

More than 20 percent of middle schoolers experience inappropriate touching

9 April 2014, by Sharita Forrest



Dorothy Espelage, a professor of educational psychology, presented new research at the annual meeting of American Educational Research Association indicating that sexual violence/harassment is prevalent in middle school environments. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

(Medical Xpress)—More than one in five youth in middle school has experienced physical sexual violence such as being inappropriately touched against their will while at school, a new study suggests.

More than 1,300 students participated in the study, which was conducted at four [middle schools](#) in the Midwest. Children ages 10-15 years who were

surveyed for the study reported a wide range of [sexual violence](#)/harassment experiences, including 21 percent who said they were physically touched when they did not want to be.

Large numbers of students also had been the target of sexual rumors or sexual commentary (19 percent and 18 percent, respectively) and homophobic name-calling (about 18 percent).

The study is among the first youth surveys to explore the prevalence of [sexual harassment](#) and sexual violence among middle school youth as well as the locations where these behaviors occur.

Students completed surveys that measured how frequently they had experienced unwanted sexual behaviors at school within the past year, and were asked to share the most upsetting thing that had happened to them and where it occurred.

Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Philadelphia, the research was led by bullying and youth violence expert Dorothy Espelage. The meeting ends Tuesday (April 8).

Espelage is a professor in the department of educational psychology at the University of Illinois. The department is a unit within the College of Education.

Sexual harassment most often occurred in schools' hallways (more than 22 percent), followed closely by classrooms (slightly more than 21 percent), gymnasiums (13 percent) and locker rooms (9 percent).

However, students reported occurrences in nearly all types of locations inside or outside their school buildings, including cafeterias and bathrooms, and indicated that victimization also occurred during school activities and by means of electronic devices.

The finding that the classroom is the second most common location where sexual harassment occurs raises some interesting and perhaps troubling questions, because classrooms are presumably one of the most organized and monitored spaces within schools, Espelage said.

"Teachers cannot always hear and see everything that is happening in the classroom, but we have to make them aware of our findings and develop strategies to reduce these behaviors," Espelage said.

Another troubling aspect of the findings was that a significant number of the victims – more than 8 percent – denied being sexually harassed, or they normalized or dismissed the behaviors as simply peers joking around with them or seeking attention. Victims downplayed these incidents by saying that the events were "not that bad or serious" or that such behaviors no longer upset them.

"It's rather concerning that at such young ages youth are dismissive of behaviors that are clearly distressing to them, whether it's forced kissing or touching or their peers spreading rumors about their sexual orientation or activity," Espelage said. "This dismissive attitude seems to be indicative of a broader societal force to normalize or legitimize sexually violent acts."

Having dismissive attitudes toward sexual violence and engaging in sexually harassing behavior at a younger age significantly increases girls' likelihood of perpetrating sexual harassment when they are older, Espelage and co-author Lisa De La Rue found in a study published in 2013.

Dismissiveness of sexual violence/harassment could be the result of schools' lack of programming that addresses these behaviors, and treating it as a trivial aspect of students' lives perpetuates a cycle of sexual aggression.

Themes of dismissiveness, homophobia and the locations where sexual victimization occurs are important for researchers to explore to help schools identify problems and develop interventions, the researchers concluded.

More information: The paper is available online: www.aera.net/Portals/38/Newsroom%20-%20Recent%20Research/Sexual%20Harassment%20and%20Sexual%20Violence%20Experiences%20Among%20Middle%20School%20Youth.pdf

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