



Research briefing: It happens all the time

Girls' and young women's experiences of sexual harassment

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Introduction

For over a decade, Girlguiding's research has captured girls' and young women's experiences, highlighting their views and the challenges they face.

When it comes to feeling and being safe in the world around them, we know girls and young women face harassment and abuse. This limits their freedom, opportunities and forces them to change their own behaviour.

This is a long-standing issue. In 2015, our Advocate panel - a group of our members aged 14 to 25 - launched our campaign to tackle sexual harassment in schools. This showed the extent of the issue and successfully called for new guidance for schools and compulsory relationships and sex education.

In March 2021, the tragic murder of Sarah Everard generated public conversation around girls and women not feeling safe in our society.

Following this, in May 2021, Girlguiding surveyed over 400 girls and young women aged 13 to 18 across the UK to understand their experiences of sexual harassment, how it negatively affects their lives, and what urgently needs to be done to make sure all girls and women can live their lives freely and safely.

Executive summary

Our research reveals the huge scale of harassment girls and young women face. From unwanted attention and comments, to physical harassment and abuse, it shows how widespread harassment is in all parts of the country, in all areas of girls' lives, from a young age.

Fear of harassment negatively affects girls' and young women's freedom - from where they go to the activities they take part in. It has a detrimental effect on their mental health too. Our research also reveals that girls of colour and who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Questioning (LGBQ) can face greater threats to their safety.¹

Our survey also shows that girls face barriers to reporting sexual harassment - both at school and to the police. Girls and young women told us they want more, urgent action from schools, the media and the government.

Sexual harassment at school

Two thirds (67%) of girls and young women have experienced sexual harassment from other students at school.

The chance of girls experiencing harassment significantly increases as they progress through secondary school. 83% of 17- and 18-year-olds have suffered some form of harassment. However, 59% of girls aged 13 to 16 have experienced harassment too.

'It happens all the time.' Girl, aged 15-16

¹ Please note that the sub-samples for girls of colour and those identifying as LGBQ include proportionally more older girls than younger girls, which will naturally boost incidence levels for some questions.

Taunts and sexist comments

Two in five (41%) girls aged 13 to 16 said they had experienced taunts or ‘jokes’ of a sexual nature. This increased to 63% for those aged 17 to 18. Girls that identify as LGBTQ were more likely to have experienced this type of harassment. 62% said they had, compared to 45% of girls that identify as heterosexual.

‘Boys think it’s funny to comment on the size of our breasts.’ Girl, aged 13-14

Two in five (41%) girls across all age groups have experienced sexist or derogatory comments on social media from someone at school or college. This increased for LGBTQ girls - 62% had suffered this, compared to 37% of straight girls.

‘There are no consequences for their actions.’ Girl, aged 13-14

Unwanted attention and touching

Just over a quarter (27%) of all girls and young women have experienced unwanted attention or stalking. This goes up from 16% for girls aged 13 to 16, to almost half of those aged 17 to 18 (47%). Girls of colour were more likely to say they’d experienced unwanted attention or stalking (39% compared to 24% of their white peers). LGBTQ girls were also more likely to have experienced this (36% compared to 24% of straight girls).

Just under a fifth of girls aged 13 to 18 (18%) have experienced unwanted touching such as being pinned down or having their bra strap or skirt pulled. Again, this increases for girls as they get older, from 9% aged 13 to 16, to 36% aged 17 and 18. This was also slightly higher for girls of colour compared to white girls (22% compared to 17%) and for LGBTQ girls compared to heterosexual girls (32% compared to 15%).

‘In the uniform dress codes girls are told to cover up for boys.’ Young woman, aged 17-18

Pictures and pornography

A third of girls aged 13 to 18 (33%) have seen rude graffiti about girls or women at school. A quarter (26%) have been exposed to pictures or videos of girls or women that made them feel uncomfortable at school. This increases from a fifth (19%) of girls aged 13 to 16 to 39% aged 17 and 18.

A similar number (24%) have seen sexually explicit pictures or videos, increasing from 12% aged 13 to 16, to almost half (48%) aged 17 and 18. Just under a quarter (23%) have been asked to share an intimate picture of themselves (14% aged 13 to 16; 42% aged 17 and 18).

42% of LGBTQ girls had been asked to share an intimate picture, compared to 20% of heterosexual girls and young women.

‘They overlook it because they say “boys will be boys”.’ Young woman, aged 17-18

Table 1: Girls that have ever experienced these forms of sexual harassment in school or college from another student

%	All ages	13-14	15-16	17-18
‘Jokes’ or taunts of a sexual nature	48	41	40	63
Sexist or derogatory comments on social media	41	34	30	58
Seeing rude or obscene graffiti about girls or women	33	25	27	48

Unwanted attention or stalking	27	17	15	47
Seeing pictures or videos of girls or women that made you uncomfortable	26	19	18	39
Seeing sexually explicit pictures or videos e.g. been shown pornography	24	11	13	48
Been asked to share an intimate photo	23	13	14	42
Unwanted touching e.g. being pinned down, skirt or bra strap pulled	18	8	10	36
Any of these	67	58	61	83

Just over half (53%) of all girls and young women don't feel boys their age understand what behaviour is appropriate towards girls and what isn't. This rises to 63% for those aged 17 to 18.

'Boys don't understand how it can make us feel.' Girl, aged 13-14

Sexual harassment in public

The vast majority of girls don't feel safe when they go outside on their own - and many are confronted with unwanted attention when they do.

Feeling safe in public

Eight in ten (80%) of all girls and young women feel unsafe when they're out on their own, increasing to nearly all young women aged 17 and 18 (96%). A third (32%) of all girls and young women feel this way often or most of the time. Girls of colour were more likely to experience this most of the time (24% compared to 13% of white girls), as are LGBTQ girls - 92% compared to 76% of straight girls.

Street harassment

Three in five girls (60%) across all age groups have experienced unwanted attention, such as being whistled at in the street. This increases from 37% aged 13 and 14 to 57% aged 15 and 16, and 83% aged 17 and 18. A fifth (19%) of all girls who have experienced this say it happens often or most of the time, increasing to 39% for the older age group. Girls of colour were more likely to experience street harassment (67% compared to 57% of white girls) and to suffer it more often. LGBTQ girls were also more likely to have experienced street harassment and more often (72% compared to 57% of straight girls).

Half (51%) of all girls and young women have experienced unwanted sexual comments directed at them. This increases from 33% aged 13 and 14 to 50% aged 15 and 16, and 69% aged 17 and 18. A quarter (27%) in this older age group say it happens often or most of the time.

Intimidation

Six in ten (60%) of all girls and young women have been intimidated by a group of boys. This rises from 46% aged 13 and 14 to 55% aged 15 and 16, and 78% aged 17 and 18 (50% of whom say this happens often or most of the time). Girls of colour were more likely to experience this most of the time (18% compared to 8% of white girls) and LGBTQ girls were more likely to have experienced this at all (78% compared to 57% of straight girls).

Just over half (54%) of girls and young women say they've felt uncomfortable or intimidated when they're out, for example at the gym. This increases from 33% aged 13

and 14 to 49% aged 15 and 16, and 82% for 17- and 18-year-olds. LGBQ girls were more likely to feel this way (77% compared to 51% of straight girls).

Public transport

16% of girls aged 13 to 16 have experienced unwanted touching on public transport, rising to 30% of those aged 17 and 18.

The impact of sexual harassment

Fear of sexual harassment significantly impacts girls' and young women's lives. It limits their freedom, opportunities and negatively affects their wellbeing. For many, this starts at a young age. Three in ten (29%) girls and young women first experienced sexual harassment when they were 11 to 13 years old. Just over a fifth (22%) said it first happened when they were 14 to 16 years old. 5% said they were younger than ten.

[‘It affects girls’ education and confidence.’](#) Girl aged 15-16

Their freedom

Fear of sexual harassment limits girls' freedom. Half (50%) of girls and young women say it means they avoid going out after dark. This increases from 33% aged 13 and 14 to 48% aged 15 and 16, and 69% aged 17 and 18. Girls of colour are more likely to avoid going out after dark (68% compared to 46% of white girls), as are LGBQ girls (63% compared to 47% of straight girls).

Two in five (40%) of all girls and young women avoid going out on their own entirely. Again, this was higher for older girls (55% aged 17 and 18 compared to 32% aged 13 to 16), for girls of colour (54% compared to 36% of white girls), and for LGBQ girls (52% compared to 37% of heterosexual girls).

A quarter (24%) of girls aged 13 to 16 and 53% aged 17 and 18 say harassment stops them from feeling free to go where they want, or they take less convenient routes to feel safer. This was significantly higher for girls of colour - 50% compared to 30% of white girls.

Fear stops 25% of girls from wearing what they want or means they change their outfits to try to avoid harassment. This increases to almost half (47%) of those aged 17 and 18 compared to 13% of girls aged 13 to 16. More LGBQ girls do this too (42% compared to 21% of white girls).

For 17% of girls and young women aged 15 to 18, fear of sexual harassment limits or stops them from using social media or going online.

Some girls and young women take steps to try to feel safer. For example, half (49%) across all ages let friends or family know where they are or where they're going. 44% aged 17 and 18 keep their keys in their hand or an emergency number on speed dial.

Their opportunities

Just under a quarter of girls (23%) say fear of sexual harassment limits how much fun they have. Whether they're out on their own or with friends, it's hard to relax and enjoy themselves. This was higher for older girls (39% aged 17 and 18 compared to 16% aged 13 to 16), for girls of colour and for girls who identify as LGBQ.

Just over a fifth (22%) of all girls and young women say fear of harassment stops them taking part in activities they enjoy, like running or walking outside. This is particularly true for those aged 17 to 18 (38%) compared to girls aged 13 to 16 (13%), and for girls of colour (32% compared to 19% of white girls).

One in ten (11%) across all age groups say harassment negatively affects their education, stopping them concentrating or participating properly in class for example. This rises to a fifth (21%) of girls aged 17 and 18.

Their mental health

Fear of sexual harassment takes its toll on girls' and young women's mental health. Just over a fifth (22%) aged 13 and 14, 28% aged 15 and 16, and 65% aged 17 and 18 say it makes them feel anxious, worried and scared.

Media attention on girls' safety

The majority of girls (83%) are aware of the recent media attention around girls' and women's safety. A third (34%) say the media's focus has made them feel more aware of how this issue impacts their own lives.

However, for a quarter (24%) aged 13 to 16 and 40% aged 17 and 18, it has made them feel more worried about going out. Some say it's helped them to feel more understood and supported - 20% aged 13 to 16 and 44% aged 17 and 18. Yet only a quarter (26%) of all girls and young women believe it will mean safety is taken more seriously and lead to action to address the issue.

Action to tackle sexual harassment

Girls and young women have a number of ideas they want to see put into practice to tackle sexual harassment and abuse at school and in public.

At school

Girls and young women want schools to take more decisive action to make sure they're safe spaces for them. 52% aged 13 and 14 and 72% aged 15 to 18 want schools to take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment. Just over three in five (63%) girls across all age groups want better education for everyone about what behaviours are acceptable and around consent. And just over a quarter (28%) would like more opportunities to talk to boys about their experiences.

'Schools have an obligation to teach and inform students a lot more about it and to do that a lot earlier.' Girl, aged 13-14

'Teachers try to control it, but they struggle.' Girl, aged 13-14

In public

Almost half (45%) of girls aged 13 to 16 and three quarters (74%) aged 17 and 18 said they want public sexual harassment to be made a crime. A third (33%) aged 13 and 14, and 54% aged 15 to 18 would like more street lighting. 42% across all age groups want more visible police officers in public.

In the media

Two in five (41%) girls aged 13 to 16 and 66% aged 17 and 18 want to see an improvement in how women are portrayed in the media, such as not being so sexualised or objectified.

Reporting sexual harassment

Girls and young women believe reporting sexual harassment should be made easier. 36% aged 13 and 14, 60% aged 15 and 16 and 75% aged 17 and 18 feel this way. Only 35% of all girls and young women said they'd know who to talk to if they experienced sexual harassment, and just 27% said they'd feel confident to report it.

Despite the scale of sexual harassment girls experience, only 7% aged 13 and 14, 11% aged 15 and 16, and 22% aged 17 and 18 had ever reported it to their school or the police. Of those who had reported, 37% felt happy about the action that was taken, while 56% felt unhappy.

[‘Make it easier to report and more awareness on how to report.’](#) Young woman, aged 17-18

Methodology

A total of 423 girls and young women from across the UK took part in the survey in May 2021 via CHILDWISE, who used an online panel to get in touch with girls 13-18. Those aged 16 and under were approached via their parents, and those aged 17 to 18 were approached directly. There were 90 girls of colour in the sample, and 73 who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning (LGBQ). The panel used is the largest in the UK and strives to be as representative as possible, including recruiting members from the top and bottom socio-economic groups, and from a mixture of sources (invitation only, online partnerships and online sites).

About Girlguiding

Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with nearly a third of a million members. We're active in every part of the UK with more than 25,000 groups meeting weekly, powered by over 80,000 volunteers. We offer girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference in their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We run Rainbows (5-7 years (4-7 in Ulster)), Brownies (7-10 years), Guides (10-14 years) and Rangers (14-18 years) with a youth membership of 240,000. Registered Charity No 306016. www.girlguiding.org.uk

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