

Sexual harassment and assault are common on scientific field studies, survey indicates

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University of Illinois anthropology professor Kate Clancy led a study of sexual harassment and assault on researchers involved in scientific field studies. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A survey of 142 men and 516 women with experience in field studies in anthropology, archaeology, geology and other scientific disciplines reveals that many of them – particularly the younger ones – suffered or witnessed sexual harassment or sexual assault while at work in the field.

A majority of the survey respondents (64 percent) said they had experienced [sexual harassment](#) (inappropriate sexual remarks, comments about physical beauty or jokes about cognitive sex differences, for example). And more than 20 percent reported they had been the victims of [sexual assault](#) (unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature, including touching, physical threats, or rape).

The survey and analysis, reported in the journal *PLOS ONE*, comes after a preliminary survey offered evidence that many of those engaged in biological anthropology field research – most of them younger women, but also men – were sexually harassed and/or assaulted while conducting field research far from home.

"Our main findings – that women trainees were disproportionately targeted for abuse and felt they had few avenues to report or resolve these problems – suggest that at least some field sites are not safe, nor inclusive," said University of Illinois anthropology professor Kate Clancy, who led the new analysis. "We worry this is at least one mechanism driving women from science."

Study co-authors are Robin Nelson of Skidmore College; Julianne Rutherford of the University of Illinois at Chicago; and Katie Hinde of Harvard University.

The researchers recruited respondents through social media outlets and on websites serving scientific disciplines that involve field research. The respondents filled out an online survey asking them about their educational and professional status, gender, age, and experiences during field studies.

Undergraduate students, graduate students and postdoctoral researchers (all described as "trainees") were more likely than faculty members to report that they had been the recipients of unwanted sexual attention.

"Over 90 percent of women and 70 percent of men were trainees or employees at the time that they were targeted," the researchers wrote about the new research. "Five of the trainees who reported harassment were in high school at the time of the incident."

Female researchers reported most often that they were the targets of researchers who were superior to them in rank – either more-established scientists working on the same sites, or leaders of the research. Males were most often harassed or abused by their peers.

"Previous work by other researchers has shown that being targeted by one's superior in the workplace has a more severe impact on psychological well-being and job performance than when the perpetrator is a peer," Rutherford said. "This suggests that women may be even more burdened by the phenomenon of workplace sexual aggression."

Field research is a required component of a degree in many scientific disciplines, Clancy said.

"Fieldwork is often what stirs the first interest in science in a young person, and research has shown that scientists who do more fieldwork write more papers and get more grants," she said. "We have to pay attention to how people are treated there."

Those who lead field studies are trained to raise and manage funds, follow research protocols and provide logistical support to their teams, but they are rarely trained to manage interpersonal conflicts that might arise in remote locations, Hinde said.

"The discussion that emerges from these results provides an opportunity for our professional communities to come together and effect solutions to improve the experiences of our trainees and colleagues," she said.

Nelson said, "In many instances, participants reported a lack of knowledge regarding institutional policies or appropriate reporting channels when misconduct occurs. These findings suggest that, in effect, many researchers were ill-equipped to advocate for themselves or others in cases of harassment or assault."

"We are the first researchers to characterize the experiences of scientists at field sites, and our findings are troubling," Clancy said. "If you are on constant high alert because you have been harassed or you are at a site where you know it happens regularly, it drains your cognitive reserves and makes you less effective at your job. No one can work well under those conditions, and we can't ask trainees to keep doing so. Field sciences are intellectually impoverished when hostile field sites drive out underrepresented scientists."

More information: "Survey of academic field experiences (SAFE): Trainees report harassment and assault,"
[dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0102172](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0102172)

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