

BULLYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Girls Inc. is committed to advancing the rights and opportunities of girls and young women, with a particular focus on the needs of girls from low-income communities and girls who face multiple, intersectional challenges. Informed by the voices of girls themselves, we advocate to break through the barriers girls face and to reform systems that impede their success.

GLOSSARY

The following glossary is provided to ensure that readers understand what is meant by the issue-specific terminology and phrases used throughout this fact sheet.

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.¹

Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets.²

Discriminatory harassment is unwelcome conduct, including bullying, that is severe or pervasive and that is based on sex, gender identity, race, disability, or other protected categories.³

Gender-based harassment is unwelcome conduct based on an individual's actual or perceived sex. It includes slurs, taunts, stereotypes, or name-calling as well as gender-motivated physical threats, attacks, or other hateful conduct.⁴

Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature.⁵ Sexual harassment can consist of repeated or singular acts that cause the victim(s) to feel uncomfortable and unsafe. It can be verbal, visual, and/or physical.⁶

Sexual violence is an all-encompassing term that refers to sexual acts perpetuated against a person's will or where a person is incapable of giving consent. This term encompasses sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual abuse. Learn more [here](#).

Bullying is not a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up; it is a public health problem faced by one-third of all kids.⁷ Bullying and harassment - either in person or electronically - negatively impacts girls' physical health, mental wellbeing, and academic achievement in specific ways. Schools that fail to properly address cases of severe or pervasive harassment may be in violation of federal civil rights laws – such as [Title IX](#).

What's at Stake

Bullying and harassment have detrimental effects when not addressed. Any involvement in bullying, whether as a bully, victim, or witness, is associated with negative outcomes. In some cases, kids may either drop out of school or lose interest in continuing their education after high school as a result of being bullied.⁸ Even the fear of being bullied or harassed may disrupt a student's ability to excel in and out of school. Such findings apply particularly to girls. According to a 2017 survey conducted by the National Women's Law Center, 14% of girls ages 14-18 reported missing school because they felt unsafe, either at school or on their way to school.⁹ Students who are bullied are also likely to have lower GPAs and standardized test scores than those who are not bullied and they are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.¹⁰ In addition to the risk of physical injury, victims of bullying are at risk for [depression, anxiety, suicidal behavior](#), physical health problems, substance abuse into adulthood, low academic achievement, and poor social and school adjustment.¹¹

Research shows that the effects of bullying last well into adulthood.¹² One study found that 42% of women with depression attribute their mental health condition to being harassed as children. Similar rates are reported for women with anxiety and panic disorders.¹³

Discriminatory Harassment and Bullying

The U.S. Department of Education's 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection found that 23% of allegations of bullying involved harassment or bullying on the basis of race, 16% involved allegations on the basis of sexual orientation, 11% involved allegations on the basis of disability, and 8% involved allegations on the basis of religion.¹⁴ Intolerance of socioeconomic and immigrant status can also be a cause for bullying, according to the World Health Organization's Health Behavior in School-Aged Children – data on children from Europe and North America. In these regions, students' socioeconomic status – parents' wealth, occupation and education level – is the most likely predictor of being bullied in school. Twenty percent of youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds experience bullying, as compared to one-quarter of teens from wealthier families.¹⁵ A recent analysis revealed that income inequality was associated with increased odds of both bullying victimization (i.e., being bullied) and perpetration (i.e., bullying others) in Canada;¹⁶ a greater association between high income disparity within a school and bullying perpetration was found among girls.¹⁷

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2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. What is cyberbullying. StopBullying.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/what-is-cyberbullying>.

3. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (n.d.). Harassment. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Retrieved from <https://www.eeoc.gov/harassment>

4. Office for Civil Rights (OCR). (2021, October 27). Sex-Based Harassment. HHS.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/harassment/index.html#:~:text=Gender%2Dbased%20harassment%20is%20unwelcome,attacks%2C%20or%20other%20hateful%20conduct>.

5. See footnote 4.

6. Association of Women for Action and Research. (2022). Characteristics & Definitions of Sexual Harassment. AWARE. Retrieved from <https://www.aware.org.sg/training/vsh-site/3-characteristics/>

7. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2021, September 9). Facts About Bullying. StopBullying.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/facts#listing>

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15. Montoya, S. (2018, October 1). New Data reveal that poor youth are among the most vulnerable to bullying. Global Partnership for Education. Retrieved from <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/new-data-reveal-poor-youth-are-among-most-vulnerable-to-bullying>

16. Pabayo, R., Benny, C., Veugelers, P. J., Senthilselvan, P. H., & Leatherdale, S. T. (2022). Income Inequality and Bullying Victimization and Perpetration: Evidence From Adolescents in the COMPASS Study. Health Education & Behavior, 49(2), 313–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10901981211071031>.

17. See footnote 40.

BULLYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Youth from traditionally marginalized backgrounds are more likely to experience bullying related to their disability, race, ethnicity, and/or gender.¹⁸ Though students of color are more likely to be bullied, they are less likely to report this bullying. This may be because students of multiple intersectional identities, especially male students, may perceive reporting bullying as an indicator of “weakness.”¹⁹ Youth from multicultural backgrounds also face disproportionate challenges with bullying. Black, Asian, and Latino women overall are targeted by cyber aggression at the highest rates, with Black American girls receiving the most online harassment.²⁰ According to the National Women’s Law Center’s 2017 *Let Her Learn* Survey, over 20% of the girls surveyed said they had been harassed because of their name or family’s country of origin.²¹ These incidents of both cyberbullying and bullying are also common among gender-expansive, immigrant, or second-generation Black and Hispanic youth.²²

Discriminatory harassment and bullying can have grave consequences. Youth who experienced bullying based on multiple stigmatized identities were 1.6 times more likely to forego medical care, 2.5 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts, and nearly 3 times more likely to become victims of violence.²³ Under Title IX, if the harassment is severe, persistent, or pervasive, schools have an obligation to act so that the victim does not have to endure a “hostile learning environment.” Learn more about Title IX [here](#), and look up your local school’s [Title IX Coordinator](#) to educate students and families about their Title IX rights.

Impact on LGBTQ+ Youth

The rate of cyberbullying victimization among LGBTQ youth is 50% higher than that of non-LGBTQ youth.²⁴ In 2021, 52% of LGBTQ middle and high school students reported being bullied in-person or online, with 42% reporting online abuse and 33% reporting in-person incidents.²⁵ Even higher rates of bullying victimization were reported specifically by transgender and nonbinary youth (61%).²⁶ The mental health effects of these experiences are severe, with 29% of middle school and 25% of high school LGBTQ students who experienced bullying reporting suicide attempts in 2021.²⁷ These rates dramatically decrease for LGBTQ youth who do not experience bullying (12% for middle school and 10% for high school students).²⁸ Furthermore, students in LGBTQ affirming schools reported drastically lower rates of bullying than those in non-LGBTQ affirming schools (46% versus 57%).²⁹ Learn more about Title IX protections from bullying and harassment in schools for LGBTQ+ or gender expansive students and their families [here](#).

Cyberbullying During COVID-19

While accounts of in-person bullying declined during the pandemic, school shutdowns were accompanied by dramatic increases in cyberbullying as youth spent more time online. Data collected in 2021 shows that 23% of 13-17 year-old students reported experiencing bullying and 7% reported bullying others. These rates represent a significant decrease from 2019 when 51% reported experiencing bullying and 12% reported bullying others.³⁰ However, an analysis of popular online social platforms revealed a 70% increase in hateful comments amongst children since December 2019. The study specifically identified significant increases in racialized cyber harassment, noting a 900% increase in hate speech directed towards China or Chinese communities on Twitter and a 200% increase in traffic to sites and posts directed against Asian communities.³¹ While COVID-19 may have shifted the mode of bullying, it also changed the reasons youth were bullied or shamed, to include wearing a mask, getting or not getting the vaccine, or getting sick with COVID.³²



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21. See footnote 9.

22. Cacciatore, G. (2021, August 30). Bullying, interrupted. *Harvard Graduate School of Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/21/08/bullying-interrupted>.

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27. See footnote 23.

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29. See footnote 23.

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In Canada

In Canada, the prevalence of bullying has remained relatively consistent over the past 12 years.³³ In a [comprehensive report](#) conducted by Raising Canada, bullying ranked number 8 out of the top 10 threats to childhood identified in Canada in 2022. Among Canadian youth in grades six through ten, being bullied is more common among girls than boys – approximately 1 in 3 Canadian girls are bullied.³⁴ Boys are more likely to bully others than girls.³⁵ Teasing or name calling is the most common form of bullying for both boys and girls.³⁶ Even though bullying can affect all children, evidence shows that rates of bullying are higher among children from minority groups (2SLGBTQIA+, immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous youth).^{37 38}

Cyberbullying During COVID-19

The UNICEF Canadian Companion found a reduction of 17% in cyberbullying for youth and young adults during the pandemic.³⁹ Researchers also found that the rates of bullying were lower during the pandemic (16.9%) than before the pandemic (35.3%).⁴⁰ That may be because children and youth spent less time at school during the pandemic – thus there were reduced opportunities for bullying. Even though overall rates of in-person bullying might have decreased, there is evidence that suggests that during the pandemic, rates of race-based bullying did increase. According to the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter & Project 1907, incidents of anti-Asian racism among children 18 years or younger increased by 286% for Asian Canadian youth during the pandemic.⁴¹ These incidents included Asian youth being coughed at, verbally harassed, and targeted in online hate.

Canadian Resources

It's important to note that some bullying and cyberbullying acts are illegal and can have serious legal consequences under Canada's Criminal Code. You can find out more about what this includes [here](#) as well as additional resources below:

- Royal Canadian Mounted Police's [Learning Resources](#)
- [PREVNet](#) (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network) is Canada's authority on research and resources for bullying prevention.
- Students are encouraged to report:
 - Criminal offenses to your local police detachment;
 - Cyberbullying to social media sites or apps and other online offenses to [Cybertip.ca](#);
 - School bullying to school administrators.



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35. See footnote 32.

36. See footnote 32.

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41. See footnote 37.

Sexual and Gender-Based Harrassment

The prevalence of sexual harassment in grades K–12 comes as a surprise to many, in part because it is rarely reported by students and schools. One out of every five (20.2%) students report being bullied.⁴² A 2017 analysis of data from the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) [found](#) that, for grades seven through twelve, 79% of the public schools surveyed disclosed *zero* reported allegations of harassment or bullying on the basis of sex. Such underreporting may be due to individual student fears of reporting to school authorities or law enforcement; procedural gaps in how institutions record or respond to incidents; a reluctance on the part of institutions to be associated with sexual harassment; or a combination of these factors.⁴³

[Comprehensive Sexuality Education](#) is a powerful tool to combat [sexual \(and dating\) violence](#), abuse and discrimination, and to promote respect for diversity in gender and sexual orientation. When provided with age-appropriate, culturally informed, and non-judgmental resources and support, youth are empowered to make informed decisions about their own health and relationships. Educators should also advocate for access to trauma-informed and culturally-competent training, which will help to identify and address bullying, and serve as part of a comprehensive school mental health system – creating an environment in which students feel comfortable reporting.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Federal

- Urge the Department of Education to maintain and clarify guidance on schools' legal obligations under Title IX; to continue strong enforcement of the law; and to make public the list of schools under investigation.
- Contact your federal representative and urge them to support comprehensive, inclusive sex education programs.

State and Local

- Reach out to your school district to learn about local policies designed to address bullying and harassment when it occurs.
- Using this [Title IX and Safety Checklist](#), evaluate your school's readiness to prevent and handle discrimination, sexual harassment, and assault.
- Find out what sex education looks like in your school. If programs are inadequate, contact your school district to advocate for comprehensive education programs.
- Use this [map](#) to learn more about the status of sex education in your state. If applicable, contact your state's Department of Education or local representative to advocate for comprehensive sex education in your state.



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