

One in 10 low-income women sexually harassed by landlord, study finds

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During the past year, thousands of women have shared their stories about sexual harassment and assault as part of the Me Too movement. Although many of the stories have often been tied to superiors in the

workplace, new research from the University of Missouri reveals another common threat to women, especially low-income women—their landlords.

In a recent pilot study that included interviews with randomly selected, low-income [women](#), 10 percent of participants reported being sexually harassed by their landlords. The harassment included being asked to trade sex for rent, lewd comments, home invasions and indecent exposure. The women were almost all in their 20s when the incidents occurred, and they were disproportionately likely to be minorities.

"While the sample was limited, I think the results of this study should be a wake-up call to policymakers," said study author Rigel Oliveri, a professor in the MU School of Law. "Low-income women are easy prey for landlords who seek to exploit them for sex."

The women interviewed in the study were all living in private rental housing, and only one woman reported the harassment to police. The others said they did not tell anyone because they feared jeopardizing their housing or they did not know where to direct a complaint.

Oliveri interviewed 100 women for the study that was published in the Missouri Law Review. She said that although it is difficult to generalize the results broadly, she believes a similar pattern would emerge with a larger sample. According to Census data, more than 16 million women living in poverty in the United States.

"The next step is to conduct a survey like this on the larger level so that we have a clearer picture of what is actually happening," Oliveri said.

"Reliable statistics on sexual harassment in housing are elusive. Not only is under-reporting rampant, but there has never been a comprehensive nationwide study of the issue."

Oliveri hopes that by better understanding the scale of the problem, it will help lawmakers enact laws that provide greater landlord oversight, which is lightly regulated in most jurisdictions. She also hopes that work like hers will lead to strengthened enforcement and more public [housing](#) options for low-income women.

"The Me Too movement has sparked an important national discussion about the prevalence of sexual harassment in American society and the ways in which powerful people can use their positions both to exploit their vulnerable targets and to escape the consequences of their actions," Oliveri said. "This conversation is a necessary starting point, but the focus on high-status workplaces overlooks other contexts in which sexual [harassment](#) occurs."

More information: Rigel C. Oliveri, Sexual Harassment of Low-Income Women in Housing: Pilot Study Results. *Mo. L. Rev.* scholarship.law.missouri.edu/mlr/vol83/iss3/6

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