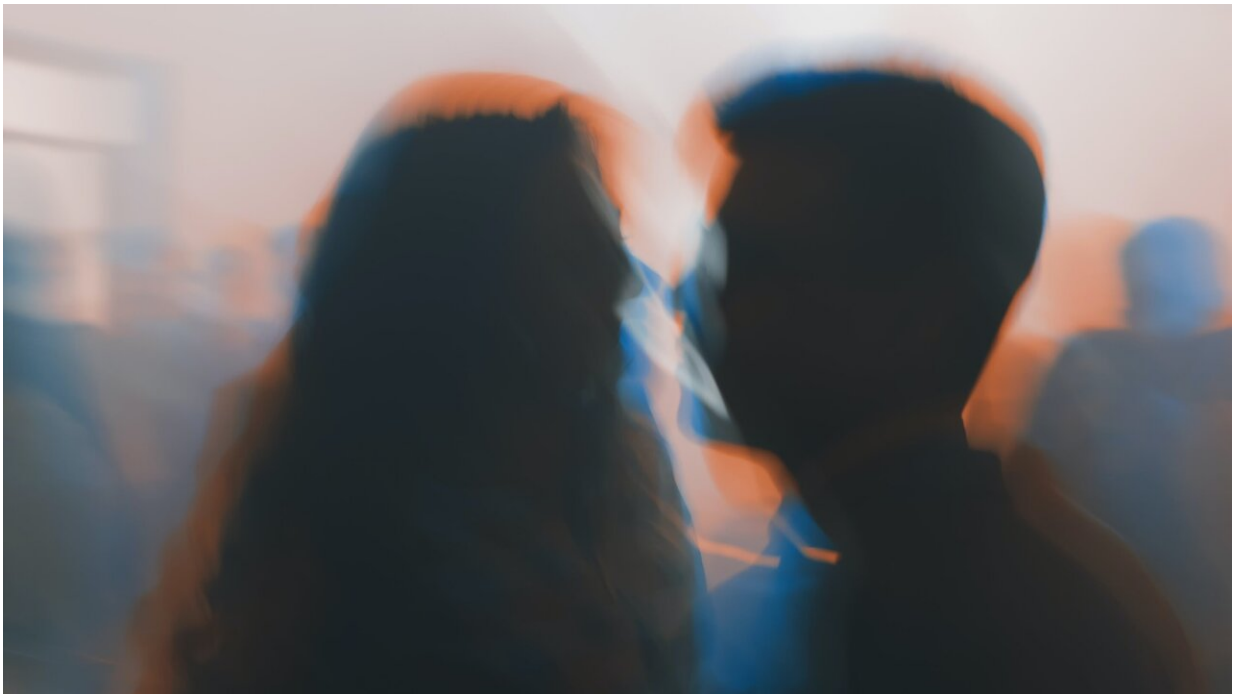


One in 10 Australians sexually harassed by peers: Study

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The first nationally representative figures on the prevalence of sexual harassment across childhood reveal females and those who are gender or sexuality diverse are most at risk.

The findings, based on data from the landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) of 8,503 Australians aged 16 years and

older who were asked to reflect on their childhood experiences of maltreatment, show males were the most common perpetrators of peer [sexual harassment](#).

Lead author and ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) doctoral student Gabrielle Hunt said the new research revealed peer sexual harassment—defined as saying, writing, or doing something sexual to a peer that is offensive or intimidating—was prevalent among young Australians.

"For the first time, we have figures that show a significant proportion of young Australians—one in 10—have been sexually harassed by their peers during childhood," Hunt said.

"We need to prioritize primary prevention messages and public health campaigns to protect children and young people by addressing the [cultural norms](#) that contribute to sexual harassment and violence against women, girls, and those with diverse genders and/or sexualities."

The study, published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* and co-authored by researchers including ICPS Director Professor Daryl Higgins and Associate Professor Megan Willis, of ACU's Faculty of Health Sciences, found:

- 4 percent of Australians aged 16 and older experienced peer sexual harassment in childhood, with the figure rising to 15.3 percent for women, and 24 percent for those with diverse genders.
- Incidence of peer sexual harassment during childhood was highest among those aged 16-24, with 21.2 percent of women and 35.9 percent of those with diverse genders experiencing it.
- In most cases, the sexual harassment was inflicted by known peers (7.9 percent), followed by siblings (1.4 percent), unknown

- peers (1.3 percent), and romantic partners (0.9 percent).
- Sexual harassment was more likely to be instigated by a male peer (9.6 percent) than by a female peer (1.8 percent). Most incidents involved a known male peer (8.9 percent of the 9.6 percent total).
 - Women who identified as gay or lesbian, or as bisexual reported higher rates of peer sexual harassment than [heterosexual women](#) (23.8 percent, 29.4 percent, and 14.2 percent respectively).
 - People with diverse genders were more likely to experience peer sexual harassment by unknown peers (12.2) compared with women (1.9 percent) and men (0.5 percent).
 - Heterosexual males had the lowest rates of experiencing peer sexual harassment (4.4 percent), but men with diverse sexualities were more likely to have experienced peer sexual harassment, including those who identified as bisexual (17.5 percent), other sexualities (14.2 percent), or gay (8.9 percent).

Professor Higgins, also one of the ACMS chief investigators, said peer sexual harassment was often trivialized in childhood, but it left those impacted at risk of adverse physical, social, and psychological problems.

"We must move away from a culture of normalizing peer sexual harassment and treat it for what it is—unwanted and confronting behavior that nobody should tolerate or accept," Professor Higgins said.

Hunt said the new research showed action was needed to reduce the incidence of peer sexual harassment.

"We need national and global conversations to shift the harmful attitudes that allow peer sexual harassment to occur at every age, but especially in childhood when young people are most vulnerable," she said.

More information: Gabrielle R. Hunt et al, The Prevalence of Peer

Sexual Harassment During Childhood in Australia, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/08862605241245368](https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241245368)

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