

# Sexual harassment at school -- more harmful than bullying

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Schools' current focus on bullying prevention may be masking the serious and underestimated health consequences of sexual harassment, according to James Gruber from the University of Michigan-Dearborn and Susan Fineran from the University of Southern Maine in the US. Their research, just published online in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*, shows that although less frequent, sexual harassment has a greater negative impact on teenagers' health than the more common form of victimization, bullying.

Gruber and Fineran's study, the first of its kind to compare bullying and sexual harassment victimization using equivalent measurements and time frames, looked at the frequency and health implications of both bullying and sexual harassment among 522 middle and high school students. The teenagers completed a questionnaire which asked how often they had experienced each behavior during the school year, who the perpetrators were, and their reaction.

Bullying was more frequent than sexual harassment for both boys and girls - just over half the students (52%) had been bullied and just over a third (35%) were sexually harassed. Almost a third (32%) had been subject to both behaviors. Girls were bullied or harassed as frequently as boys, but gays, lesbians and bisexuals – sexual minorities – were submitted to greater levels of both.

Both behaviors have a negative effect on victims' health. After taking into account the effects of other stressful life events, ranging from

parents' divorce, moving house, falling in love and getting into trouble with the law, Gruber and Fineran found that sexual harassment causes more harm than bullying in both boys and girls. Girls and sexual minorities, however, appeared to be the most affected by sexual harassment, suffering from lower self-esteem, poorer mental and physical health, and more trauma symptoms (thoughts and feelings arising from stressful experiences) than boys.

In the authors' view, schools' current focus on preventing bullying, as well as the tendency to regard sexual harassment as a form of bullying rather than an issue in its own right, draws attention away from a serious health issue. They argue that sexual harassment prevention should receive equal attention as a distinct focus, so that schools can continue to provide a healthy environment for children.

Source: Springer

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