



CROSSING  
THE

LINE

Sexual  
Harassment  
at School

AAUW

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A student is groped on the way to class.

Kids call a student “gay” and “faggot” and just won’t quit.

A demeaning sexual rumor about a student goes viral in cyberspace.

Sexual harassment has long been an unfortunate part of the climate in middle and high schools in the United States. Often considered a kind of bullying, sexual harassment by definition involves sex and gender and therefore warrants separate attention. The legal definition of sexual harassment also differentiates it from bullying.

Based on a nationally representative survey of 1,965 students in grades 7–12 conducted in May and June 2011, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School* provides fresh evidence about students’ experiences with sexual harassment, including being harassed, harassing someone else, or witnessing harassment. The survey asked students to share their reactions to their experience with sexual harassment and its impact on them. It also asked them about their ideas for how schools can respond to and prevent sexual harassment.

### JUST PART OF THE SCHOOL DAY

Sexual harassment is part of everyday life in middle and high schools. Nearly half (48 percent) of the students surveyed experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010–11 school year, and the majority of those students (87 percent) said it had a negative effect on them.<sup>1</sup> Verbal harassment (unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures) made up the bulk of the incidents, but physical harassment was far too common. Sexual harassment by text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means affected nearly one-third (30 percent) of students. Interestingly, many of the students who were sexually harassed through cyberspace were also sexually harassed in person.

Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed, by a significant margin (56 percent versus 40 percent). Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed both in person (52 percent versus 35 percent) and via text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means (36 percent versus 24 percent). This finding confirms previous research showing that girls are sexually harassed more frequently than boys (Sagrestano, 2009; Ormerod et al., 2008; AAUW, 2001) and that girls’ experiences tend to be more physical and intrusive than boys’ experiences (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). Being called gay or lesbian in a negative way is sexual harassment that girls and boys reported in equal numbers (18 percent of students).

Witnessing sexual harassment at school was also common. One-third of girls (33 percent) and about one-quarter (24 percent) of boys said that they observed sexual harassment at their school in the 2010–11 school year. More than one-half (56 percent) of these students witnessed sexual harassment more than once during the school year. While seeing sexual harassment is unlikely to be as devastating as being the target of sexual harassment, it can have negative effects, such as reducing students’ sense of safety. Witnessing sexual harassment at school may also “normalize” the behavior for bystanders.

The prevalence of sexual harassment in grades 7–12 comes as a surprise to many, in part because it is rarely reported. Among students who were sexually harassed, about 9 percent reported the incident to a teacher, guidance counselor, or other adult at school (12 percent of girls and

<sup>1</sup>Of students who said that they were sexually harassed, 13 percent chose “none” when asked which experience of sexual harassment had the most negative effect on them.

5 percent of boys). Just one-quarter (27 percent) of students said they talked about it with parents or family members (including siblings), and only about one-quarter (23 percent) spoke with friends.<sup>2</sup> Girls were more likely than boys to talk with parents and other family members (32 percent versus 20 percent) and more likely than boys to talk with friends (29 percent versus 15 percent).<sup>3</sup> Still, one-half of students who were sexually harassed in the 2010–11 school year said they did nothing afterward in response to sexual harassment.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT NEGATIVELY AFFECTS GIRLS

Girls were more likely than boys to say that they had been negatively affected by sexual harassment—a finding that confirms previous research by AAUW (2001) and others. Not only were girls more likely than boys to say sexual harassment caused them to have trouble sleeping (22 percent of girls versus 14 percent of boys), not want to go to school (37 percent of girls versus 25 percent of boys), or change the way they went to or home from school (10 percent of girls versus 6 percent of boys), girls were more likely in every case to say they felt that way for “quite a while” compared with boys. Too often, these negative emotional effects take a toll on students’ and especially girls’ education, resulting in decreased productivity and increased absenteeism from school (Chesire, 2004). Thus, although both girls and boys can encounter sexual harassment at school, it is still a highly “gendered phenomenon that is directly and negatively associated with outcomes for girls” (Ormerod et al., 2008).

### “THAT’S SO GAY”

Gender harassment is a significant part of the sexual-harassment problem in schools. In this type of harassment, students are targeted for failing to follow norms

that are typical for their gender. For example, a boy who wears colorful clothing might be called gay, and a girl who plays sports might be called a lesbian. In this type of harassment, students police other students’ behavior and enforce gender stereotypes.

Boys were most likely to identify being called gay as the type of sexual harassment most troubling to them. Reactions varied, however, with some boys saying that they laughed it off, while others expressed embarrassment, sadness, or fear as a result of the experience. For girls, being called a lesbian was also a common occurrence, particularly for female athletes. Reactions to this form of sexual harassment varied as well, with some students undisturbed but others upset by the experience.

### A VICIOUS CYCLE

Harassers come in all shapes and sizes, but the AAUW survey revealed overarching patterns. Nearly all the behavior documented in the survey was peer-to-peer sexual harassment. Boys were more likely than girls to say they sexually harassed other students (18 percent versus 14 percent). Most students who admitted to sexually harassing another student were also the target of sexual harassment themselves (92 percent of girls and 80 percent of boys). Almost one-third (29 percent) of students who experienced sexual harassment of any type also identified themselves as harassers. Only 5 percent of students who had never experienced sexual harassment identified themselves as harassers.

### “NO BIG DEAL”

Many of the students who admitted to sexually harassing others didn’t think of it as a big deal (44 percent), and many were trying to be funny (39 percent). Only a handful of students who harassed others did so because they

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<sup>2</sup>These estimates of the number of students who talked with their parents about a sexual-harassment incident may be higher than other estimates because the referenced event was the experience that had the most negative effect on the student. In other surveys, students were asked to recall the most recent experience.

<sup>3</sup>Respondents could select more than one category. For example, a student could say that she or he spoke with a parent and talked with a friend.

wanted a date with the person (3 percent) or thought the person liked it (6 percent). Thus, sexual harassment does not usually appear to be a misunderstanding. Few harassers see themselves as “rejected suitors,” and many appear to be misguided comedians or simply students who are unaware, or unwilling to recognize, that their actions may bother others. These findings suggest that prevention efforts need to address when humor crosses the line and becomes sexual harassment. Moreover, for some students, understanding that sexual harassment can indeed be a big deal for other students is a necessary first step.

### STUDENTS SPEAK OUT

Students offered ideas for reducing sexual harassment in their school, including designating a person they can talk

to (39 percent), providing online resources (22 percent), and holding in-class discussions (31 percent). Allowing students to anonymously report problems was a top recommendation (57 percent), as was enforcing sexual-harassment policies and punishing harassers (51 percent). These suggestions should spur strategies and approaches for responding to and preventing sexual harassment in schools.

This report concludes with a discussion of promising practices that are making a difference in schools, along with recommendations for how administrators, educators, parents and other concerned adults, students, and community groups can contribute to efforts to make middle and high schools free from sexual harassment.