

Executive Summary and Major Findings



Eight years ago, the AAUW Educational Foundation commissioned Louis Harris & Associates (now Harris Interactive) to conduct the first nationally representative survey on sexual harassment in public school. The original *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools* (1993) revealed the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment and the accompanying bullying and teasing in students' school lives and explored the impact that the harassment had on the educational environment and learning experience. This current survey, also by Harris, revisits these issues:

- Do students view sexual harassment as a large problem in their school?
- Are students aware that their schools have a policy or distribute literature on sexual harassment?
- How often do students experience sexual harassment in their school lives?
- How do boys and girls differ in their experience of school sexual harassment?
- What role does the type or frequency of sexual harassment have on students' experiences?
- What are the emotional and behavioral consequences of sexual harassment?
- What changes concerning these issues have occurred since 1993?

Students' answers were analyzed, where possible, to identify any difference by gender, race/ethnicity (white, black, or Hispanic), grade level (eighth and ninth or 10th and 11th), and area of school (urban or suburban/rural).

Harassment in Schools

As in 1993, today nearly all students say they know what sexual harassment is. When asked to provide their own definitions, students mention physical and nonphysical behaviors: touch, words, looks, and gestures.

For the purposes of this survey, students were given the following definition of sexual harassment:

Sexual harassment is **unwanted** and **unwelcome** sexual behavior that interferes with your life. Sexual harassment is **not** behaviors that you **like** or **want** (for example **wanted** kissing, touching, or flirting).

EXAMPLES OF HARASSMENT

- ❖ Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks
- ❖ Showed, gave, or left you sexual pictures, photographs, illustrations, messages, or notes
- ❖ Wrote sexual messages/graffiti about you on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc.
- ❖ Spread sexual rumors about you
- ❖ Said you were gay or lesbian
- ❖ Spied on you as you dressed or showered at school
- ❖ Flashed or "mooned" you
- ❖ Touched, grabbed, or pinched you in a sexual way
- ❖ Intentionally brushed up against you in a sexual way
- ❖ Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way
- ❖ Pulled off or down your clothing
- ❖ Blocked your way or cornered you in a sexual way
- ❖ Forced you to kiss him/her
- ❖ Forced you to do something sexual other than kissing

Students were also given 14 examples of harassment. Half the examples involve physical contact, while half do not.

One way to categorize these examples is on a continuum, from nonphysical to physical. Students say the most upsetting acts, however, span the nonphysical and physical. About equal numbers of students—three-quarters of those surveyed—say they would be very upset if someone spread sexual rumors about them, if someone pulled off or down their clothing, or if someone called them gay or lesbian. Thus, the survey shows, some forms of speech are as upsetting as actions.

Greater Awareness of School Policies and Materials

Two findings stand out dramatically from 1993: Students today are much more likely to say their schools have a sexual harassment policy or their schools distribute literature on sexual harassment. Seven in 10 students say yes, their schools have a policy on sexual harassment, while more than one-third say yes, their schools distribute literature about this issue. Both findings represent substantial increases over 1993, when the plurality of students answered the same question with either no or I'm not sure.

Personal Experiences of School Sexual Harassment

How common is school sexual harassment? As in 1993, eight in 10 students experience some form of sexual harassment at some time during their school lives. One striking change since 1993 is the increase in the number of boys who often experience school sexual harassment.

As mentioned previously, sexual harassment encompasses a range of behaviors, both those that involve physical contact as well as those that do not. In addition, the frequency of occurrence ranges from ever experiencing to often experiencing. Is school

sexual harassment as prevalent a problem when viewed by these differing definitions?

In terms of type of harassment, nonphysical is the most prevalent. Three-quarters of students ever experience this type of harassment, with more than half experiencing it often or occasionally. Physical harassment lags not far behind. The majority of students experience physical harassment at some point during their school lives, with one in three experiencing it often or occasionally. In terms of frequency, six in 10 students experience some form of sexual harassment often or occasionally, with fully one-quarter experiencing it often.

Although most students experience some form of sexual harassment during their school lives, all students' experiences are not equivalent. Girls are more likely than boys to experience nonphysical or physical harassment, and they are more likely than boys to experience it more frequently. These differing experiences may explain girls' and boys' differing views on their school environment as a whole. Girls are more likely than boys to say that they know someone who has experienced sexual harassment at school and that there is a lot of or some sexual harassment in their school.

Given the prevalence of harassment at school, how do these experiences affect students and learning? In addition to feeling upset, students report other consequences more directly tied to education. One-quarter of the students who experience harassment say they do not talk as much in class or do not want to go to school, and two in 10 found it hard to pay attention. The type of harassment plays a role in the impact. Students who experience physical harassment are more likely than those who experience nonphysical to report such behavioral and educational consequences.

Conclusions

When the original *Hostile Hallways* survey was conducted in 1993, a large majority of students had

experienced sexual harassment at some point in their school lives. And for many students, this experience reverberated throughout their educational and emotional lives. Eight years later, this picture looks the same in key aspects. But students today are more likely to say their schools have a policy or distribute literature on sexual harassment.

Because of the widespread nature of sexual harassment in school life, some students report that it's not a big deal and many accept it as part of everyday life. The results of this current survey reaffirm that despite students' seemingly offhanded acceptance, experiencing sexual harassment in school life has broad consequences, both subtle and direct, on girls' and boys' education.

Major Findings

Significant numbers of students are afraid of being hurt or bothered in their school lives.

- Two in 10 students (18 percent) fear that someone will hurt or bother them at school.
- Girls and boys are almost equally likely to feel this way, and these levels do not differ substantially between urban and suburban/rural schools.

Sexual harassment is widespread in school life. While boys today are even more likely than boys in 1993 to experience sexual harassment, they are still less likely than girls to have this experience.

- Eight in 10 students (81 percent) experience some form of sexual harassment during their school lives: six in 10 (59 percent) often or occasionally and one-quarter (27 percent) often. These levels have not changed since 1993.
- Girls are more likely than boys to experience sexual harassment ever (83 percent vs. 79 percent) or often (30 percent vs. 24 percent).
- Boys today are more likely than those in 1993 to experience sexual harassment often or occasionally (56 percent vs. 49 percent) or often (24 percent vs. 18 percent).

- Three-quarters of students (76 percent) experience nonphysical sexual harassment at some point in their school lives, more than half (54 percent) often or occasionally.
- Six in 10 students (58 percent) experience physical sexual harassment at some point in their school lives, one-third (32 percent) often or occasionally.
- One-third (32 percent) of students are afraid of being sexually harassed. Girls are more than twice as likely as boys to feel this way (44 percent vs. 20 percent).

School sexual harassment has a negative impact on students' emotional and educational lives.

- Nearly half (47 percent) of all students who experience sexual harassment feel very or somewhat upset right afterward.
- Students who experience physical harassment are more likely than those who experience nonphysical harassment to feel very or somewhat upset (56 percent vs. 26 percent).
- Students who experience sexual harassment are most likely to react by avoiding the person who bothered or harassed them (40 percent), talking less in class (24 percent), not wanting to go to school (22 percent), changing their seat in class to get farther away from someone (21 percent), and finding it hard to pay attention in school (20 percent).

Students today are much more likely than those in 1993 to say their schools have a policy or distribute literature on sexual harassment.

- Seven in 10 students (69 percent), compared to just 26 percent in 1993, say their schools have a policy on sexual harassment to deal with sexual harassment issues and complaints.
- More than one-third (36 percent) of students, compared to 13 percent in 1993, say their schools distribute booklets, handouts, and other literature and materials about sexual harassment.

Nearly all students surveyed know what sexual harassment is.

- Ninety-six percent of students say they know what sexual harassment is.
- This percentage is higher for students who say their schools both have a policy and distribute materials on sexual harassment than for those who say their schools do neither (98 percent vs. 91 percent).

The most upsetting examples of sexual harassment in school life involve speech as well as actions. Students are most likely to be very upset if someone did the following:

- Spread sexual rumors about them (75 percent)
- Pulled off or down their clothing (74 percent)
- Said they were gay or lesbian (73 percent)
- Forced them to do something sexual other than kissing (72 percent)
- Spied on them as they dressed or showered (69 percent)
- Wrote sexual messages or graffiti about them on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, etc. (63 percent)

A sizeable minority of students reports high levels of sexual harassment in school.

- Fourteen percent of students say there is a lot of sexual harassment in school.
- This level has not substantially changed since 1993 (14 percent today; 15 percent in 1993).

Most experiences involve students harassing other students, although many experiences involve school adults harassing students.

- As in 1993, nearly nine in 10 students (85 percent) report that students sexually harass other students at their schools.
- A large number of students report that teachers and other school employees sexually harass students, although this number has declined since 1993 (38 percent today vs. 44 percent in 1993).

Slightly more than half (54 percent) of students say they have sexually harassed someone during their school lives.

- This represents a decline from 1993, when six in 10 students (59 percent) said they sexually harassed someone.
- In particular, boys today are less likely to report being a perpetrator (57 percent today vs. 66 percent in 1993).