

Sexual harassment is reported to be common in Scottish secondary schools

February 23 2022

Survey items	Ever victim (past 3 months)			Ever perpetrator (past 3 months)		
	Boys %	Girls %	Chi-sq sig	Boys %	Girls %	Chi-sq sig
1-Made sexual jokes, gestures or looks (V/V)#	52.7	48.7	0.356	37.5	14.8	<0.001
2-Showed you or sent you sexual images or messages that you did not want to see (V/V)	17.1	32.9	<0.001	4.0	1.8	0.106
3-Wrote sexual messages / graffiti about you in public places (eg. on toilet walls, in changing rooms) (V/V)	8.5	7.9	0.789	4.0	0.9	0.012
4-Spread sexual rumours about you online or in person (V/V)	15.1	20.0	0.134	6.4	2.7	0.030
5-Said you were gay or lesbian, in a hurtful way (V/V)	26.3	19.6	0.056	15.9	2.7	<0.001
6-Spied on you as you dressed or showered at school (PC/P)#	3.8	3.5	0.868	0.00	0.00	n/a
7-Flashed /'moonied' at you (showed their private parts or exposed themselves) (V/V)	18.6	10.8	0.008	8.4	1.5	<0.001
8-Touched, grabbed, or pinched you in a sexual way (PC/P)	19.4	16.6	0.386	7.7	1.2	<0.001
9-Brushed up against you in a sexual way on purpose (PC/P)	15.2	11.6	0.207	3.2	1.2	0.087
10-Pulled at your clothing in a sexual way (PC/P)	8.3	7.3	0.668	3.2	0.6	0.023 ~
11-Pulled off or down your clothing (PC/P)	5.5	4.2	0.490	3.6	0.3	0.003 ~
12-Blocked your way or cornered you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable (PC/P)	10.7	14.7	0.154	2.0	0.0	0.013 ~
13-Made you kiss him / her (PC/P)	6.3	5.8	0.794	1.6	0.0	0.032 ~
14-Made you do something sexual other than kissing (like touching their private parts) (PC/P)	5.5	2.4	0.052	0.4	0.0	0.429 ~
15-Taken a picture to see under your clothes, eg. up your skirt or down your shirt (PC/P)	2.8	1.2	0.226 ~	0.8	0.0	0.184 ~
16-Forwarded a naked or sexual picture of you to others, without your agreement (PC/P)	3.5	5.5	0.265	0.8	0.6	1.000 ~
17-Pressured you to send them a naked (nude) or sexual picture of yourself (PC/P)	5.0	14.3	<0.001	1.2	0.0	0.078 ~

V/V = visual or verbal; PC/P = physical contact or personally-invasive

~ Fisher's exact test used when small expected cell counts.

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Individual victimization and perpetration items by gender. Credit: Sweeting et al., 2022, *PLOS ONE*, CC-BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Sexual harassment in secondary schools is pervasive: two in three teens (64.7 percent) surveyed in Scotland reported visual and verbal harassment, and one in three (34.3 percent) reported personally invasive behaviors, in the last three months. Students are uncertain about the acceptability of many behaviors, and some are normalized, according to

the research, published in the open access journal *PLOS ONE*. Effective interventions are needed to change attitudes and behaviors which can persist into later life.

There is little research on the prevalence of sexual [harassment](#) among young people, and even less on adolescent perceptions of what counts as sexual harassment. Researchers at the University of Glasgow conducted a survey of 638 students aged 13-17 in three [secondary schools](#) between June and November 2019. Students were asked about their experiences of instigating or experiencing 17 behaviors in the past three months.

Sexual jokes, gestures or looks were most commonly experienced—by around half of respondents. The second most commonly reported behavior was being shown or sent unwanted sexual images. Girls were more likely to be sent or shown sexual images (33 percent of girls vs 17 percent of boys) and were also more likely to be pressured into sending them (14 percent of girls vs 5 percent of boys). Meanwhile, boys reported higher rates of being flashed or mooned at (19 percent of boys vs 11 percent of girls).

Focus groups with 119 students followed the survey, to discuss perceptions around acceptability of these behaviors. This revealed that some low-level visual or verbal behaviors such as making sexual jokes were acceptable within friendship groups, or in online gaming chat settings. There were rarely explicit discussions about boundaries; instead, judgements were made by 'feeling' a [behavior](#) was ok and/or 'knowing the person'.

The researchers highlight that harassment is often unrecognized, normalized or perceived as not worth reporting, underlining the importance of helping [young people](#) recognize how low-level sexual harassment can play into norms and attitudes that encourage more serious behaviors.

The authors add: "Sexual harassment is common and often seen as 'normal' among teenagers at school. Our study agrees with others in this respect, but, importantly, also highlights the uncertainties which teenagers may feel around whether many behaviors generally regarded as representing sexual harassment are acceptable or not. These results have implications for the design of school-based [sexual harassment](#) interventions which, if effective, could generate long-lasting changes in attitudes and behaviors."

More information: Sweeting H, Blake C, Riddell J, Barrett S, Mitchell KR (2022) Sexual harassment in secondary school: Prevalence and ambiguities. A mixed methods study in Scottish schools. *PLoS ONE* 17(2): e0262248. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262248

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