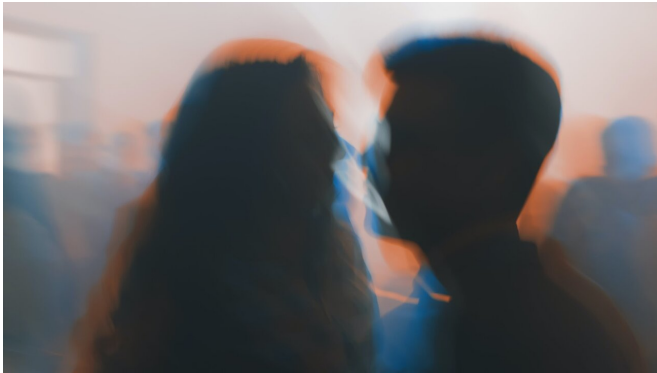


# Gender harassment and institutional betrayal in high school take toll on mental health

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High school students who endure gender harassment in schools that don't respond well enter college and adulthood with potential mental health challenges, according to a University of Oregon study.

The study, published last month in *PLOS ONE*, found that 97 percent of women and 96 percent of men from a pool of 535 undergraduate college students had endured at least one instance of gender harassment during [high school](#).

Experiences of gender harassment, especially for those who encountered it repeatedly, were associated with clinically relevant levels of trauma-related symptoms in college.

"We found that the more gender harassment and institutional [betrayal](#) teens encounter in high [school](#), the more mental, physical and emotional challenges they experience in college," said lead author Monika N. Lind, a UO psychology doctoral student. "Our findings suggest that gender harassment and institutional betrayal may hurt

[young people](#), and educators and researchers should pay more attention to these issues."

The study, the three-member UO team noted, served to launch academic research into the responses of high schools to gender harassment, beyond media reports of institutional betrayal by schools since the #MeToo movement began.

Gender harassment, a type of sexual harassment, is characterized by sexist remarks, sexually crude or offensive behavior and the enforcement of traditional gender roles.

Institutional betrayal, a label coined previously by the study's co-author UO psychologist Jennifer Freyd, is the failure of an institution, such as a school, to protect people who depend on it. A high school mishandling a case of gender harassment reported by a [student](#) is an example of institutional betrayal.

Participants—363 females, 168 males, three non-binary and one who did not report gender—initially were not aware of the study's focus.

They completed a 20-item gender harassment questionnaire about their high school experiences and a 12-item questionnaire about their schools' actions or inactions. Trauma symptoms were assessed with a 40-item checklist that explores common posttraumatic symptoms such as headaches, memory problems, anxiety attacks, nightmares, sexual problems and insomnia.

An analysis that considered gender, race, age, gender harassment, institutional betrayal, and the interaction of gender harassment and institutional betrayal significantly predicted trauma-related symptoms, but, Lind said, a subtle surprise emerged.

"We expected to find an interaction effect showing that the relationship between gender harassment and trauma-related symptoms depends on institutional betrayal, such that people who experience high gender harassment have different levels of symptoms depending on how much institutional betrayal they experience," she said. "Instead we found that [gender harassment](#) and institutional betrayal are independently related to trauma-related symptoms."

That issue, Lind said, needs to be further explored. It's possible, she said, that the pool of students wasn't large enough or that the measures used were not robust enough. Another factor may be that the study focused more on institutional betrayal than impacts of institutional courage.

"This is like measuring mood and only letting respondents report negative to neutral mood—you're missing a bunch of variability that might be captured if you extended the scale to go from negative to positive," she said. "Expanding the scale to capture institutional courage might increase the likelihood of identifying a meaningful interaction."

How schools might respond to the issues identified in the study should begin with listening to students, Lind said. Asking about problems and listening to responses is an example of institutional courage. Interventions that do not do so often fail.

"Schools should engage in self-study, including interviews, focus groups and anonymous surveys of students, and they should take students' reports and suggestions seriously," Lind said. "When you're trying to intervene in adolescence, you'll do better if you demonstrate respect for teens' autonomy and social status."

Researchers have not focused on such issues in high schools, where students are emerging into early adulthood from the physical, neurological and psychological changes occurring in adolescence, said Freyd, a pioneer in academic research on issues of sexual [harassment](#), institutional betrayal and institutional courage.

"Until now, all of the education-focused institutional

betrayal research has considered the experiences of undergraduate and graduate-level college students, as well as those of faculty members," she said. "There also has been work on these issues in the military and workplaces, but we don't know a lot about [gender harassment](#) or institutional betrayal in adolescence."

**More information:** Monika N. Lind et al, Isn't high school bad enough already? Rates of gender harassment and institutional betrayal in high school and their association with trauma-related symptoms, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0237713](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237713)

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