



(S)HE Matters

Peer-to-Peer Sexual Harassment in High School Study

**A Qualitative Look at Sexual
Harassment in High Schools**

About Me



My name is Celia Ziliak and I am the Founder/Director of (S)HE Matters and the head of this research project. I want to tell you a little bit about why I started this group. I have been dealing with sexual harassment since I was 11 years old; however, there was one particularly bad incident my sophomore year that moved me to action. That was when I had to report someone for sexually assaulting me in the hallway before school. After submitting the initial claim, it took several months for the school to talk to the harasser about why what he did was unacceptable. The incident convinced me that the issue of sexual harassment requires immediate attention and solutions from all members of our school communities. I thought the best way to start was to back up my argument with data.

Student Voice Team

The Kentucky Student Voice Team consists of over one hundred self-selected youth from across the state, and works to integrate students as education research, policy, and advocacy partners to improve Kentucky schools. We were founded in 2012 at the Prichard Committee.



Our partnership with (S)HE Matters in this qualitative study of student perceptions of sexual harassment in high school is part of a broader effort to ensure the type of school climate that supports all students to learn at high levels.

(S)HE Matters

(S)HE Matters stands for Sexual Harassment Education Matters, the S is in parentheses to represent She/He/Them because this isn't just a woman's issue. Our mission is to decrease sexual harassment in high schools and to change policies as well as implement sexual violence education in schools. We recognize everyone's voice as valid and strive for more student voice to be included in education decision-making processes.

Title IX and Sexual Harassment

“Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, which can include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature.”

—U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights

Title IX

Title IX is a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, including on the basis of sex stereotypes, in education programs and activities. All public schools and any private schools receiving federal funds must comply with Title IX. This law protects students from sexual harassment and assault.

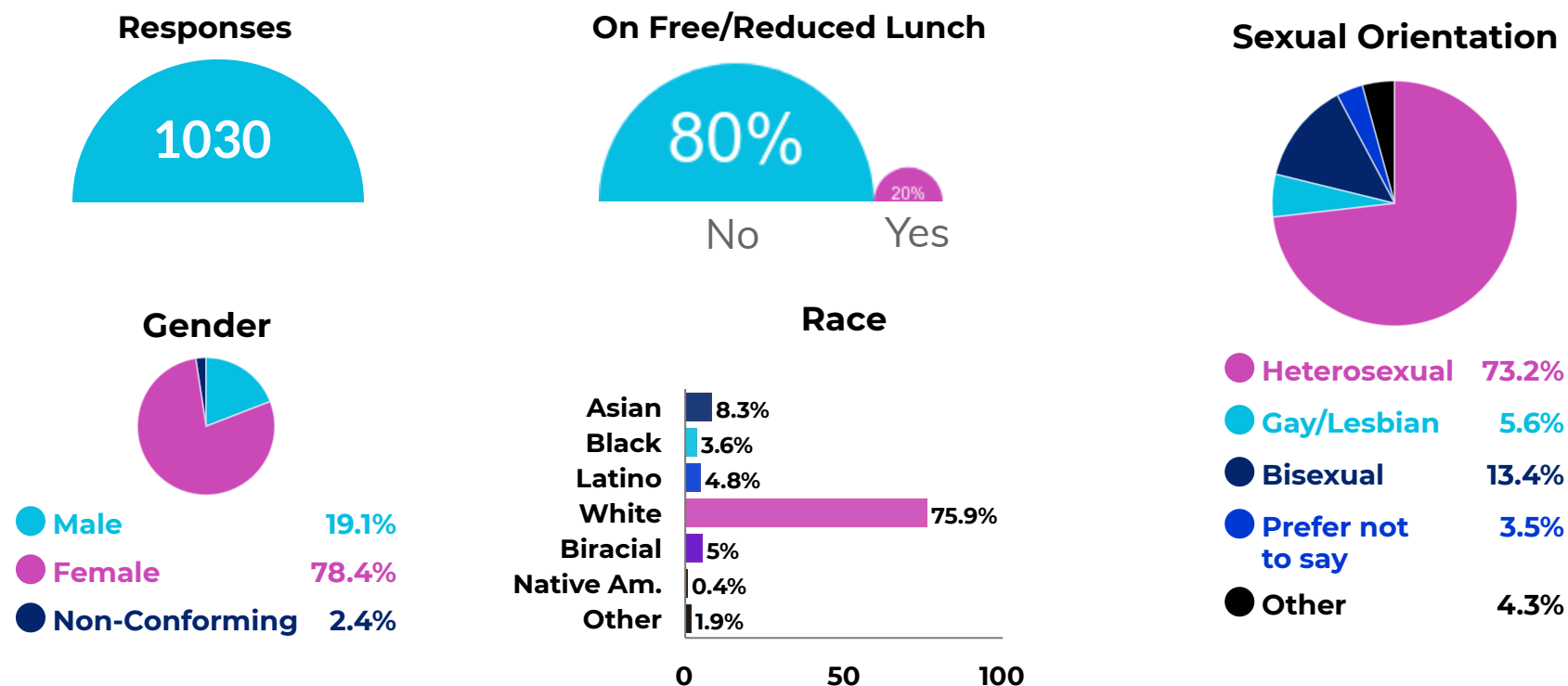
What Title IX Defines As Sexual Harassment

Sexual Harassment can be carried out by a boyfriend or girlfriend, a date, other youth, or adults. If someone does any of the following to you because of gender or sex, it may constitute gender-based violence or harassment.

Someone:

- follows you around, always wants to know where you are and who you are with, or stalks you
- pressures you to perform sexual acts
- touches you sexually against your will
- forces you to have sex
- interferes with your birth control
- verbally abuses you using anti-gay or sex-based insults
- sends you repeated and unwanted texts, IMs, online messages, and/or phone calls that harass you
- hits, punches, kicks, slaps, or chokes you
- verbally or physically threatens you
- spreads sexual rumors about you
- sends you unwanted nude photos or spreads nude photos of you online

Demographics



Methodology

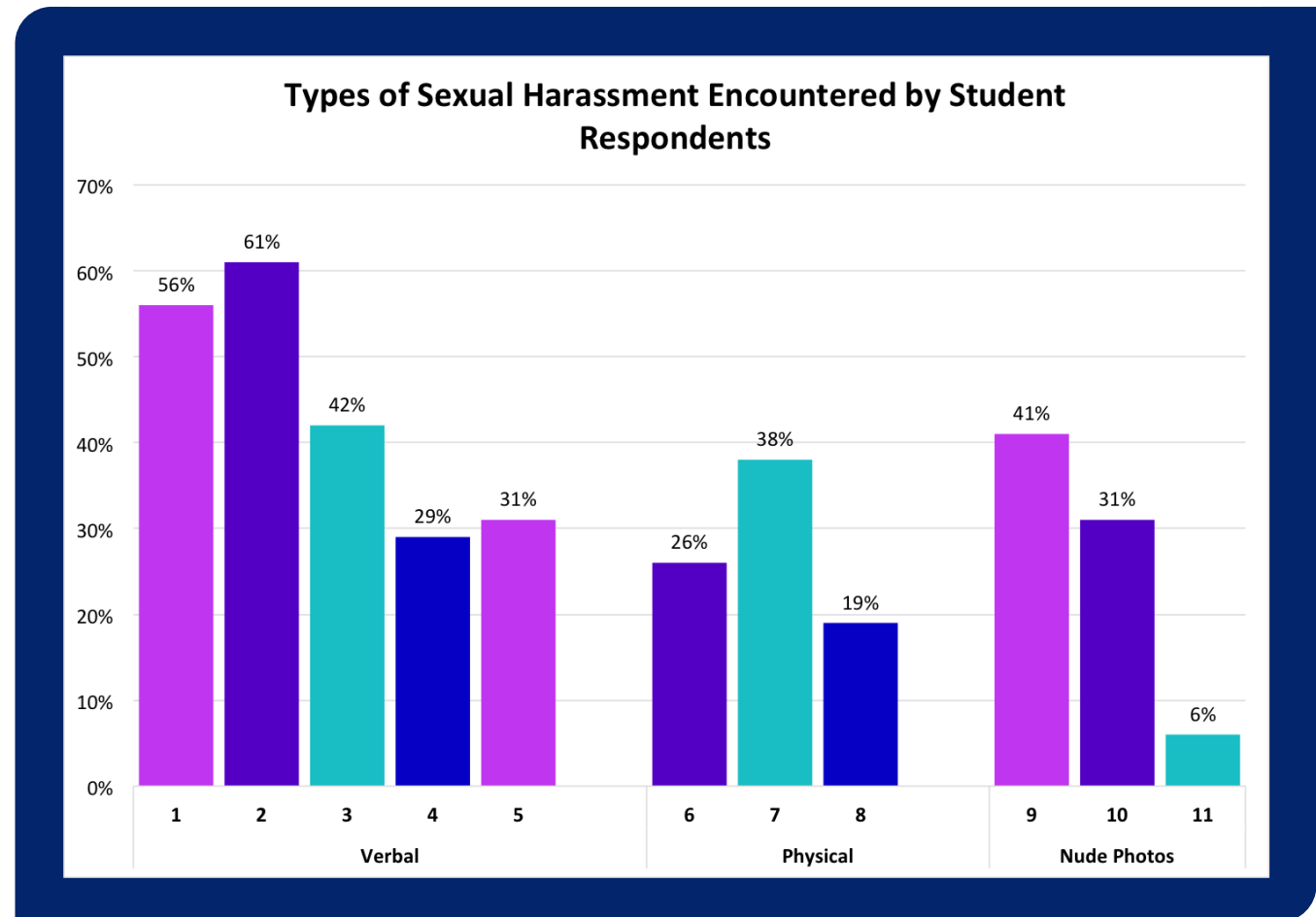
The study was conducted through a 25 question survey on Survey Monkey, and disseminated through various social media platforms and word of mouth, also known as snowball sampling. There were over 1,030 respondents from 42 states and two US territories, 834 respondents were from Kentucky, in a survey window of about one month. The survey contained questions about the types of harassment experienced, reactions to harassment, how harassment was reported, the effects of harassment on mental health, and resources available in schools to deal with harassment. Snowball sampling is a method of collecting data used to receive responses from those who do not wish to be found or who do not feel comfortable giving true responses without complete anonymity. In context, the issue of sexual harassment is still seen as controversial by many, and it can be difficult for those who have been a victim of it to come forward. By disseminating the survey through high school students, it is easier for victims of sexual assault to buy in and take the survey comfortably. It is important to acknowledge that due to the nature of the survey, it is impossible to generalize the results of this study to any population, beyond the original sampling group. This report solely reflects the circumstances of its respondents, not the general state of American high schoolers.

Findings

I designed this survey on peer-to-peer sexual harassment in high school to be distributed to a large sample group in my school district. However, after months of working closely with administrators, the request was denied. I was told it was because of the sensitive nature of the content being discussed.

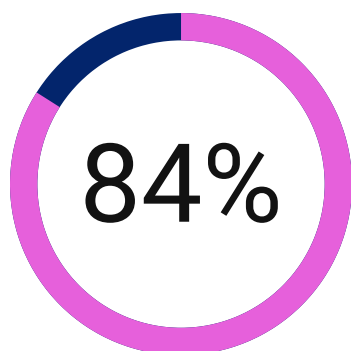
This setback was hard, but I knew the research was needed, so I consulted with the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team and turned the survey into an online version. Together, we then distributed the survey through our joint social media platforms.

I created this survey because I knew numbers like those shown in this graph existed but there were few studies that attempted to show them in this age group. I knew that while it may be easy to dismiss the experience of one person, it is a lot harder to dismiss those of over 850 students.

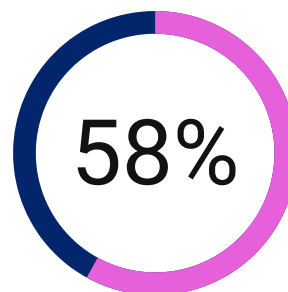


1. sexually demeaning offensive language
2. unwanted sexual comments that made me feel uncomfortable
3. catcalled in school
4. called gay/gay slurs in a negative way
5. unwelcome sexual rumors spread about me
6. pressured into doing something sexual with someone
7. groped/touched by someone w/o my consent
8. physically intimidated in a sexual way
9. unsolicited photos sent to me
10. pressured into sending photos
11. had my photos spread online

Sexual Harassment by the Numbers

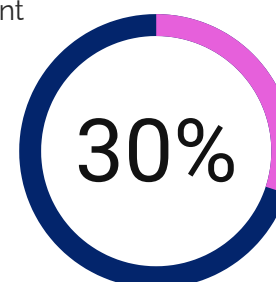


of respondents dealt with sexual harassment in high school

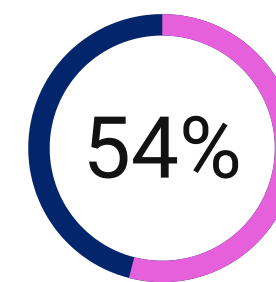


of respondents believed their school could have done more to prevent sexual harassment

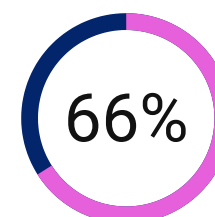
Of Respondents who had experienced sexual harassment:



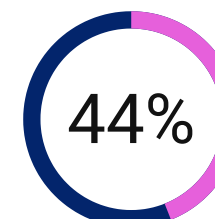
reported being raped



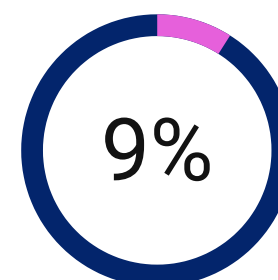
reported being sexually assaulted



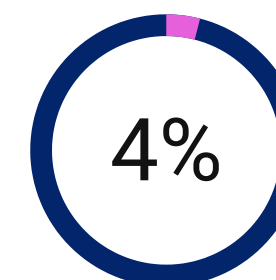
of respondents said they just ignored the incident



of respondents changed the way they dress to avoid unwanted attention



of respondents reported any incidents to the school



of respondents who were minorities reported incidents to their school

Sexual Harassment and Mental Health

Of 715 Responses	NOT AT ALL	A LITTLE BIT	A LOT	ALL THE TIME
made me lose sleep	38.59% 274	42.82% 304	12.82% 91	5.77% 41
distracted from homework	32.68% 232	41.97% 298	18.73% 133	6.62% 47
made me not want to go to school	34.88% 248	34.88% 248	19.83% 141	10.41% 74
gave me anxiety	17.18% 122	37.32% 265	28.87% 205	16.62% 118
made me feel unsafe	32.39% 230	37.46% 266	21.13% 150	9.01% 64
made me angry	10.91% 77	28.47% 201	41.64% 294	18.98% 134
made me feel powerless	30.32% 215	37.94% 269	19.61% 139	12.13% 86

Perceptions Surrounding Sexual Harassment

7

"People should be given information on sexual assault. Sexual assault is NOT just rape, I didn't know this until the past year. Most people who are assaulted don't even realize it."

17-year-old female

45%

said most incidents involved one male

"Sexual harassment should be a bigger concern for every school out there. Teens need to learn the consequences and that those actions will never be okay. It is important for people to learn before they step into the world after school."

16-year-old male

"I would like to point out issues like these are rooted in historically normalized practices like sexism, racism, double standards, verbal choices that effect mentalities, and most of all, failure to teach people these things when they're young and more impressionable."

16-year-old female

"Any sexual advance, whether verbal, physical, or online, when done without enthusiastic consent, is sexual harassment."

17-year-old female

55.7%

of respondents witnessed sexual harassment at school

34% didn't do anything about it

99

RESPONDENTS

said sexual harassment is sometimes okay when the victim's significant other was doing it.

"It's NEVER the victims fault."

17-year-old female

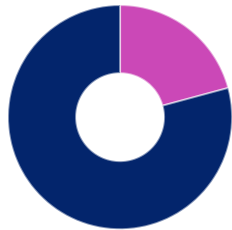
"Rape culture is a myth, sexual harassment is bulls**t. Grow a pair and get over it. I can say whatever the f**k I want about people, it's free speech."

17-year-old male

	NEVER	SOMETIMES	A LOT OF THE TIME	ALL OF THE TIME
Is it ever okay to call someone gay?	57.58% 467	39.21% 318	1.6% 13	1.6% 13
How often do you call someone or something gay? (Includes online conversations)	56.54% 458	34.94% 283	6.42% 52	2.1% 17
How often do you comment on a girl's/boy's body with your friends?	27.78% 225	59.51% 482	10.49% 85	2.22% 18
How often do you call out to a girl/boy in a sexual way?	92.59% 750	5.8% 47	1.11% 9	0.49% 4
Sexual Harassment is okay	99.01% 804	0.25% 2	0.12% 1	0.62% 5
Sexual harassment is at least partly the fault of the student who is being harassed.	86.16% 697	12.24% 99	0.49% 4	1.11% 9

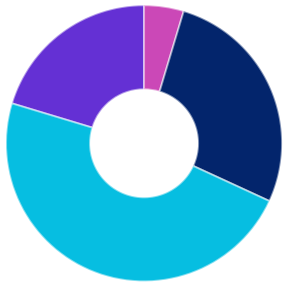
School's Role in Addressing Sexual Harassment

Have you seen someone punished for sexual harassment in school?



● Yes 20.8%
● No 79.2%

I feel safe in school.



● Never 4.6%
● Sometimes 27.2%
● Mostly 47.8%
● Always 20.3%

"The majority of assaulters in my school are male. A lot of them happen to be popular athletes. They don't end up getting punished even if they are reported. I know an athlete who has been accused of sexual assault/rape by girls-he hasn't ever faced punishment and I don't believe there has been any sort of investigation. It's ridiculous."

17-year-old female

"I remember hearing guys on the football team talking about how they gang up on the freshmen in the locker rooms but I didn't realize it was sexual assault."

21-year-old female

"Girls and guys should feel safe in school, especially since they're forced to be here. If no one is going to protect me and I'm being sexually harassed, what's the point of coming here? Why would I want to do anything to help better my school when they don't give a s**t about me?"

17-year-old female

While I know of the resource at my school, it is a male administrator, and many students likely don't feel comfortable taking the issue to him. More resources would make it a more comfortable and safe environment. I think a lot of victims are afraid of retaliation or of getting police and parents involved without having a voice in the matter if they speak up about what happened."

17-year-old female

Is there someone at your school to whom you can report sexual harassment?



● Yes 61.5%
● No 33.4%
● I don't know 5.1%

Do you know of policies against sexual harassment at your school?



● Yes 33.0%
● No 67.0%

Students' Solutions

“Be more open and understanding. Do everything you can to avoid placing blame on whoever came forward, no matter the circumstances. Coming forward is hard, don’t make it any harder.” 14-year-old female

“A shift in the education about sexual harassment from being centered on victim blaming to being focused on why sexual harassment is never okay. More resources for people to go to when they have experienced sexual harassment.” 17-year-old female

“I think students need to formally learn about sexual harassment, dating violence/abuse(emotional and physical), and assault. The idea that ‘boys will be boys’ is an excuse that needs to change with education and policies.” 18-year-old female

“Change dress codes so you don’t unintentionally sexualize girls’ bodies.” 18-year-old female

“Take a more proactive instead of reactive approach to sexual harassment. Instead of waiting for students to come to administration, have the administration meet with each student individually at least once a year. I feel like this would have positive effects beyond the scope of sexual harassment and contribute to a more safe and positive school culture as a whole.” 17-year-old male

“I think it’s very important that school systems develop a program that is actually effective in communicating this information to students, possibly having students lead the program and showing their peers that there is someone they can talk to that isn’t an authority figure.” 15-year-old female

“Addressing, not ignoring the existence of [sexual harassment] in high schools” 14-year-old male

“Student reps that people can go to to be listened to and more comfortable reporting/sharing issues.” 16-year-old female

“Even after I told my mom about it for the first time, she told me that it wasn’t [sexual assault] and that I needed to be careful because I could get an innocent person in trouble for suggesting things like that. Sometimes not even our own family members/adults in our lives are aware of what is and isn’t sexual harassment/assault. We can’t rely on children being taught these things at home. Not being aware of it even being harassment or assault can cause people to take even longer to report. The fight against sexual assault and harassment starts with educating young people and children.” 18-year-old female

“Make a meeting that each high school grade level has to attend to learn about the ways to prevent sexual harassment on and off school campuses. The meeting should include who [victims] can talk to.” 16-year-old female

“Train staff to recognize sexual harassment and how to deal with it in a school setting. Better educate students on what sexual harassment is and the severity of it/consequences.” 17-year-old gender non-conforming

“This is a very important issue. It is too late for people to learn about [sexual harassment] in college or the workforce. Teach people in middle and high school.” 21-year-old female

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Visit our website: www.shemattersky.org

Working together to educate and empower

(S)HE Matters

Need Help?

Call 1-800-656-4673 to talk to someone now if you've experienced sexual assault.

Live in Kentucky?

Go to www.kasap.org to find a resource in your county.

Want more Information on Sexual Harassment and Assault?

Go to our website (www.shemattersky.org) and look under resources!

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or DM us on twitter/instagram