



# *Nowhere to Hide*

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*A Look at the Pervasive Atmosphere  
of Sexual Harassment in  
Memphis Area Middle and High Schools*

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# Contents

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<b>Preface</b>	3
<b>Executive Summary</b>	4
<b>Introduction</b>	6
<b>The Study</b>	9
Methodology	9
Who participated in the study?	11
How did we measure sexual harassment?	11
How prevalent is sexual harassment in Memphis area middle and high schools?	12
Who is doing it... and to whom?	14
Where is it happening?	14
Does sexual harassment affect boys and girls differently?	15
Do students report sexual harassment when it happens?	15
Are there correlations between sexual harassment and ... students' mental health?	16
... students' feelings of safety at school?	16
... students' academic participation?	16
... students' sexual risk taking?	16
Mediational Analysis	16
Conclusions	17
Implications for Future Research	19
Recommendations	20
<b>References</b>	22
<b>Appendices</b>	23
List of schools attended by study participants	
List of Community Partners	

# Executive Summary

## Background

According to the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2001), “Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment can include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment of a student can deny or limit, on the basis of sex, the student’s ability to participate in or to receive benefits, services, or opportunities in the school’s program. Sexual harassment of students is, therefore, a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title IX under the circumstances described in this guidance.”

In two national surveys, the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1993, 2001) found that approximately 81% of middle and high school students in public schools experienced harassment from peers or school personnel.

## Our Study

CROW designed a study to examine the extent to which students were being sexually harassed in local schools, and how this might be affecting their academic, psychological and social well being.

Sexual harassment was defined and measured by grouping specific behaviors into four categories: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, and sexual assault.

Participants included 590 adolescents in Memphis area middle and high schools, recruited through several local agencies,

organizations, and church youth groups that serve adolescents.

- 70.4% girls, 29.6% boys
- 71.9% African-American , 23.7% White
- 89.5% public schools, 10.5% private/parochial schools
- Average age 15, Range 11 to 19

## Results

### How prevalent is sexual harassment in our schools?

- Student-to-student sexual harassment, particularly gender harassment, is pervasive in Memphis area middle and high schools with over 90% of students in this study reported being sexually harassed at least once while in their current school.
- This pattern holds in both public and private schools. 91.3% of public school students and 85.5% of private school students reported being sexually harassed by a student at least once while in their current school.

### Who’s doing it... and to whom?

- Students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds reported similar experiences with sexual harassment.
- Girls were more likely than boys to report having been sexually harassed by a student, although the majority of both girls and boys have experienced sexual harassment in their current schools.

- Girls report gender harassment primarily from boys. Boys report gender harassment from both girls and boys.
- Although student-to-student sexual harassment is far more prevalent than adult-to-student harassment in our middle and high schools, approximately one quarter of students reported some experience with sexual harassment from an adult.
- Girls were more likely than boys to report that they had been sexually harassed by an adult.

### Where is it happening?

- Both student-to-student and adult-to-student sexual harassment takes place all over campuses, with the highest reported rates in classrooms, cafeterias, and physical education facilities.
- Sexual harassment is not confined to school premises – students also report harassment when on school trips and when on school buses.

### Does harassment affect boys and girls differently?

- Although boys and girls do not differ substantially in their likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment, girls report being more upset about sexual harassment experiences than boys report.

- This leads to a ripple effect, in which girls who are harassed are more likely to be upset, and the more upset they are, the greater the impact on their mental health and school outcomes.

#### **Do students report sexual harassment when it happens?**

- Most students do not report sexual harassment. Although 90% experienced harassment, only 16% said they had ever reported an incident of sexual harassment to school authorities.

#### **Is there a correlation between sexual harassment and students' well being?**

- Sexual harassment has a negative impact on students mental health, sense of being safe at school, body image, self-esteem, and school participation.
- Frequency of sexual harassment is an important factor. The more frequently sexual harassment occurs, and the more upset students are by harassment, the less safe they feel in school, and the more likely they are to withdraw from school related activities.
- The more frequently harassment occurs, and the more upset students are by harassment, the lower their self-esteem, the more psychological distress they report, and the more negatively their view their own bodies.

#### **Does sexual harassment lead to earlier sexual initiation or other sexual risk taking?**

- The more frequently sexual harassment occurs, the younger students are to initiate sexual activity, the more sexual partners they have, and the more sexual risk taking behaviors they engage in. This is true for both girls and boys.
- For boys only, the more frequently sexual harassment occurs, the younger they report initiating sexual activity.
- Results of mediational modeling suggest that for girls, sexual harassment leads to more sexual risk taking, and in addition, sexual harassment leads to lower self esteem, which in turn leads to more risky sexual behavior.
- The same mediational effect is true of psychological distress, negative body image, perceptions of school safety, and withdrawal from school activities.
- For boys, sexual harassment leads to more sexual risk taking, and in addition, sexual harassment leads to more psychological distress and withdrawal from school activities, which each in turn lead to more risky sexual behavior.

#### **Conclusions**

- Sexual harassment is pervasive in Memphis area middle and high schools.
- The schools' climates are not conducive to students' reporting harassment when it occurs.
- Rates of harassment are almost identical among middle and high school students, suggesting that harassment starts when students are still fairly young.
- Although both boys and girls suffer negative consequences from sexual harassment, girls are particularly at risk for psychological distress, poor body image, low self-esteem, and feelings of being unsafe at school.
- Although researchers have recently begun to investigate sexual harassment as an antecedent of sexual violence, we propose that studies be broadened to include sexual harassment as an antecedent of early and/or risky sexual behavior.
- In a community marked by high rates of teen pregnancy and birth, sexually transmitted diseases, and infant mortality, every route to better outcomes for our youth must be examined, including the prevention of sexual harassment.