

#MeToo: Study finds sexual harassment in academic libraries more frequent than thought

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Sexual harassment is far more frequent in academic libraries than previously assumed, according to a first-of-its-kind survey published in

College & Research Libraries.

The study, co-authored by researchers at CU Boulder, William & Mary and Radford University, found that 78% of librarians at academic libraries have experienced [gender harassment](#), 64% have experienced seductive behavior by patrons and 35% have experienced sexual assault, which was characterized by deliberate touching that made the respondent uncomfortable.

"Our study found that most academic librarians get sexually harassed at work," said co-author Jennifer Knievel, a professor in CU Boulder's University Libraries. "About half of that [harassment](#) comes from colleagues, and the other half comes from patrons."

The quantitative survey is the first of its kind to measure the prevalence of [sexual harassment](#) in academic libraries, according to Knievel. She said that, despite substantial anecdotal evidence of sexual harassment among librarians, it hasn't been measured with a standard tool.

The research team used the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire—the most widely used tool for measuring workplace sexual harassment. The survey received 613 responses from librarians in academic libraries nationwide and asked respondents to answer questions about their experiences at work over the last five years.

Among the findings, they discovered that younger women who spent more time with patrons on a daily basis were more likely to experience gender harassment, seductive behavior and [sexual assault](#). It also found that respondents who work at [public universities](#) are more likely to experience sexual harassment than those who work at private institutions.

Knievel, who has been a librarian for 21 years and researches mentoring,

sexual harassment, management and leadership in academic libraries, hopes these findings initiate a bigger conversation in her industry.

"We're hoping that this will inspire people to put in place some changes that the industry really needs to ensure the safety of all librarians and the stability of our industry as a whole," she said.

Defining sexual harassment

Lead author Candice Benjes-Small, head of research services at William & Mary Libraries, decided to embark on the research after the #MeToo movement began gaining traction in 2017.

"The #MeToo movement really brought to light the fact that there's really no consensus about what sexual harassment really is," Benjes-Small said. "And we found that was consistent with our survey results."

When respondents were asked if they've been sexually harassed, many said no. Benjes-Small explained that's because many respondents interpreted that, in order for an incident to be defined as sexual harassment, it needed to involve a power dynamic or an imminent threat to themselves or their jobs.

For their study, Benjes-Small and Knievel didn't use only the "legal definition" of sexual harassment, but also considered inappropriate behaviors that were sexual in nature and traumatic to those who experienced them.

"One thing [social science research](#) says really consistently is that sexual harassment, even if it falls below the legal definition, can contribute to mental and physical health problems, a lack of connection with colleagues and a lack of job satisfaction, which leads to a higher turnover rate in the workplace," Knievel said.

The definition of sexual harassment can be very nuanced, depending on the environment and the relationship between the perpetrator and victim. Members of the research team hope their findings will broaden society's view of what constitutes sexual harassment and encourage victims to recognize their experiences as problematic and unacceptable.

"Just because it doesn't fall under the legal definition, doesn't mean it's okay," Benjes-Small said. "If behavior is traumatizing to our colleagues, we need to take it seriously and we need procedures in place to minimize that behavior."

Customer is not always right

Similar to people who work in the restaurant and nursing industries, librarians are expected to be polite, welcoming and friendly—despite how their patrons are behaving.

It can be difficult for people to ask a question in the library or admit that they need research help.

"Part of our core values as a profession is to help people overcome their reluctance to ask a question by being very welcoming," Knievel said.

"But there's a dark side to that welcoming attitude—it can make us inadvertently welcoming of behaviors that are unacceptable."

According to [peer reviewed social science research](#), men are far more likely to misinterpret friendliness from women as sexual interest, even when that's not the intended message.

But according to Knievel, the expectation of friendliness is just one part of the problem.

"Further research shows that people are much more likely to harass in

environments where people believe themselves to be anonymous," she said.

Because academic libraries are still public spaces, patrons aren't required to give their names.

"Patrons know that the librarians can't identify them, which makes them more likely to harass because it feels less risky to them," she said.

The research team hopes to widen the scope of their research to include public libraries.

One of the findings they discovered in their survey of [academic libraries](#) was that librarians who spent more time with patrons were on average 13% more likely to experience sexual harassment of any kind, compared to librarians who did not spend time with patrons.

"Because public librarians spend more time with patrons than academic librarians do, and their patrons are much more anonymous, our hypothesis is that sexual harassment would be even higher," Knievel said.

The researchers believe the frequency of sexual harassment in libraries could be lowered if institutions had procedures in place for how to communicate and report when behavior from patrons is unacceptable.

"The general public has a tendency to assume that libraries are low-stress environments, where people are friendly and quiet," Benjes-Small said.

"Now that people know that's not the case, we need to consider how to train and educate people about all forms of sexual harassment, and how to push back."

To protect respondents' privacy and prevent retraumatization, the survey did not capture any identifying features, such as the names of institutions or descriptions of specific incidents.

More information: Candice Benjes-Small et al, #MeToo in the Academic Library: A Quantitative Measurement of the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Academic Libraries, *College & Research Libraries* (2021). [DOI: 10.5860/crl.82.5.623](https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.5.623)

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