

Increasing harassment of researchers subject of new report

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The prevalence of social media has contributed to the increased level of harassment and online threats faced by researchers, particularly during the pandemic, according to a new Royal Society of Canada policy briefing. Credit: Firmbee/Pixabay

A Canadian task force made up of university-based researchers, including at Western, is tackling the growing number of online threats and harassments researchers face and has called on the federal government to initiate a nationwide, coordinated approach to addressing

the issue.

"The problem has always been there, but the tools have changed," said Howard Ramos, chair of the department of sociology, and co-author of a Royal Society of Canada briefing, "Protecting Expert Advice for the Public: Promoting Safety and Improved Communications."

Ramos and his co-authors considered growing levels of [harassment](#) faced by researchers, and laid out recommendations on what funding agencies, the [federal government](#) and the post-secondary sector can do to address the issue.

Among the recommendations is for Statistics Canada to expand its survey of post-secondary faculty and researchers to "collect data on harassment, intimidation and other threats from outside of scholars' institutions."

The working group that published the policy briefing is part of a Royal Society of Canada task force on COVID-19 mandated to provide evidence-informed perspectives on major societal challenges in response to and recovery from the pandemic.

"COVID-19 has highlighted the extent to which researchers who publicly share their expertise and the results of research face harassment and personal threats. The intimidation of experts has recently garnered significant media attention, but it is a problem that has affected the safety, well-being and work of those who produce knowledge for some time," the report said.

The panel considered the changing online media environment as well as the increased expectations for academics to engage in knowledge mobilization and translation. The rise in social media consumption has increased the number and scope of people who can easily comment on or

share research.

"In many ways, it documents a problem that people have known about for some time, but haven't named publicly or at a national scale," said Ramos. "What's changed is the scale and how easy it is to harass people on so many platforms. It has become internationalized, and the harasser could be a bot or person from anywhere."

Female researchers, along with Indigenous peoples and people of color, are more likely to face harassment, and it is often misogynistic and racist in nature, he said. "It's become much easier for people to complain or harass in ways that are far more personal than it would have been a decade or two ago."

Researchers doing work related to [public debates](#) will also be the target of more harassment, which has increased during the pandemic and led to a decrease in the public's trust in science.

"With the pandemic, there was a lot more pre-peer reviewed work sent out. The media picks up on it, only to later find out the science changed. This is a challenge when doing science in real time," said Ramos.

To better respond to the harassment, universities need to record and track the harassment experienced by researchers, "rather than just accepting that it is happening, and believing it is benign." Adequate response will require more coordination across units, as well as clear guidelines for how researchers should report harassment.

"When someone is harassed, they may end up not knowing where to go, or they find out there are holes in the support system," said Ramos. Reports to campus police may be passed on to local police, or to IT services, and no party or office will take responsibility.

Universities and [funding agencies](#) need to provide more support and training for faculty members, including discussion of the norms for engaging the public, the best practices, and potential pitfalls.

"We find there's been an increase in perceived pressure from early career researchers to engage in knowledge mobilization when they don't feel comfortable," he said. "Academics increasingly feel pressured to weigh in on issues which they may not have expertise on."

"Universities are doing much better in their role of engaging the public but haven't thought about what is needed to support such a shift in mandate," said Ramos. "There is expectation for experts to be there, but at same time experts may say things people don't want to hear. The value of a university is that it offers impartial advice.

The [full policy briefing](#) report is available from the Royal Society of Canada website.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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