

Escalation in harassment of New Zealand's MPs threatens democracy, says study

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From online abuse to threats of sexual violence, harassment of New Zealand's parliamentarians is on the rise, and becoming increasingly disturbing, University of Otago research shows.

Published in *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, the study investigates harassment and violence towards MPs in the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery era, following on from a similar 2014 study.

Of the 54 MPs who participated, 98% said they had experienced harassment, ranging from disturbing communication to actual physical violence.

Lead author Professor Susanna Every-Palmer, of the Department of Psychological Medicine, Wellington, says the harassment experienced has significant psychosocial costs and requires a multi-pronged response.

"Most MPs reported experiencing abuse related to the Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as lockdowns and vaccine mandates. Many of them commented that the frequency and intensity of abuse increased markedly during the pandemic and had not subsequently abated.

"Disturbingly, women were at significantly higher risk of certain types of social media harassment including gendered abuse, sexualized comments, threat of sexual violence, and threats toward their family," she says.

Ninety-six percent of participants had been harassed over [social media](#), with over half being threatened, including threats of physical violence (40%), [sexual violence](#) (14%), threats made towards MP's family members (19%), threats towards staff (12%), and [death threats](#) (27%).

Almost all forms of harassment had increased significantly compared to 2014.

When participants described the nature and context of the harassment, three themes emerged: a changing landscape with racist, misogynistic, and extreme right rhetoric proliferating online; fear that they or someone close to them might be attacked, seriously hurt, or killed; and a feeling of inadequate support with resources not keeping pace with the changing landscape.

Co-author Dr. Justin Barry-Walsh, forensic psychiatrist, says a great deal of harm arises in the context of this unreasonable and harmful harassment—to MPs, to those close to them, and to their staff.

"The research demonstrates the damage that can be done by those that hold misogynistic attitudes and are willing to express them. It raises the specter of erosion of our democracy by continuation of such harassment, particularly towards women MPs," he says.

However, the study provides valuable information for the services responsible for the safety and welfare of MPs and their staff, including Police and Parliament's security.

Dr. Barry-Walsh continues, "The research highlights the importance of having a systemic and effective response to this issue, including the need to adapt to a changing threat landscape and possible legislative change. Having a cohesive approach to these threats is valuable, with the Parliamentary Service, Police, and mental health organizations working together."

He adds that it is not enough to simply monitor and report on this issue: "MPs were clear that they and their staff require more support and resources to manage these threats. For new politicians, de-escalation, safety, and cybersecurity training should be part of the induction package, and resources made available to increase home and office security measures."

Professor Every-Palmer hopes the study provides politicians with permission to acknowledge the extent of the difficulties they may face, and to appropriately seek support and assistance for themselves and their staff when they are the subject to harassment.

"We expect that for some, this research will validate their experiences

and confirm what they have been saying. We hope this means MPs will not downplay the significance and harm that arises from harassment—[harassment](#) occurs across the [political spectrum](#) and should not be politicized," she emphasizes.

More information: Susanna Every-Palmer et al, Stalking, harassment, gendered abuse, and violence towards politicians in the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery era, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsy.2024.1357907](#)

Provided by University of Otago

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