rapes and attempted rapes occurring *in our nation's public high schools.*[2] Indeed, by the time girls graduate from high school, more than one in ten will have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse in or out of school.[3]]
  - When young women get to *college*, nearly 20% of them will be victims of attempted or actual sexual assault, as will about 6% of undergraduate men.[4]

W3
- [Victims of sexual assault are more likely to suffer academically and from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, to abuse alcohol and drugs, and to contemplate suicide.[5]]

Why is ED Issuing the Dear Colleague letter (DCL)?

W4[Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 ("Title IX"), 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1681, *et seq.*, prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity. ED is issuing the DCL to explain that the requirements of Title IX cover sexual violence and to remind schools[6] of their responsibilities to take immediate and effective steps to respond to sexual violence in accordance with the requirements of Title IX. In the context of the letter, sexual violence means physical sexual acts perpetrated against a person's will or where a person is incapable of giving consent. A number of acts fall into the category of sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault, sexual battery, and sexual coercion.]

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[1] For example, see HEATHER M. KARJANE, ET AL., SEXUAL ASSAULT ON CAMPUS: WHAT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ARE DOING ABOUT IT 3 (Nat'l. Institute of Justice, Dec. 2005).

[2] SIMONE ROBERS, ET AL., INDICATORS OF SCHOOL CRIME AND SAFETY 104 (U.S. Dep't of Education & U.S. Dep't of Justice, Nov. 2010), *available at* http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011002.pdf.

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[5] For example, see WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, WORLD REPORT ON VIOLENCE AND HEALTH 162-164 (Etienne G. Krug, et al. eds., 2002), *available at* http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2002/9241545615_eng.pdf; CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE: FACT SHEET 1 (2011), *available at* http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/SV_factsheet_2011-a.pdf.

[6] "Schools" includes all recipients of federal funding and includes school districts, colleges, and universities.

What does the DCL do?

- Provides guidance on the unique concerns that arise in sexual violence cases, such as the role of criminal investigations and a school's independent responsibility to investigate and address sexual violence.
- Provides guidance and examples about key Title IX requirements and how they relate to sexual violence, such as the requirements to publish a policy against sex discrimination, designate a Title IX coordinator, and adopt and publish grievance procedures.
- Discusses proactive efforts schools can take to prevent sexual violence.
- Discusses the interplay between Title IX, FERPA, and the Clery Act[7] as it relates to a complainant's right to know the outcome of his or her complaint, including relevant sanctions facing the perpetrator.
- Provides examples of remedies and enforcement strategies that schools and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) may use to respond to sexual violence.

What are a school's obligations under Title IX regarding sexual violence?

- Once a school knows or reasonably should know of possible sexual violence, it must take immediate and appropriate action to investigate or otherwise determine what occurred.
- If sexual violence has occurred, a school must take prompt and effective steps to end the sexual violence, prevent its recurrence, and address its effects, whether or not the sexual violence is the subject of a criminal investigation.
- A school must take steps to protect the complainant as necessary, including interim steps taken prior to the final outcome of the investigation.
- A school must provide a grievance procedure for students to file complaints of sex discrimination, including complaints of sexual violence. These procedures must include an equal opportunity for both parties to present witnesses and other evidence and the same appeal rights.
- A school's grievance procedures must use the preponderance of the evidence standard to resolve complaints of sex discrimination.
- A school must notify both parties of the outcome of the complaint.

How can I get help from OCR?

OCR offers technical assistance to help schools achieve voluntary compliance with the civil rights laws it enforces and works with schools to develop approaches to preventing and addressing discrimination. A school should contact the OCR enforcement office serving its jurisdiction for technical assistance. For contact information, please visit ED's website at http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OCR/contactus.cfm.

A complaint of discrimination can be filed by anyone who believes that a school that receives Federal financial assistance has discriminated against someone on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or age. The person or organization filing the complaint need not be a victim of the alleged discrimination, but may complain on behalf of another person or group. For information on how to file a complaint with OCR, visit http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ ocr/complaintintro.html or contact OCR's Customer Service Team at 1-800-421-3481.

[7] The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act is at 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1232g, and the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security and Campus Crime Statistics Act is at 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1092(f).

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, "Know Your Rights: Title IX Prohibits Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Where You Go to School."
http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/fact_sheet_know_your_rights.pdf

Know Your Rights: Title IX Prohibits Sexual Harassment[1] and Sexual Violence Where You Go to School

W4 Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 ("Title IX"), 20 U.S.C. §1681 *et seq.*, is a Federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities. All public and private elementary and secondary schools, school districts, colleges, and universities (hereinafter "schools") receiving any Federal funds must comply with Title IX. Under Title IX, discrimination on the basis of sex can include sexual harassment or sexual violence, such as rape, sexual assault, sexual battery, and sexual coercion.

Below is additional information regarding the specific requirements of Title IX as they pertain to sexual harassment and sexual violence.

What are a school's responsibilities to address sexual harassment and sexual violence?

- A school has a responsibility to respond promptly and effectively. If a school knows or reasonably should know about sexual harassment or sexual violence that creates a hostile environment, the school must take immediate action to eliminate the sexual harassment or sexual violence, prevent its recurrence, and address its effects.
- Even if a student or his or her parent does not want to file a complaint or does not request that the school take any action on the student's behalf, if a school knows or reasonably should know about possible sexual harassment or sexual violence, it must promptly investigate to determine what occurred and then take appropriate steps to resolve the situation.
- A criminal investigation into allegations of sexual harassment or sexual violence does not relive the school of its duty under Title IX to resolve complaints promptly and equitably.

What procedures must a school have in place to prevent sexual harassment and sexual violence and resolve complaints?

- **Every School Must Have And Distribute A Policy Against Sex Discrimination**
  - Title IX requires that each school publish a policy that it does not discriminate on the basis of sex in its education programs and activities. This notice must be widely distributed and available on an on-going basis.
  - The policy must state that inquiries concerning Title IX may be referred to the school's Title IX coordinator or to OCR.

- **Every School Must Have A Title IX Coordinator**
  - Every school must designate at least one employee who is responsible for coordinating the school's compliance with Title IX. This person is sometimes referred to as the Title IX coordinator. Schools must notify all students and employees of the name or title and contact information of the Title IX coordinator.
  - The coordinator's responsibilities include overseeing all complaints of sex discrimination and identifying and addressing any patterns or systemic problems that arise during the review of such complaints.

[1] Use of the term "sexual harassment" throughout this document includes sexual violence unless otherwise noted.

- **Every School Must Have And Make Known Procedures For Students To File Complaints Of Sex Discrimination.**

  - Title IX requires schools to adopt and publish grievance procedures for students to file complaints of sex discrimination, including complaints of sexual harassment or sexual violence. Schools can use general disciplinary procedures to address complaints of sex discrimination. But all procedures must provide for prompt and equitable resolution of sex discrimination complaints.

  - Every complainant has the right to present his or her case. This includes the right to adequate, reliable, and impartial investigation of complaints, the right to have an equal opportunity to present witnesses and other evidence, and the right to the same appeal processes, for both parties.

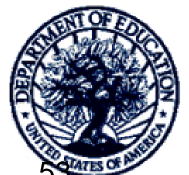
  - Every complainant has the right to be notified of the time frame within which: (a) the school will conduct a full investigation of the complaint; (b) the parties will be notified of the outcome of the complaint; and (c) the parties may file an appeal, if applicable.

  - Every complainant has the right for the complaint to be decided using a preponderance of the evidence standard (*i.e.*, it is more likely than not that sexual harassment or violence occurred).

  - Every complainant has the right to be notified, in writing, of the outcome of the complaint. Even though federal privacy laws limit disclosure of certain information in disciplinary proceedings:
    - Schools must disclose to the complainant information about the sanction imposed on the perpetrator *when the sanction directly relates to the harassed student.* This includes an order that the harasser stay away from the harassed student, or that the harasser is prohibited from attending school for a period of time, or transferred to other classes or another residence hall.
    - Additionally, the Clery Act (20 U.S.C. §1092(f)), which only applies to postsecondary institutions, requires that both parties be informed of the outcome, including sanction information, of any institutional proceeding alleging a sex offense. Therefore, colleges and universities may not require a complainant to abide by a non-disclosure agreement, in writing or otherwise.

  - The grievance procedures may include voluntary informal methods (e.g., mediation) for resolving some types of sexual harassment complaints. However, the complainant must be notified of the right to end the informal process at any time and begin the formal stage of the complaint process. In cases involving allegations of sexual assault, mediation is not appropriate.]

If you want to learn more about your rights, or if you believe that a school district, college, or university is violating Federal law, you may contact the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, at (800) 421-3481 or ocr@ed.gov. If you wish to fill out a complaint form online, you may do so at: http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html.



Reference Summary

Whereas 1 — Research shows that over 40% of middle and high school students are victims of sexual violence or sexual harassment and these acts are vastly under reported

Reference 1	Page 9
Reference 2	Pages 18 – 19, & 43
Reference 3	Page 48
Reference 4	Page 50

Whereas 2 — Research indicates that school is the most common location of peer sexual victimization

Reference 1	Pages 5 & 10
Reference 2	Page 24
Reference 3	Page 48

Whereas 3 — Sexual violence or sexual harassment have devastating effects on adolescents, negatively impacting their emotional and physical well-being, and depriving them of equal and free access to an education

Reference 1	Page 5 – 6
Reference 2	Pages 19 & 34
Reference 3	Pages 48 – 49
Reference 4	Page 50

Whereas 4 — Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (“Title IX”), 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1681et seq., prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity. Under Title IX, discrimination on the basis of sex includes sexual harassment or sexual violence. However, there is a lack of compliance with Title IX Federal law which requires schools to take immediate action to eliminate harassment and sexual violence, prevent its occurrence, and address its effects

Reference 1	Page 6
Reference 2	Pages 21 – 22, 41 – 42, & 43
Reference 4	Page 50
Reference 5	Pages 52 – 53