



Nowhere to Hide

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

Center for Research on Women
University of Memphis

Contents

Research conducted by
The University of Memphis
Center for Research on Women
Dr. Lynda M. Sagrestano, Director

Principal Investigator:
Lynda M. Sagrestano, Ph.D.

Research Team:
Regina Lowery, M.S.,
Project Coordinator
Deborah Clubb, M.S.J.,
Executive Director,
Memphis Area Women's Council
Alayne J. Ormerod, Ph.D.
Rebecca L. Terrell, M.P.A.
Janelle Williams

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901.678.2770
FAX 901.678.3652
crow@memphis.edu

<http://crow.memphis.edu>

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Preface

The mission of the **Center for Research on Women (CROW)** at the University of Memphis is to conduct, promote, and disseminate scholarship on women and social inequality. The Center's approach to research, theory, and programming emphasizes the structural relationships among race, class, gender, and sexuality, particularly in the U.S. South and among women of color.

In order to address issues related to gender and educational equity in Memphis area schools, CROW joined forces with the Memphis Area Women's Council (MAWC) and the Women's and Gender Studies program at the University of Memphis to create a program for young women ages 13 to 17, called *Girls for Change*. The goal was to create a framework through which teen girls would become empowered to identify, assess, and take strategic action on issues relevant to their own lives.

Over the course of several monthly meetings in 2005, the girls identified key issues they were confronting and wanted to change; sexual harassment in school took center stage.

In response, CROW and MAWC developed a three-phase project which would more fully investigate, and thus enable the girls to act on, their concerns:

Phase I: Understand the experiences of sexual harassment among middle and high schools girls in Memphis area public and private school systems, as well as the impact of these experiences on their

academic and personal development.

Phase II: Using data from Phase I, help girls create an intervention program that will effect change related to the conditions surrounding sexual harassment in their school environments.

Phase III: Provide support and guidance to girls as they develop advocacy tools with which to approach school administrators and school boards to seek change in this domain, including enforcing sexual harassment policies in the schools and implementing a peer education program.

This report represents the findings of Phase I of the project. In 2008 CROW researchers surveyed nearly 600 local middle and high school aged girls and boys in the Memphis area. The study was designed to examine the extent to which students were being sexually harassed in local schools, and how this might be affecting their academic participation and psychological and social well being. Researchers sought to include students from both public and private middle and high schools, and to include students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The report also expands on current knowledge about sexual harassment in schools by examining the potential relationship between sexual harassment experiences and early sexual initiation and/or sexual risk taking.

We have included a review of current literature on sexual harassment and taken

a look at the legal context of sexual harassment in school. The report then documents the findings of this study, suggests directions for further research, and makes recommendations for parents and schools.

As the project's Principal Investigator, I'd like to express my thanks to members of our research team for their months of work and years of expertise, all of which helped inform the direction and ultimate impact of this study. I would also like to express sincere appreciation to all the community partner agencies who assisted in recruiting students for this study, and last but not least, to the students themselves for taking the time to share this valuable information on their personal experiences.

When our schools are considered harassment-free zones, all students will be much more likely to fulfill their true and complete potential.



Lynda M. Sagrestano, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Research on Women
The University of Memphis

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.

Introduction

Definition

According to the U.S. 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.”

Sexual harassment is most commonly studied in the workplace, yet evidence suggests that patterns of behavior that could be construed as sexual harassment begin much earlier, in middle and high school. The American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1993, 2001) conducted a national study to examine this issue, and concluded that approximately 81% of middle and high school students in public schools experienced harassment from peers or school personnel, when in school buildings or on school grounds. Of those, one-third reported having experienced sexual harassment in the sixth grade or earlier. The most common forms of sexual harassment were making sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks, and touching, grabbing or pinching in a sexual

way (AAUW, 1993, 2001).

Harassment in schools takes place in public places, often in front of teachers or other school personnel who do not try to deter it, creating a “hostile” environment. The OCR (1997, 2001) defined an environment as hostile when “conduct of a sexual nature is sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive to limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the educational program, or to create a hostile or abusive educational environment.” Studies consistently suggest that girls experience higher frequency of harassment than boys, and that boys are more likely to be the perpetrators of harassment than girls. Consequences of sexual harassment in school can include physical, psychological, and educational problems.

In the following sections, antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment, gender and racial/ethnic differences in experiences with harassment, gender differences in patterns of harassment, educator sexual misconduct, and policy implications will be reviewed.

Antecedents

Antecedents of peer-to-peer sexual harassment must be considered from the perspectives of the perpetrator and the victim of harassment. Research suggests that experiences in the home, including history of family violence and family victimization, are associated with sexual harassment perpetration (Fineran & Bolen,

2006). In addition, patterns of delinquency are associated with sexual harassment perpetration (Fineran & Bolen, 2006). For boys, bullying another student serves as precursor to perpetrating sexual harassment (Pellegrini, 2001), whereas for girls, having a history of sexual harassment victimization serves as a precursor to becoming perpetrators of sexual harassment (Fineran & Bolen, 2006), perhaps as a defense against further victimization.

Risk factors for being victimized by sexual harassment are both structural and individual. At the structural level, a school’s tolerance towards sexual harassment has been found to be an important antecedent of sexual harassment, including unresponsiveness by teachers to both student complaints of sexual harassment and to harassment that happens in front of them in public areas in the school (Cheshire, 2004; Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Lee, Croninger, Linn, & Chen, 1996; Ormerod, Collinsworth, & Perry, 2008).

At the individual level, gender is among the most relevant antecedents, with girls more likely to be victims than boys (Lee et al., 1996). Many students are both perpetrators and victims (Duffy, Walsh, & Wareham, 2004), however boys who have harassed others are especially prone to being harassed themselves (Fineran & Bolen, 2006). Factors such as race/ethnicity, parental education, and school performance are not risk factors for

sexual harassment victimization, however, those with lower academic performance tend to experience more severe harassment than their classmates (Lee et al., 1996).

Consequences

A variety of negative psychological and educational consequences have been linked to peer sexual harassment. These include embarrassment, self-consciousness, low self-confidence, fear, confusion, reduced popularity, and doubt about whether one can have a happy romantic relationship (AAUW, 2001; Duffy et al., 2004). Reported educational consequences included difficulty studying, lack of concentration, lack of attention in the classroom, lower grades and academic self-esteem, and increased avoidance behaviors (AAUW, 2001; Duffy et al., 2004; Lee et al., 1996).

Girls tend to experience more psychological consequences, including lower self-esteem, increased mental and physical health problems, more trauma symptoms, and more substance use, than their male counterparts (AAUW, 2001; Duffy et al., 2004; Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Murnen & Smolak, 2000), which may reflect differences in how boys and girls appraise sexual harassment (Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Loreda, Reid, & Deaux, 1995).

Gender and Racial/Ethnic Differences

Research examining gender in sexual harassment consistently indicates that boys and girls report experiencing sexual harassment (AAUW, 2001; Murnen & Smolak, 2000). Most studies also indicate that girls are harassed more frequently (AAUW, 2001; Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Ormerod et al., 2008), and their harassment experiences tend to be more physical, intrusive, and intimidating than boys' experiences (Hand & Sanchez, 2000).

The findings related to racial/ethnic differences are less conclusive, with some but not all studies reporting significant differences in the experience and impact of sexual harassment. In addition, racial/ethnic differences interact with gender differences. According to the AAUW survey, African-American girls were more likely than their White and Hispanic counterparts to experience physical forms of sexual harassment such as being touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way; to have someone pull at their clothing in a sexual way; and to be forced to be kissed. However, African-American boys were less likely to experience physical harassment than their White male peers (AAUW, 2001). In contrast, other research indicates that Hispanics experience less frequent and less severe harassment than their White counterparts, but no significant differences emerged between African-American and White students (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). These differences among

studies may reflect differences in the definition and measurement of sexual harassment.

With respect to perpetration, research suggests that African-American boys were more likely than their Hispanic and White counterparts to engage in physical sexual harassment, whereas White boys were more likely to engage in nonphysical harassment such as calling someone gay or lesbian or spreading sexual rumors (AAUW, 2001).

Responses to sexual harassment may also vary by gender and race/ethnicity. Research indicates that for both boys and girls, Whites are more likely to experience embarrassment as a consequence of sexual harassment victimization than their African-American peers (AAUW, 2001). In contrast, African-American girls from working class backgrounds tend to respond to sexual harassment with verbal comebacks and physical assault (Porter, 2000).

Teacher-to-Student Sexual Harassment

In a comprehensive review of the research on sexual misconduct, Shakeshaft (2004) concluded that sexual harassment by teachers towards students is highly prevalent, with estimates ranging from 4% to 50%. Shakeshaft concluded that the AAUW study provides the best estimate, at 9.6%. Teachers, coaches, and substitute teachers are more likely than other types of school staff members to be perpetrators of

sexual misconduct with a student.

According to the AAUW (2001), more girls than boys reported being targets of sexual harassment by an adult. Reanalysis of the AAUW data indicated that African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic students were more likely to be targets of educator sexual misconduct than White and Asian students (Shakeshaft, 2004). Consequences of being a target of educator sexual misconduct include negative academic, emotional, and developmental outcomes, including poor academic performance, sleep disorders, and negative feelings of self-worth (Shakeshaft, 2004).

Policy Implications

Sexual harassment, a form of sex discrimination, is illegal according to Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972. Title IX applies to all public and private educational institutions that receive federal funds. Although sex discrimination has been illegal since 1972, schools were not liable for teacher-student sexual harassment and peer sexual harassment until relatively recently.

The evolution of sexual harassment legislation as an educational issue began with the introduction of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in the workplace on the basis of sex, as well as race, religion, color, and national origin. In 1972, Title IX was passed, making it illegal for educational institutions

that received federal funds to discriminate on the basis of sex (Le, 2007). The Supreme Court, however, did not apply Title IX to a sexual harassment case in an educational setting until the 1990's.

The most groundbreaking case was *Davis v. Monroe County*, in which the Supreme Court applied Title IX to hold a school responsible for not responding to a girl's complaints of sexual harassment from her male classmate. The Court concluded that a school could be held liable for hostile environment sexual harassment if the behavior is "severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive," and there is actual notice and deliberate indifference on the part of the teachers and staff (Le, 2007).

Sexual harassment law differs from anti-bullying laws. Sexual harassment is a federal offense, and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) is responsible for ensuring that schools comply with Title IX. According to the OCR, every school must issue and publicize a policy against sex discrimination, grievance procedures, and procedures for the resolution of the problem (OCR, 2001). Students can be awarded monetary damages if they are sexually harassed, and schools can be sued and held for sexual harassment. In contrast, anti-bullying laws target the bullies rather than the schools that allow the bullying to happen (Stein, 2003).

Because there is no federal law against bullying it is up to each individual state to pass legislation addressing this behavior. Not all states define the term

"bullying" in their state laws, and it is at the discretion of each state to decide how bullying is reported and what the consequences of bullying should be (Kosse & Wright, 2005).

In order to combat middle and high school sexual harassment, it is important to have a policy in place that prohibits this conduct. As mentioned earlier, Title IX mandates that each school have a sexual harassment policy, and the policy should have certain characteristics. The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights has made several recommendations for developing a school sexual harassment policy. Suggestions include educating those who will be part of the development process, allowing everyone (including the students) to be part of this development process, making sure that the policy complies with federal and state laws regarding discrimination, and disseminating knowledge about aspects of the policy (OCR, 2001).

The Study

This report outlines the major results from our study, organized according to the major questions we were investigating. For most analyses, we examined both gender and race/ethnicity. In many cases, as expected, significant gender differences emerged, whereas only rarely did racial/ethnic differences emerge, nor was there any meaningful pattern to the racial/ethnic differences. Therefore, this report will focus primarily on gender differences, and document racial/ethnic differences when they emerge.

Similarly, analyses were conducted to compare public schools to private schools, and to compare middle school students with high school students. Few differences were observed between the reports of public and private school students, or between middle and high school students. Notable differences will be reported in appropriate sections.

Methodology

Participants. Participants included 590 adolescent girls (70.4%) and boys (29.6%) in middle and high school. The majority of the sample was African American (71.9%; 23.7% White), and enrolled in public schools (89.5%; 10.5% private/parochial). The students ranged in age from 11 to 19, with a mean age of 15.41 ($SD = 2.23$), and represented grades 6-12 (mean grade = 9.58, $SD = 2.13$).

A list of schools attended by study participants is provided in the Appendices.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited through several local agencies, organizations, and church youth groups that serve adolescents. Community partners were used to facilitate capturing a more diverse sample of adolescents in the region, as these organizations represent communities of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, and also serve public and private school populations.

To recruit community partners to assist us in data collection, a list of 87 potential partners was developed based on the team's existing community contacts and the Youth Community Resource Directory created by *Connect to Protect Memphis*, an HIV prevention program at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Potential partners were contacted by mail with a letter explaining the project and a brochure created by our team that defined sexual harassment, discussed the issue in the context of Memphis and Shelby County, presented information for parents about what they can do to protect their children, and outlined the goals of the research project. In addition, the packet included information on the Center for Research on Women, the Memphis Area Women's Council, and *Girls for Change*.

A list of community partners who assisted in data collection by providing access to participants can be found in the Appendices.

Once community partners agreed to participate, they were given packets that



included a description of the project and a parental consent form. Partner agencies distributed packets to middle and high school students who were participating in their programs. Students were instructed to take the packets home to their parents, and then return the completed consent form to the partner agency (assuming parents agreed to participation). Data collection was then scheduled and trained members of the research team administered the survey to small groups of adolescents.

Procedures. At the time of administration, instructions were reviewed and participants were guaranteed anonymity. In addition, participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study if they did not wish to participate. Each adolescent then completed the scannable survey independently by responding to each item. Upon completion, participants returned surveys to the facilitator, who then provided them with an information sheet and a small incentive in

the form of a gift card to a local merchant.

Instrumentation. An 11-page scannable survey was developed to measure student-to-student sexual harassment, adult-to-student sexual harassment, psychosocial outcomes (self-esteem, psychological distress, negative body image), school outcomes (perceptions of safety at school, withdrawal from school activities), and sexual experiences.

Sexual Harassment. A series of items were developed to measure student-to-student (25 items) and adult-to-student (15 items) sexual harassment based on Ormerod and colleagues, 2008 and AAUW, 2001. For each item, the survey first asked whether the experience had happened since the student was at his or her current school, and frequency was coded: 0 = never, 1 = once, and 2 = twice or more. The survey then asked who did it (male, female, both), and how they appraised the situation using a 4-point Likert scale from (1) *not upset* to (4) *very upset*. Based on Ormerod et al., 4 student-to-student frequency subscales were created: Gender Harassment (GH), Unwanted Sexual Attention (USA), Sexual Coercion (SC), and Sexual Assault (SA). For each subscale, an impact score was calculated using the following formula: Impact = Frequency X Appraisal. Adult-to-student harassment items were combined into 1 frequency scale, and impact was calculated using the formula above.

Psychosocial Measures. *Self-Esteem* was measured using the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem scale. The 10 items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, and Cronbach's Alpha in the current sample was .83. *Psychological Distress* was measured using the 16-item Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Spencer, 1982). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, and Cronbach's Alpha was .88 in the current sample. *Negative Body Image* was measured with a modified version of the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-R-10; Mazzeo, 1999). This 8 item measure assesses intensity of preoccupation with body image on a 6-point Likert scale, and Cronbach's Alpha in the current sample was .84.

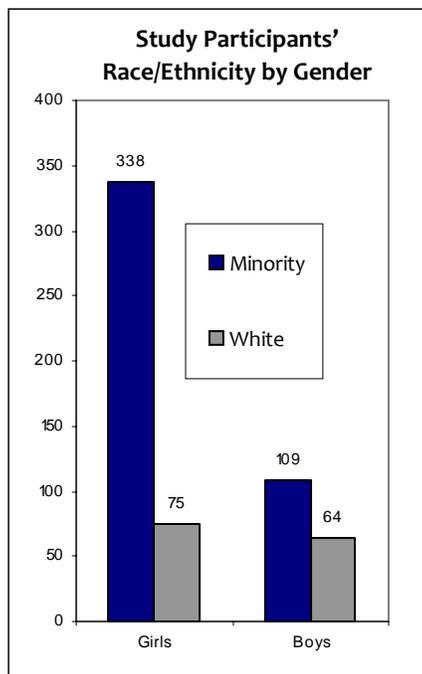
School Outcomes. A measure of *School Withdrawal* was developed based on Ormerod et al. (2008) and AAUW (2001) to assess student withdrawal from school and class activities. Five items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, and 11 items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Cronbach's Alpha for the measure was .81 in the current sample. A measure of *Sense of Safety at School* was developed to assess student perceptions of personal safety at school based on Ormerod et al. (2008). The 4 items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, and Cronbach's Alpha in the current sample was .70.

Sexual Behavior. To assess sexual behavior, 12 items were taken from the 2007 *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey* (CDC, 2008). Eight items (touch genitals, touch breasts, oral sex, anal sex, intercourse, alcohol or drugs before sex, condom last time) were used to create a *Sexual Risk Taking Index*, with each item coded as no = 0 or yes = 1, and then summed across items.

All procedures and instruments were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Memphis.

Who participated in our study?

- 590 adolescents in Memphis area middle and high schools
- Recruited through local agencies, organizations, and church youth groups that serve adolescents
- Participants completed a 30 minute survey
- Received a gift card for participating
- Gender: 70.4% girls, 29.6% boys
- Race: 71.9% African-American , 23.7% White
- School Type: 89.5% public,10.5% private/parochial
- Age: average 15 yrs, range 11 to 19
- Grade: average grade 9, range 6th -12th



How did we measure sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is typically defined as unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior which interferes with a person's life. We measured the following four specific types of student-to-student sexual harassment in this study:

Gender Harassment was assessed using the following items:

- Saying sexual things to someone
- Staring at parts of someone's body
- Saying offensive things about someone's body
- Making sexual or obscene gestures
- Wearing t-shirts with sexually offensive words or pictures

Unwanted Sexual Attention was assessed using the following items:

- Cornering, leaning over, or following someone
- Persistently trying to have a romantic or sexual relationship
- Persistently asking someone out after they say no
- Touching someone in a way that makes her feel uncomfortable
- Giving someone sexual attention she does not want
- Kissing or hugging someone when she does not want to

Sexual Coercion was assessed using the following items:

- Hinting or saying something bad would happen to her if she didn't go along with something sexual
- Hinting or saying something special would happen to her if she went along with something sexual

Sexual Assault was assessed using the following items:

- Making forceful attempts to have sex with someone
- Pulling someone's clothes down or off
- Trying to have sex with someone while she is under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Trying to have sex with someone by pressuring or arguing
- Having sex with someone without her consent or against her will

How prevalent is sexual harassment in Memphis middle and high schools?

Student-to-student sexual harassment is pervasive in Memphis area schools. Over 90% of students in this study reported being sexually harassed at least once while in their current school.

Girls were more likely than boys to report having been sexually harassed, although the majority of both girls and boys have experienced sexual harassment in their current schools. 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 at least once while in their current schools.

Gender Harassment is pervasive in Memphis schools, with approximately 88% of students reporting some form of Gender Harassment. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to report that another student said offensive things about their bodies and how they look, and that someone stared at them or part of their body.

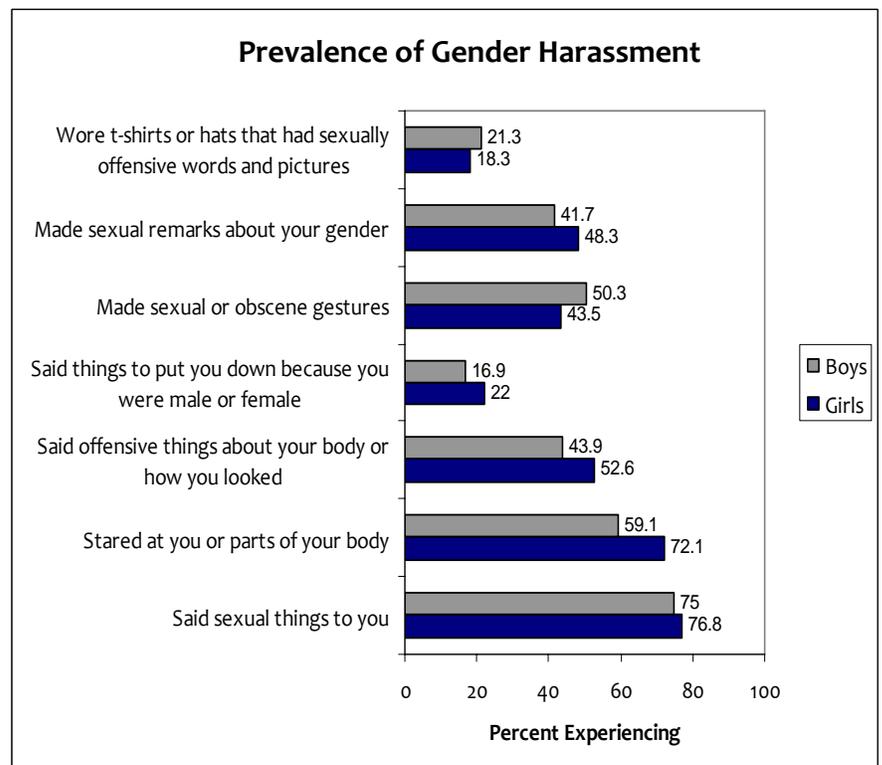
Unwanted Sexual Attention is also common in Memphis middle and high schools, with approximately 75% of students reporting some form of Unwanted Sexual Attention. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to report various types of Unwanted Sexual Attention, including being kissed or hugged when they did not want it, getting sexual attention they did not want, being touched

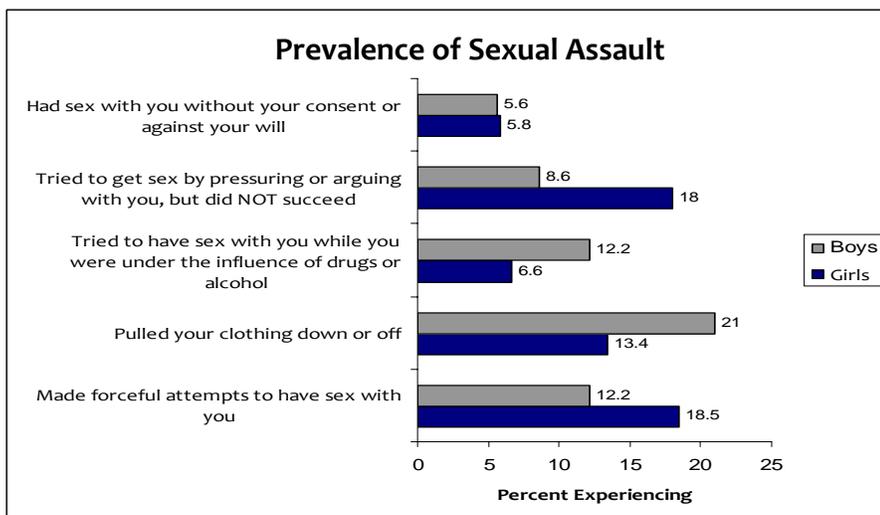
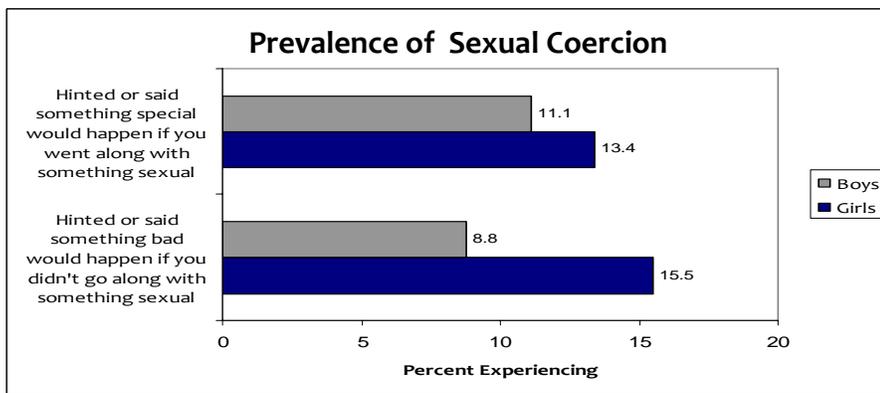
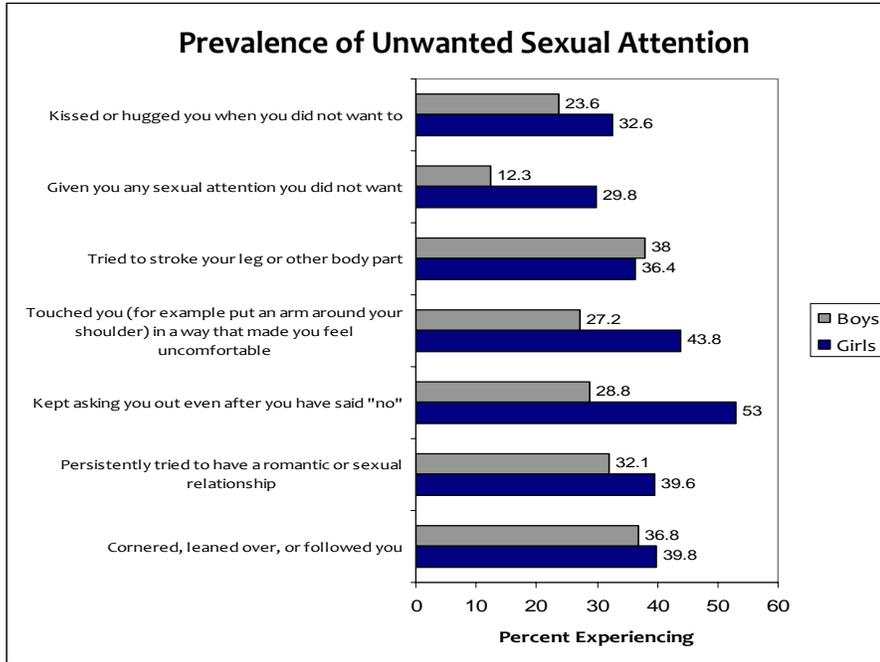


in a way that made them uncomfortable, being asked out repeatedly after they had said no, and being persistently pursued for a romantic or sexual relationship.

Sexual Coercion is less common than other forms of sexual harassment, with approximately 20% of students reporting some form of Sexual Coercion. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to report that another student had hinted or said something would happen if she did not go along with something sexual.

Sexual Assault was more frequent than Sexual Coercion, with approximately 32% of students reporting some form of Sexual Assault. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to report that another student had tried to get sex by pressuring or arguing, tried to have sex while under the influence, pulled her clothing down or off, or made forceful attempts to have sex.





Who is doing it... to whom?

Who sexually harasses whom depends on the type of harassment. On average, girls experience more gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention than boys. This holds true in both public and private schools, and in both middle and high schools. Girls report gender harassment primarily from boys, but in some cases from both boys and girls. Boys report gender harassment from both girls and boys.

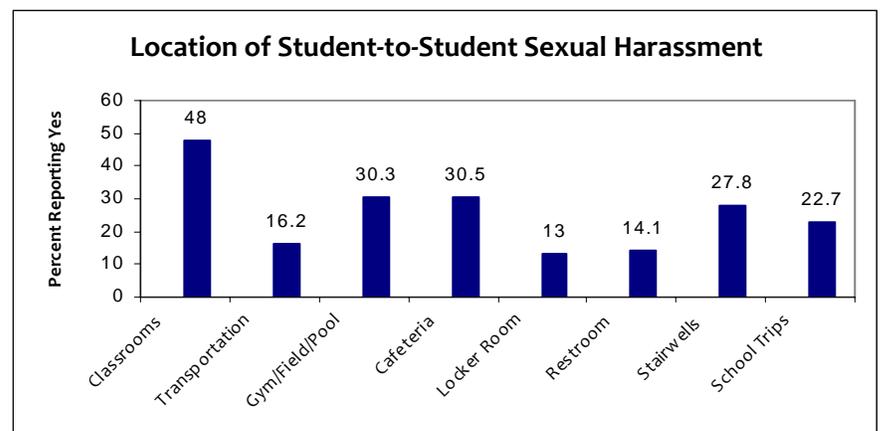
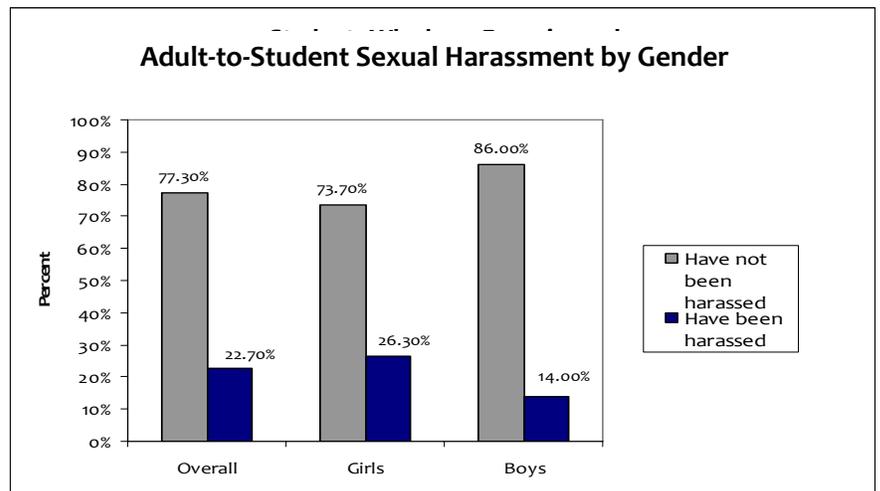
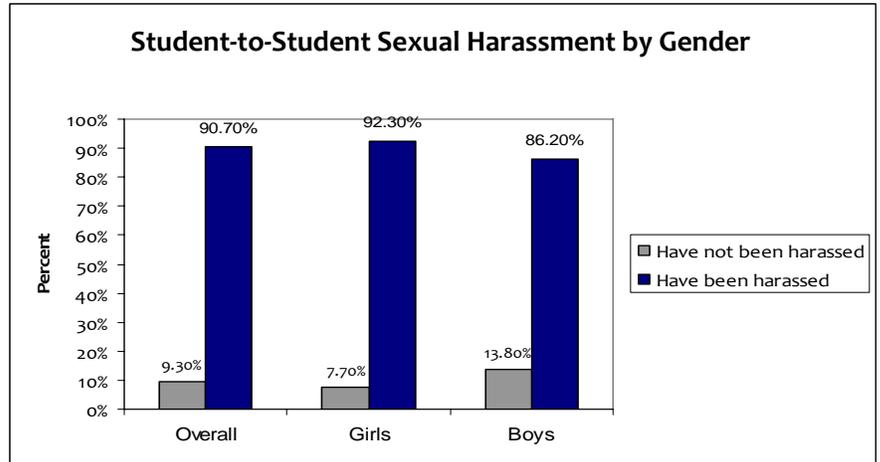
Patterns for Unwanted Sexual Attention, Sexual Coercion, and Sexual Assault are similar in that girls report most of these types of harassment from boys, and boys report most of these types of harassment from girls.

The rates of **adult-to-student** sexual harassment are much lower than student-to-student harassment. Still, approximately a quarter of students report some experience with sexual harassment from an adult. Girls are more likely than boys to report being sexually harassed by an adult.

Students who report experiencing sexual harassment from an adult are most likely to report teachers and coaches as the person responsible for the harassment. Fewer than 3% of students had ever reported a teacher or other school official for sexual harassment.

Where is it happening?

Both student-to-student and adult-to-student sexual harassment takes place



all over school campuses, with the highest reported rates in classrooms, cafeterias, and physical education facilities. Sexual harassment is not confined to school premises; students report harassment when on school trips and when on school buses.

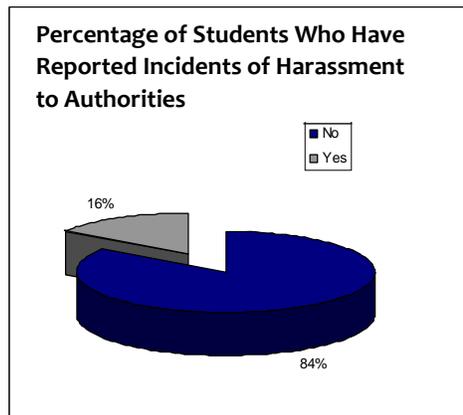
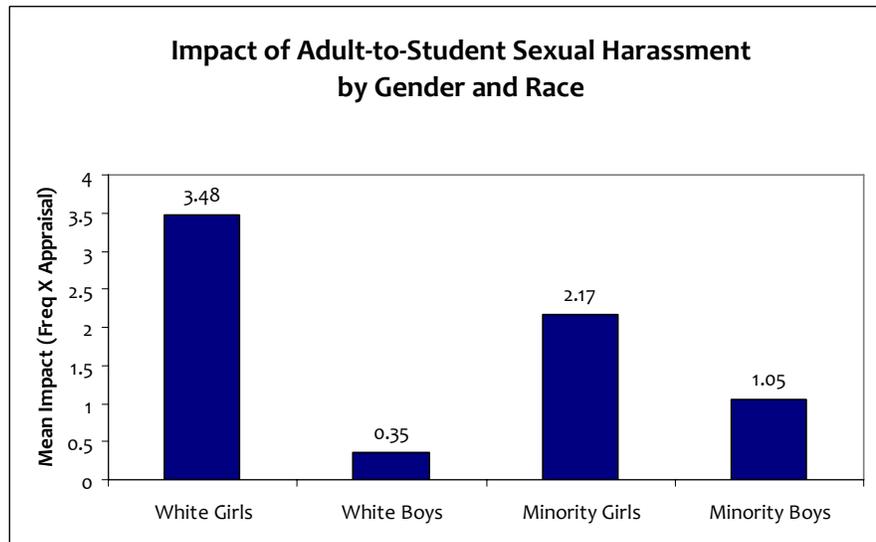
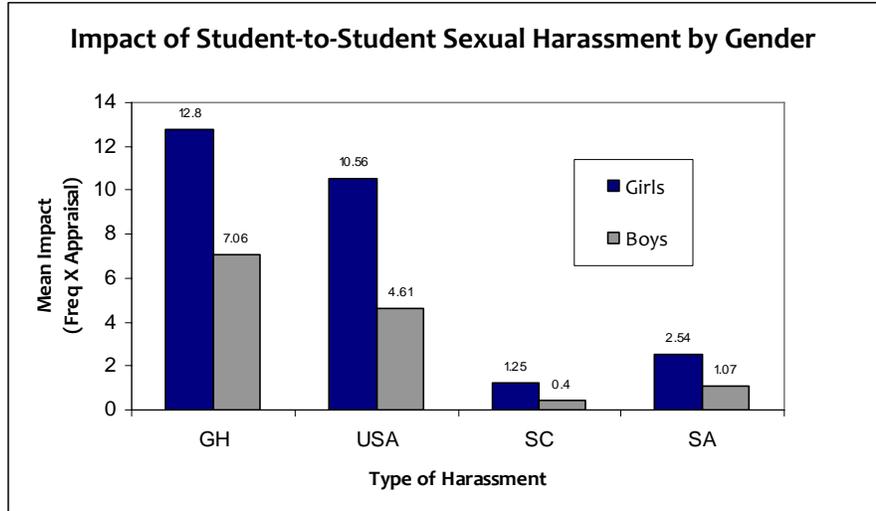
Does sexual harassment affect boys and girls differently?

Although boys and girls may not differ substantially in their likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment, the negative impact of sexual harassment on girls is significantly greater than it is on boys. Specifically, girls report being more upset about sexual harassment experiences than boys report. This pattern holds across all types of sexual harassment, and for both student-to-student and adult-to-student harassment.

Although there were no significant differences in frequency of sexual harassment experiences among private and public school students, students at public schools reported greater negative impact of sexual harassment at school than students at private schools.

Do students report sexual harassment when it happens?

Most students do not report sexual harassment to authorities when it happens. Over 90% of students in this study reported being sexually harassed at least once while in their current school, but only 16% said they had ever reported it. And although nearly 23% of study participants said they had experienced sexual harassment by an adult in school, only 3% said they had ever reported it.



Did the study find correlations between sexual harassment and ...students' mental health?

The study used a number of psychosocial measures to assess whether sexual harassment impacted mental health issues for students. Overall, self-esteem was high and psychological distress was low among the students in the sample. Girls reported substantially more negative body image than boys. Boys and girls did not differ in self-esteem or psychological distress.

Correlational analyses indicate that for girls, the more frequently harassment occurs, and the more upset girls are by harassment, the lower their self-esteem, the more psychological distress they report, and the more negatively they view their own bodies. For boys, in contrast, sexual harassment was only associated with increased psychological distress.

...students' feelings of safety at school?

Generally, students report feeling fairly safe at school. Girls report feeling less safe at school than boys report. Students at public schools report feeling less safe than their counterparts at private schools.

Correlational analyses indicate that for girls, the more frequently sexual harassment occurs, and the more upset girls are by harassment, the less safe they feel in school. This pattern was not found for boys.

...students' academic participation?

In general, boys report more behavior related to withdrawing from school and school-related activities than girls report. Correlational analyses indicate that for both girls and boys, the more frequently sexual harassment occurs, and the more upset students are by harassment, the more likely they are to withdraw from activities.

...students' sexual risk taking?

Students were asked whether they had ever engaged in several different types of sexual behavior, including touching genitals, touching breasts, oral sex, anal sex, sexual intercourse, alcohol or drugs before sex, and not using a condom the last time they had sex.

Almost all of the students (92.5%) reported that they had engaged in at least one of the sexual risk taking behaviors at some point in their life. On average, students reported engaging in 2 of the behaviors during their lives. More than half the students (55.9%) had not yet engaged in sexual intercourse. As expected, more middle school students (72.4%) than high school students (46%) had not yet had sexual intercourse. Whites were less likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse than minorities.

The average lifetime number of partners reported was 2.79, with boys reporting more partners than girls and Whites reporting more partners than minorities. The average number of partners in the last 3 months was 1.71, with

boys reporting more partners than girls.

Correlational analyses also indicate that for girls and boys, the more frequently sexual harassment occurs, the more partners they report in the last three months. In addition, for boys only, the more frequently sexual harassment occurs, the younger they are to initiate sexual activity.

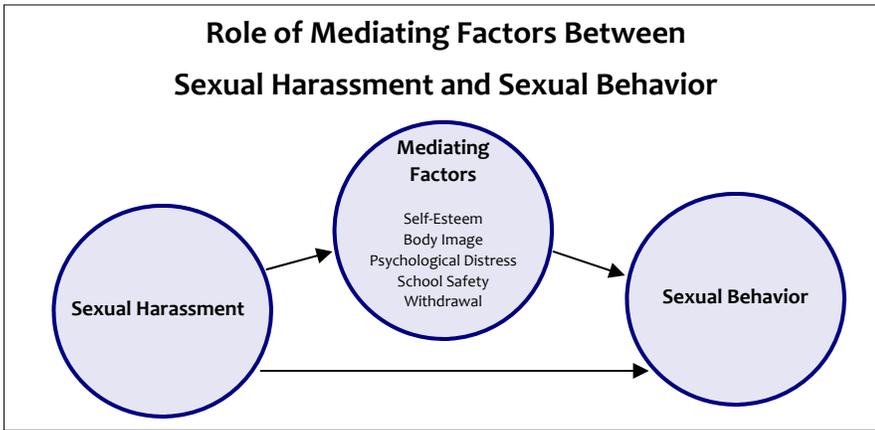
When we combine data across 8 types of risk taking behaviors, boys reported engaging in more sexual risk taking, on average, than did girls, and Whites reported engaging in more sexual risk taking, on average, than did minorities.

Correlational analyses indicate that for girls and boys, the more frequently sexual harassment occurs, and the more upset students are by harassment, the more sexual risk taking behaviors they engage in.

Mediational Analyses

To better understand the relationship between sexual harassment and sexual risk taking, a series of analyses were conducted to test whether the relationship between sexual harassment and sexual risk taking was mediated by mental health factors. If mediation is detected, it implies that there is a causal relationship among the variables. We tested whether self-esteem, psychological distress, and negative body image each mediated the relationship between sexual harassment and engaging in sexual risk taking behaviors.

The results indicated that for girls, sexual harassment was directly related to



sexual risk taking, and in addition, each of the three mental health variables mediated the relationship between sexual harassment and sexual risk taking. More specifically, this means that in addition to the direct relationship, sexual harassment leads to lower self-esteem, which in turn leads to more sexual risk taking. Similarly, sexual harassment leads to more psychological distress, which in turn leads to more sexual risk taking. Finally, sexual harassment leads to more negative body image, which in turn leads to more sexual risk taking.

For boys, sexual harassment was directly related to sexual risk taking, and mediation was found for psychological distress, only, such that sexual harassment leads to more psychological distress, which in turn leads to more sexual risk taking.

A similar set of analyses was conducted for school safety and withdrawal. Results indicated that for girls, in addition to the direct relationship, sexual harassment leads to feeling less safe at school, which in turn leads to more sexual risk taking. Similarly, sexual harassment

leads to more withdrawal from school activities, which in turn leads to more sexual risk taking. For boys, in addition to the direct relationship, sexual harassment leads to more withdrawal from school activities, which in turn leads to more sexual risk taking.

Conclusions

The results of this study lead us to conclude that there is a pervasive atmosphere of sexual harassment in Memphis area middle and high schools. Over 90% of students reported being sexually harassed by another student, and 23% reported being sexually harassed by an adult. Yet only 16% of students had ever reported an incident of sexual harassment to the authorities. These figures are higher than national estimates (AAUW, 1993, 2001) which indicate approximately 80% of students are sexually harassed by other students, and 10% are harassed by adults in school settings. Thus, our study concludes that not only is sexual harassment pervasive, but that the climate is not conducive to students' reporting harassment.

The prevalence of sexual harassment was similar across public and private schools, with public school students (91.3%) slightly more likely than private school students (85.5%) to report sexual harassment. These small differences were not statistically significant, and it should be noted that several of the private schools are single sex, suggesting that students at single sex schools are not immune to sexual harassment.

Although one might expect sexual harassment experiences to increase with increasing age, the results of this study did not reflect that pattern. Instead, rates of harassment were almost identical among middle and high school students, suggesting that harassment is starting when students are still fairly young. Although our study did not include elementary school aged children, results of other studies suggest that sexual harassment begins in elementary school (AAUW, 1993, 2001). Furthermore, students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds reported similar experiences with sexual harassment. Thus, it is imperative that policies and interventions to prevent sexual harassment begin with elementary schools, and must be designed to be both age and culturally appropriate.

Sexual harassment in Memphis area public and private schools takes many forms. This study focused on gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, and sexual assault. Gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention were the most pervasive,

with the majority of students reporting experiencing these types of sexual harassment in their current schools. Sexual coercion and sexual assault were less common, but were still experienced by substantial numbers of students. It is noteworthy that both boys and girls report high levels of all forms of harassment, yet in most cases, girls report higher levels than boys. This was especially true for unwanted sexual attention.

Even more significant was the impact of sexual harassment on girls. Although boys and girls may experience sexual harassment at similar rates, girls report feeling considerably more upset than boys about being sexually harassed. 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 is on their mental health and school outcomes.

Correlational analyses indicate that for girls, the more frequently harassment occurs, and the more upset girls are by harassment, the lower their self-esteem, the more psychological distress they report, the more negatively they view their own bodies, the less safe they feel in school, and the more likely they are to withdraw from activities. For boys, in contrast, sexual harassment was only associated with increased psychological distress and withdrawal from school activities.

The psychological and school related outcomes just described have been documented by other researchers (e.g.,

AAUW, 2001). However, researchers have only recently begun to focus on sexual harassment as an antecedent of sexual assault and other forms of interpersonal violence.

What this study suggests that has not previously been studied is a relationship between sexual harassment and the engagement in risky and/or early sexual behavior. Our decision to study this issue was based on our hypothesis that an environment where students are routinely exposed to excessively sexualized discourse might impact their sexual development and experimentation.

Specifically, if everyday exposure to sexual harassment is the context in which students are learning to negotiate their own developing sense of sexuality, would that context affect their sexual decision making, and/or impede their ability to form healthy and responsible attitudes toward sexuality and relationships with others? Our study is the first step in understanding this complex question.

Correlational analyses indicate that for girls and boys, the more frequently they are sexually harassed, the more sexual partners they report and the more sexual risk taking behaviors they engage in. Also, for boys only, the more frequently they are sexually harassed, the younger they are to initiate sexual activity.

Perhaps even more striking are the results of the mediational analyses, which suggest that the relationship between sexual harassment and sexual risk taking is mediated by mental health and school

outcomes factors. Our results indicate that for girls, not only does sexual harassment lead to more sexual risk taking, but sexual harassment leads to lower self-esteem, which in turn leads to more risky sexual behavior. The same can be said 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.

According to data released from the 2007 *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System* (CDC, 2008) approximately 47.8% of HS students have had sexual intercourse. Comparisons across the 40 states that participate in the YRBSS indicate that Tennessee is ranked fourth, with 54.4% of high school students reporting ever having sexual intercourse. Because Memphis participates in the YRBS Local Survey, data is available for Memphis City Schools (MCS) specifically; 62.8% of MCS high school students reported ever having sexual intercourse.

In our sample, a smaller percentage (54%) of high school students reported that they had engaged in intercourse. This difference may reflect the sampling strategy used for this study. Most of the students in our sample were recruited through agencies that provide adolescents with life skills and other resources to enhance their lives. Our data suggests that

participation in these kinds of programs may serve as a protective factor, reducing the likelihood of engaging in sexual intercourse during high school.

In a community marked by high rates of teen pregnancy and birth, sexually transmitted diseases, and infant mortality, every route to prevention must be examined, including the prevention of sexual harassment.

Finally, we must consider why students do not report sexual harassment. Several possible reasons include that they may not identify what is happening to them as sexual harassment, they may not realize that this type of behavior is illegal, they may not be aware of policies in place in their schools to protect them, or they may not feel comfortable or safe enough to register an official complaint.

When we talked informally with adolescent girls, they expressed considerable concern about the climate of harassment in their schools, but few identified the behavior as sexual harassment, per se, and most did not believe that there was anything that they could do about it. This suggests that if we want to reduce sexual harassment in schools, we first need to educate students and adults about what kinds of behaviors are inappropriate and illegal, and then we need to give them the tools they need to address the behaviors, including interpersonal skills that will foster appropriate responses to sexual harassment when it happens, and effective policies that are easily accessible and

understood by all students.

We cannot turn away from this challenge. Every student, under Title IX, has the right to a harassment-free school environment. The negative impact of sexual harassment on student well-being and academic achievement has been well documented. Intervention is now the only responsible course of action.

Implications for Future Research

As mentioned previously, researchers have only recently begun to investigate sexual harassment as an antecedent of sexual violence. We propose that this approach be broadened to include the study of sexual harassment as an antecedent of early and/or risky sexual behavior.

To understand the complex set of circumstances that surround sexual harassment, initiation of sexual behavior, sexual risk-taking, and sexual assault, we propose that longitudinal research is needed. This research would follow students from middle school into high school and beyond to understand the role of sexual harassment in the trajectory to initiation of sexual behavior. It would also examine the various social climates in which our youth are growing and developing – including families, neighborhoods, churches, schools, and peer groups – which interact in complex ways to shape our youth and their behavior.

Increased understanding of how these complex social systems work together will inform how we intervene to reduce and prevent sexual harassment, as well as risky sexual behavior and interpersonal violence.

Recommendations

Every school should have policies that prohibit all types of harassment. And every school is required to have policies that prohibit sexual harassment. But sexual harassment is sometimes hard to talk about, and it is too often overlooked, downplayed, or simply ignored in the language and/or the enforcement of overly generic harassment policies. It is a subject that merits focused attention and specific action.

Several publications, including the American Association of University Women's (2004) *Harassment-Free Hallways*, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (2001) *Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance*, Bernice Sandler and Harriet Stonehill's (2005) *Student-to-Student Sexual Harassment K-12*, and the website for Equal Rights Advocates (www.equalrights.org) each discuss many ways that school administrators, teachers, and parents can help to reduce and prevent sexual harassment in schools. The recommendations that follow have been compiled from these resources, and expanded based on our own findings.

In addition, the Memphis Area Women's Council will be working with girls ages 13-17 over the next year through its *Girls for Change* program to more directly address sexual harassment policies and/or curriculum in Memphis area schools. For information on ways that girls or schools can get involved visit <http://www.memphiswomen.org>.

It should be noted that research has not evaluated the effectiveness of these kinds of changes in sexual harassment policies. As schools begin to implement recommended policy changes, careful documentation and evaluation of effectiveness are warranted. In the long term, research is needed to establish best practices related to policy and curriculum to prevent sexual harassment in schools.

For more information on harassment policy, curriculum, prevention and advocacy, visit <http://crow.memphis.edu>.

What Can Schools & Teachers Do?

Take Immediate Action

- Model appropriate behavior – avoid sexual references, innuendo, jokes.
- Post harassment policies and procedures on the school website in a visible location and include in the student handbook.
- Publicize and guarantee confidential reporting. Students must be confident there will be no penalty for reporting harassment.
- Make sure teachers, counselors, and administrators are well informed and approachable.
- Communicate to all school personnel that they are obligated to report any sexual harassment they observe or learn about.
- Include sexual harassment training in new employee orientation.
- Appoint one person to oversee sexual harassment policies for the school district.
- Appoint one person at each school to receive complaints and serve as liaison between parties.
- Require the school district to maintain written records and data, and to prepare an annual report on sexual harassment in the district.

Address Policy Issues:

- Create a comprehensive sexual harassment policy that emphasizes that harassment is illegal and a punishable behavior.
- Good policies will educate students and others about the issue, not just lay out guidelines and punishments.
- Sexual harassment policies folded into bullying policies tend to obscure the issue.
- Policies need to explicitly address student-to-student and adult-to-student harassment.
- Create clear guidelines for reporting and investigating sexual harassment that include sanctions, written documentation, and notification of families and other appropriate authorities.
- Train all school personnel (e.g., administrators, teachers, staff, aides, assistants, bus drivers, cafeteria

workers, grounds persons, crossing guards, coaches, security officers, and volunteers) regarding policies, procedures, and appropriate conduct.

- Educate students and their families about sexual harassment and codes of appropriate behavior beginning in elementary school and continuing through middle and high school.
- Regularly assess the extent of peer harassment in each school.
- Create a brochure that summarizes the policies and procedures. Distribute annually to all school personnel, students, and families, and post in high traffic areas of all school buildings.

Create Sexual Harassment Curriculum:

- Integrate discussions of sexual harassment into sections on civil rights, diversity, tolerance.
- Use case studies and/or videos followed by discussion.
- Provide lists of resources (articles, websites, hotlines).
- Make use of or create peer education programs.

What Can Parents Do?

- Encourage children to discuss school life.
- Encourage children to speak up for themselves – promote self confidence.
- Model appropriate behavior.
- Raise awareness of other people’s feelings.
- Discuss issues like healthy dating relationships, gender equity, and sexism with your children.
- Request a copy of the school’s sexual harassment policy and discuss with children.
- If there is no policy or it is inaccessible, talk to school administrators, the board of governors, or commission members.
- Encourage discussion of sexual harassment at parent-teacher events.
- If your child reports sexual harassment to you, follow up with school officials.

What Can Students Do?

- Learn about your school’s policy on sexual harassment.
- Find out who the school’s Title IX officer is.

- Organize a school-wide campaign to promote the issue such as: “This School is a Harassment Free Zone” or “Expect Respect.”
- If you feel scared, threatened, or uncomfortable with someone’s behavior, talk to a trusted adult.
- If you observe someone else being harassed, tell an adult you trust.

If You Are Being Harassed:

- Don’t blame yourself -- the person who is harassing you is the one doing something wrong.
- Say “no” clearly. Tell the person harassing you that their behavior is not acceptable.
- Write down who did or said what to you, and what your response was.
- Report it! Tell a parent, as well as a school official like a teacher or guidance counselor. School officials can’t stop the harassing behavior if they don’t know it is happening.
- Remember that sexual harassment is against the law. If you report sexual harassment to school officials and nothing happens, you can file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327) Spanish speakers available.

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Appendices

Memphis Area Schools Attended by Study Participants

Middle Schools

Airways Middle School
 American Way Middle School
 Bellevue Middle School
 Briarcrest Christian School
 Campus School
 Colonial Middle School
 Craigmont Middle School
 Cypress Middle School
 Dexter Middle School
 First Assembly Christian School
 Georgia Avenue Elementary School
 Germantown Middle School
 Havenview Middle School
 Hickory Ridge Middle School
 Holy Rosary Elementary School
 HUMES Middle School
 Immaculate Conception Cathedral Middle School
 Kingsbury Middle School
 Kirby Middle School
 Lanier Middle School
 Marshall Elementary School
 Memphis University School
 Mt. Piscah Middle School
 Raleigh-Egypt Middle School
 Ridgeway Middle School
 Riverview Middle School
 Sherwood Middle School
 Shadowlawn Middle School
 Snowden School
 Southwind Middle School
 St. George's Independent School
 St. Mary's Episcopal School
 Trinity Christian Academy
 Westside Middle School
 White Station Middle School
 Whitney Elementary School
 Wooddale Middle School
 Woodstock Middle School

High Schools

Arlington High School
 Bartlett High School
 Bolton High School
 Briarcrest Christian School

Central High School
 Christian Brothers High School
 City University School of Liberal Arts
 Collierville High School
 Concord Academy
 Cordova High School
 Covington High School
 Craigmont High School
 East High School
 Evangelical Christian School
 Fairley High School
 First Assembly Christian School
 Frayser High School
 George Washington Carver High School
 Germantown High School
 Hamilton High School
 Harding Academy of Memphis
 Hillcrest High School
 Hollis F. Prie High School
 Houston High School
 Immaculate Conception Cathedral High School
 Kirby High School
 Lausanne Collegiate School
 Macon Road Baptist School
 Manassas High School
 Melrose High
 Memphis Catholic High School
 Memphis University School
 Middle College High School
 Millington Central High School
 New Hope Academy
 Northside High School
 Oakhaven High School
 Overton High School
 Pyramid Academy
 Raleigh-Egypt High School
 Renaissance Academy North
 Ridgeway High School
 Sheffield High School
 Southwind High School
 Southside High School
 St. Agnes Christian Academy
 St. Benedict at Auburndale High School
 St. George's Independent School
 St. Mary's Episcopal School
 Tipton Rosemark Academy
 Trezevant High School
 White Station High School
 Whitehaven High School
 Wooddale High School

Participating Community Partners

Baptist Memorial Hospital for Women
 VolunTeens Program
 BASIC Church
 Breath of Life Church
 Frayser Baptist Church
 Gifts of Life Ministries
 Girl Scouts - Lindenwood Troops
 Girls for Change
 Girls Inc.
 Greenbriar Apartments
 Ladies in Training
 Latino Memphis
 Lindenwood Church Youth Choir
 Memphis Area Women's Council
 Memphis Challenge
 Memphis Sexual Assault Resource Center
 Neighborhood Christian Center
 New Life Church
 Pershing Park Apartments
 Praise and Fellowship Church
 Robinhood Apartments
 St. John's UMC Teens
 University of Memphis ACAD classes
 University of Memphis Governor's School

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337 Clement Hall
Memphis, TN 38152
901.678.2770

Center Staff

Lynda M. Sagrestano, Ph.D., Director

Rebecca L. Terrell, MPA, Assistant Director

Carrie A. Brooks, M.S., Project Coordinator,
Community Voice Evaluation Project

Naketa Edney, M.A., Research Associate,
Community Voice Evaluation Project

Lornette W. Stokes, Administrative Secretary

Brandon D. Riley, Student Assistant

Current Research Agenda

Sexual Harassment in Schools

Teen and Unintended Pregnancies

Preconception Health

Infant Mortality

Women and Poverty in Memphis, TN

Violence Against Women on College Campuses

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