

UK teens experienced spike in online harm during COVID-19 pandemic, report claims

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A new pair of reports co-led by a UCL researcher highlights the scale of online harm faced by young people in the UK while also demonstrating the impact of educational workshops in equipping young people with

tools to navigate the digital world.

For the first report, researchers surveyed 551 UK teenagers (aged 13–18), as well as teachers, [school](#) safeguarding leads and parents, and carried out interviews at schools and online.

The report found that 78% of those surveyed experienced at least one type of technology-facilitated harm, which included body shaming, online harassment, public outing of their sexuality, and image based [sexual abuse](#), and 99% of these participants reported that incidents increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report, "Young People's Experiences of Technology Facilitated Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19," was led by Professor Tanya Horeck (Anglia Ruskin University—ARU) and co-authors included Professor Jessica Ringrose and Betsy Milne (IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society).

A second new report, "[Equipping Young People to Navigate Post-digital Sexual Violence](#)," led by Professor Ringrose showed the positive impact that workshops designed to help schools reduce sexual violence can have. By improving young peoples' knowledge of sexual violence and the different forms it takes, the workshops equipped them with tools to navigate the digital world.

Professor Ringrose's study piloted schools-based workshops in mixed and single-sex secondary schools with young people in either Year 9 (aged 13–14) or Year 10 (aged 14–15).

Researchers observed 53 workshops, attended by 988 young people in eight diverse schools across England and found 88.6% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of sexual violence and the different forms it takes improved as a result. Likewise, 97% of young

people agreed their understandings of how to be an active bystander in situations of sexual violence improved as a result of attending the workshops.

The study, which also provided teachers with training on how to deliver the student workshops, concluded with a set of practical recommendations for schools, parents and caregivers, young people, and for government to help create a culture where sexual violence is not tolerated, and victims are supported.

The young people surveyed in the summer of 2021 for the ARU-led report were avid social media users, with 89% having at least one type of social media account.

The [report](#) found that 59% of respondents experienced at least one form of activity categorized as technology-facilitated gender-based violence, with 27% receiving unwanted sexual messages online, such as via Instagram DMs and Snapchat messages, while 17% were sent flattering messages, for example relating to their looks or maturity, by an adult stranger, and this increased by 55% during COVID.

In the qualitative research, several participants, particularly girls, described receiving increased unwanted sexual messages and comments from adult men during lockdown. This unwanted contact often came in the form of messages, requests, "likes" and comments on Instagram from adult men, which girls described as "creepy" and "weird."

The study also found that sexual and gender diverse young people experienced higher rates of some forms of online harm compared to cisgender and heterosexual teens, with 40% of [sexual minorities](#) (compared to 8.4% of heterosexual youth) experiencing sexuality-based harassment, which included offensive or degrading messages, comments or "jokes" about their sexual orientation, or being "outed."

Professor Ringrose (IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society) said, "Early digital sex education is an essential preventative measure in reducing gender and sexual based harm. Learning about the law, consent and their rights around sexual violence, including how these apply in online contexts, helps to safeguard and support young people both on screens and at school.

"We found that a shocking 55% of young people aged 13–15 had never learned about the issue of sexual violence in school prior to the workshops. We also found that 89% of students and 95% of teachers felt the workshops had increased their understandings of the topic equipping them with better tools to respond, including [young people](#) learning about being an active bystander."

Provided by University College London

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