

Gangs in schools lead to more sexual harassment, according to study

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A study co-authored by a University of Kansas professor shows that gang presence in schools is not only disruptive to a safe learning environment, it could also lead to more frequent and more aggressive incidents of sexual harassment.

Anjali Forber-Pratt, assistant research professor in the Bureau of Child Research, co-authored the study on gang presence in a Midwestern middle [school](#) with known gang presence and [low socioeconomic status](#). They interviewed students in the school about their experiences with gangs, sexual harassment and victimization. The study was born from a larger project Forber-Pratt was part of, looking at gang presence and bullying. The school showed high levels of sexual harassment.

"This particular school was looking different than others in the larger study," Forber-Pratt said. "It was the statistical outlier in that it had more incidents of bullying, reports of victimization and sexual harassment. We thought, 'There has to be a reason for that.' We learned this school has a high gang presence. So what happens when you have a school with a high known gang involvement? We learned that the incidents of sexual harassment are more violent and there is more homophobic teasing."

Like bullying in other studied institutions, sexual harassment was heightened in the school due to gang activity. The researchers found that students follow gang leaders to avoid becoming victimized themselves. When they see leaders committing such behaviors, they often do the same both to fit in and in an effort to avoid being the target of such

harassment themselves. Forber-Pratt, who co-authored the study with Steven Aragon of Texas State University and Dorothy Espelage of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, recently presented the findings at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in Philadelphia. The research was funded by the Centers for Disease Control Injury and Prevention grant awarded to Espelage.

Girls who took part in the school interviews confided they were often subject to aggressive, even violent harassment. They reported being groped, pressured to give in to sexual advances and even given color-coded bracelets that corresponded with how sexually active they agreed to be. Boys said they were regularly teased and called homophobic slurs, or subjected to lewd teasing by known gang leaders insinuating they were gay.

The presence of gangs cultivated an environment of fear among students, teachers and administrators that allowed much of the harassment to continue unchecked, Forber-Pratt said. That finding shows that teachers and administrators need to both acknowledge that harassment exists and make it known that it will not be tolerated. While that is easier said than done, it is worth the effort both because it would improve students' safety and help them academically. Previous research has shown that students perform better in school when they feel safe, have a strong sense of school identity and have positive associations with the school they attend.

Forber-Pratt, whose research interests are in the sociopolitical aspects of school environment, said the project and data gathered will be part of the larger study in gang presence, bullying and school safety. The study is among the first to examine gang presence at a middle school level. The authors will continue to analyze data and produce journal articles, all as part of a larger effort to design more effective interventions all schools can use to combat problems such as gang presence, violence and [sexual](#)

[harassment](#).

"Traditionally we forget about these students who fall through the cracks," Forber-Pratt said. "That's where I think this research is very valuable in addressing how you can create a safe environment when you're dealing with a climate of fear in a school."

Provided by University of Kansas

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