

Sexual Harassment and Related Behaviours Reported Among Youth from Grade 9 to Grade 11

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Background

Sexual harassment is typically defined as a form of unwanted or unwelcome sexual attention, and is considered a form of gender-based violence. Similar to the definition of bullying, 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 to create a hostile or abusive educational environment. Such harassment can take physical forms (such as a pulling at clothing, rubbing up against another person, or grabbing impinging), as well as verbal forms (such as sexual comments, jeers, rumour spreading, or sexual jokes aimed at an individual).

Sexual harassment has been recognized for many years as being a problem in the workplace, University campuses, and the military, where studies show that about two in five women and one in six men report at least one episode of sexual harassment in the past two years (Street, Gradus, Stafford, & Kelly, 2007). Women as well as men are more likely to experience sexual harassment from other men, although reasons for such harassment and the forms it may take are different for men and women. Women are more likely to report being put down or treated differently because of their sex, whereas men experience vulgar comments or negative remarks, presumably to enforce traditional gender role stereotypes (for example, being called "gay," "fag," etc.).

Investigators have recently examined the extent to which older children and adolescents may engage in such behaviour from elementary school throughout high school. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) conducted two groundbreaking studies of sexual harassment in U.S. schools in 1993 and 2001. They found that the vast majority (81%) of students experienced some form of sexual harassment during their school years. Fifty-nine percent were harassed occasionally, and 27% were targeted often. Additionally, over half of the students reported that they had sexually harassed someone during their school years. Girls experienced more forms and a higher frequency of harassment than boys (AAUW, 2001). These findings were supported in a province-wide survey conducted by the Ontario Secondary School Teacher Federation (1995), in which over 80% of female students reported they had been sexually harassed in a school setting.

Importantly, prevalence rates of harassment among youth vary considerably in accordance with the time frame that students are being asked to consider. For example, the surveys above asked students whether they had "ever" experienced any of the forms of harassment, which produces

the highest prevalence (lifetime) rates. In contrast, studies that measure student responses in respect to a more specific time period, such as the last month or year, find lower reports overall. For example, Walsh, Duffy, and Gallagher-Duffy (2007) recently conducted a study of sexual harassment in Canadian schools, in which students were asked questions about unwanted sexual behaviors and harassment that occurred *only in the past two weeks*. Within this narrow window, these investigators found that 15% of students were subjected to various forms of unwanted and personally upsetting sexual harassment. Thus, regardless of measurement time frame the rates of sexual harassment are significant, ranging from 15% of teens over the past two weeks, to four out of five experiencing such behaviours at least once during their school years.

The significance of such behavior is shown by the extent of psychological problems reported among those who report higher rates of sexual harassment victimization: negative psychosocial effects such as depression, loss of appetite, nightmares or disturbed sleep, low self-esteem, and feelings of being sad, afraid, scared, or embarrassed (Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Students who experienced harassment also reported loss of interest in school activities, feeling more isolated from friends and family, and a loss of friendships. In terms of school performance difficulties, students who were the victims of harassment had more absenteeism, decreased quality of schoolwork, skipping or dropping classes, poor grades, tardiness and truancy (see summary presented in Gruber & Fineran, 2007).

Recent studies on the extent of this problem among adolescents indicate that boys not only are the offenders but also the victims, especially of certain types of harassment. In one of the few studies that examined how sexual harassment in grade 8 may predict adjustment problems three years later, Goldstein, Malanchuk, Davis-Kean, & Eccles (2007) found that the extent to which younger adolescents (boys as well as girls) associate with deviant peers (such as those that engage in risk behaviors, antisocial acts, and so forth) are most likely to be the victim of sexual harassment. Girls who reached pubertal development earlier were at increased risk of sexual harassment, which is believed to be due to the inappropriate attention given by others to their development. Of concern was the finding that girls who reported higher victimization in the 8th grade also had increased problems with substance use, lower self-esteem, and symptoms of depression three years later, suggesting that sexual harassment is a risk factor for psychological problems among youth, as it has been found among women.

Purpose of this study

Our research team at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health is engaged in a study of youth that examines how adolescents become involved in risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, unsafe sex, and aggression in their peer and romantic relationships. We anticipated that many of these risk behaviors are interconnected, such that students who are engaging in unsafe or abusive behavior in grade 9 are more likely to have problems later on in high school.

Grade 9 is a particularly difficult year for many students, as they are subject to verbal and physical taunts and aggression not only from their own classmates, but also from older students. As they attempt to navigate this entry into high school peer groups, many are faced with decisions and conflicts that pose a risk to their emotional well-being. By examining these risk behaviors, as well as suspected factors that may influence such behaviors, we hope to determine ways of reducing adolescent dating violence, peer aggression, and related risk behaviors over the course of high school.

In the current study we examined the nature and role of sexual harassment in Grade 9 and Grade 11, following the same sample of adolescents. Based on what is emerging in the literature on sexual harassment, we anticipated that such behavior will be common among high school students in grade 9, and will either increase or remain the same by grade 11. We further anticipated that sexual harassment would be associated with other forms of interpersonal difficulties, such as bullying, involvement in antisocial behavior, and engagement in risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use. We present descriptive findings from our sample of over 1800 students from 23 high schools in Ontario in which they were administered a questionnaire asking about their experiences of sexual harassment, both as a victim and as a perpetrator.

Method and Findings

At the beginning of the grade 9 year students in the schools were given a consent form to take home to their parents, explaining the study and seeking their permission to participate. They then completed a survey online during school hours, in the school library or similar facility where computers were available. Their responses were confidential, and they were assigned a unique identifier so that they could be followed two years later.

The survey contained questions concerning their overall well-being, as well as their engagement in risk behaviors such as alcohol and drugs, dating violence, sexual harassment, and sexual behaviour, among others. The 75 minute survey was initially administered to over 1800 students in 23 high schools in Ontario in the middle of their grade 9 academic year; it was re-administered to these same students two years later in grade 11. This design allowed us to examine factors in grade 9 that may be associated with sexual harassment and related behaviours, and then to determine the extent to which such problems (perpetration as well as victimization) predict adjustment and other behaviors two years later (these latter findings will be presented in a subsequent report).

As part of our larger survey, the students completed an eight item questionnaire concerning their experiences of sexual harassment victimization and perpetration. The scale is based on the original used in the AAUW and OWD studies, and contains an equal number of verbal and physical forms of harassment. The questions, shown in the tables below, are preceded by instructions to answer whether any of the unwanted things had been done to him or her in the past three months by another teen or classmate (Yes or No response). The questions were first asked about victimization experiences, and then repeated in terms of their own behavior towards others (perpetration). The descriptive findings are presented in tables 1 (victimization) and table 2 (perpetration). Results for both males and females in grade 9 are shown in the middle column, and results in grade 11 (based on the same students) are shown on the right-hand side.

Sexual Harassment Victimization

As shown in Table 1, girls were much more likely to report being the victim of unwanted sexual attention than boys on almost all questions. The most common form of harassment, reported by 36% of the boys and 46% of the girls in grade 9, was “Someone made sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks at me.” This behavior continued to be the most common behavior reported in grade 11, declining significantly for boys but remaining the same for girls (27% and 46%, respectively). Reporting that “Someone touched, grabbed, or pinched me in a sexual way” or “Someone brushed up against me in a sexual way” were also reported by about one in four boys and almost one in three girls in grade 9, declining only slightly by grade 11.

In terms of the different forms of sexual harassment victimization experienced by boys and girls, girls experienced considerably more forms that involved sexual comments, unwanted looks or touches, and having parts of their body commented on or rated. In contrast, boys were much more likely to report being called "gay", "fag", or similar terms compared to girls. Interestingly, this pattern of homophobic insults continued mostly unchanged from grade 9 (34%) to grade 11 (30%) for boys, but declined by almost half for girls (22% and 12%). Boys also reported having someone show them sexual pictures, messages, or notes more often than girls, although this form of harassment was relatively less common than the others. Finally, boys and girls were somewhat equal in terms of their experiences of being brushed up against in a sexual way, having rumours spread about them, or having someone pull their clothing in a sexual way.

Sexual Harassment Perpetration

Table 2 presents results from these same students in grades nine and 11, in terms of unwanted sexual attention or acts they perpetrated towards others. First, we notice that the percentage of students reporting on these eight behaviors is significantly lower than it is for victimization, which is often found in self-reports of inappropriate, unacceptable, or abusive behavior. We found that boys reported more perpetration than girls on all items, a pattern that remained stable through grade 11. Again, the most common offense involved sexual comments and jokes towards others (29% of boys and 19% of girls), which declined only slightly by grade 11.

It is interesting to note that in grade 9 about one in five boys reported that they "touched, grabbed or pinched someone in a sexual way," but this behavior declined by a third (to 15%) in grade 11. A similar decline in this behavior was found among the girls (12% versus 8% in grades nine and 11, respectively), which may reflect the recognition of the inappropriateness and consequences associated with such unwanted sexual attention. Boys continue to report that they engaged in behaviors such as rating parts of a person's body, from grade 9 to grade 11 (this behavior was less frequent for girls). Finally, it is striking to note that calling someone a homophobic insult continued to be very common, both among girls and boys in grade 9 (38% and 26%, respectively). As it did with reports of victimization, this pattern of behavior dropped slightly from grade 9 to grade 11 (from 38% to 33% for boys; from 26% to 16% for girls).

School Safety and Sexual Pressures

Table 3 summarizes student responses concerning their feelings of safety at school, aggression among peers, and sexual pressures and behaviours. According to the survey, students feel the least safe in Grade 9 (33% of boys and 29% of girls reported feeling unsafe at school at least one day over the past month), which decreases significantly by Grade 11 (13% and 19%, respectively). Similarly, 32% of boys and 16% of girls in Grade 9 reported being physically harmed at school. Again, this pattern drops in Grade 11 by about half. Bullying over the internet remains constant from Grade 9 to Grade 11 for boys (12%) and girls (14%), perhaps reflecting the widespread use of the web and social networking sites.

When surveyed on sexual pressures, 10% of males and 27% of females admitted being pressured into doing something sexual that they did not want to. Not surprisingly, the data shows that girls are feeling this pressure more than boys, with 15% reporting that they had oral sex just to avoid having intercourse. Disturbingly, 4% of males in grade 11 admitted trying to force someone to have sex with them (doubling from 2% in Grade 9).

Predicting Harassment and Dating Aggression in Grade 11

Finally, we examined the extent to which sexual harassment in Grade 9 predicts negative outcomes two years later in Grade 11. We found that students who reported two or more forms of harassment in Grade 9 were significantly more likely (by a factor of 1.5) to be the victim of dating violence in Grade 11 if they were in a dating relationship; these same students were also more than twice as likely (2.3 times) to report being the victim of sexual harassment in Grade 11.

Discussion and Implications

Our findings are consistent with earlier studies regarding girls being victimized more often than boys, and boys being more often the offender. Although our rates are lower than those reported in studies that ask about lifetime occurrences, these differences are due to the fact that we asked about such behaviours within a much shorter time frame (typically one to three months).

Over the two years of the study we found that the frequency of many forms of abuse and harassment, such as hitting others, reduced over time. Part of this reduction can be attributed to maturity, as well as the likelihood of greater victimization in the younger grades by those in the older grades. Nonetheless, we found that students who reported more victimization by his or her peers in grade 9 were more likely to be a victim of harassment in grade 11, especially in romantic relationships, which underscores the significance of these events on an individual's course of development.

Based on these and previous findings, there is ample evidence to conclude that harassment and abuse are occurring at high rates among high school students. Although many of these behaviours are not as visible or extreme as other forms of violence, these acts of "everyday violence" are likely to have significant impact on the lives of youth. While some of these behaviours show decline developmentally over the course of adolescence (such as hitting others), it is clear that students worry about their safety as they enter high school.

Further analysis and discussion of these findings are available from the first author:

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Table 1: Harassment Victimization (N = 1819)

Type of Harassment	Grade 9		Grade 11 (%)	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Someone made sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks at me	36	46	27	46
Someone touched, grabbed or pinched me in a sexual way	24	30	21	28
Someone brushed up against me in a sexual way	30	27	25	26
Someone spread sexual rumours about me	12	13	11	13
Someone called me a “gay”, “fag”, “dyke”, “lezzie”, “queer” or similar terms	34	22	30	12
Someone pulled at my clothing in a sexual way	15	16	15	15
Someone showed, gave, or left me sexual pictures, photographs, messages, or notes	16	9	12	9
Someone made comments about or rated the parts of my body that makes me a boy or girl	16	24	15	24

Table 2: Harassment Perpetration (N = 1819)

Type of Harassment	Grade 9		Grade 11 (%)	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
I made sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks at someone	29	19	25	16
I touched, grabbed or pinched someone in a sexual way	22	12	15	8
I brushed up against someone in a sexual way	21	14	16	11
I spread sexual rumours about someone	5	4	6	3
I called someone a “gay”, “fag”, “dyke”, “lezzie”, “queer” or similar terms	38	26	33	16
I pulled at someone’s clothing in a sexual way	12	7	10	6
I showed, gave, or left sexual pictures, photographs, messages, or notes to someone	6	3	7	3
I made comments about or rated the parts of my body that makes someone a boy or girl	19	13	17	9

Table 3: School Safety and Sexual Pressures

Question Item	Grade 9		Grade 11 (%)	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
During the past 30 days, on how many days did you feel unsafe at school? *	33	29	13	19
During past 3 months, did another same sex teen hit, slap or physically hurt YOU intending to scare or humiliate you	32	16	14	6
During past 3 months, did YOU hit, slap or physically hurt another same sex teen intending to scare or humiliate this person	25	10	13	3
Electronically bullied using the internet or email in past 4 weeks	12	14	12	14
Has done something sexual he/she really did not want to do**	--	--	10	27
Has had oral sex just to avoid having sex **	--	--	9	15
Has forced someone to have sex with him or her	2	0.2	4	1

Note: * percentages reflect at least one day or more

** question asked in Grade 11 only

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