

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Experiences Among Middle School Youth

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### **Introduction**

Sexual violence (including sexual harassment, homophobic name-calling, and unwanted sexual touching) is increasingly being recognized as a public health concern among adolescents (CDC, 2012). Outcomes for those who suffer from sexual violence perpetration can be severe: from lower grades and missing more class to increased rates of risky behavior, depression, anxiety, and suicidality, the negative academic and mental health effects of sexual violence are well documented (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Alleyne-Green, Coleman-Cowger, & Henry, 2012; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Raiford, 2006). Much of the research on sexual violence has focused on prevalence of sexual harassment among adolescents and its overlap with other forms of aggression (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Fineran, McDonald, & Constable, 2009; Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Laporte, Jiang, Pepler, & Chamberland, 2011; Leen et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2011). Within the sexual violence literature, distinctions have been made in the motives underlying aggressive acts and different ways of interpreting them. For example, “homophobic content has been one factor identified as associated with aggression among [middle school] peers” (Poteat & Espelage, 2007). In one study, findings indicated that “homophobic content is highly correlated with both relational and physical forms of aggression and with both relational and physical forms of victimization” (Poteat & Espelage, 2005).

Another especially insidious aspect of sexual violence is the dismissiveness and trivialization of these behaviors by perpetrators, observers, and victims alike. For example, specific to early adolescence, the advent of sexual violence may be clouded by the onset of developmental processes and this linkage could result in the dismissiveness or minimization of its negative outcomes (McMaster et al., 2002). The extent to which sexual harassment and assault is treated as acceptable or inevitable led Nan Stein to remark that, “schools may be training grounds for the insidious cycle of domestic violence” (Stein, 148, 1995). Dismissiveness of sexual violence could also be a result of the lack of sexual harassment programming in schools. Regardless, dismissiveness of serious sexual harassment as trivial is an important aspect of the cyclical and ongoing nature of violence in students’ lives, it is especially vital to study this aspect of sexual violence more fully.

The themes of homophobia and dismissiveness within sexual violence are important to study in order to design better ways of reducing these behaviors. Unfortunately, the research on this topic is limited in scope and few studies focus on experiences of middle school youth; therefore, not enough is known about the specific themes and experiences of current adolescent victims of sexual violence and harassment. Furthermore, very little research exists on the locations within schools where middle school students experience sexual violence. Identifying the locations of where peers have most contact with sexual aggression will perhaps reveal the

social dynamics that relate to a school's geographical framework (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999). Therefore, this study assessed locations of sexual violence victimization as well as types of sexual violence experiences middle school youth are encountering during a time in which there has been a decrease in prevention of sexual violence in schools. Additionally, this research could help schools develop or select targeted interventions for preventing and reacting to these behaviors. Thus, this current investigation focused on the types of sexual harassment and sexual violence that middle school youth experience using a mixed-methods survey approach.

## Method

### Participants

In Spring 2008, students completed a survey designed to collect information about their attitudes and experiences at school as part of a project being funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Participants include 1391 students from four midwestern middle schools (grades 5 – 8). The sample is 49.8% female and students ranged in age from 10- 15 years ( $M = 13.9$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ); 59% ( $n = 820$ ) identified as African-American and 41% identified as Caucasian ( $n = 571$ ). Students were administered self-report surveys during free periods or health/gym classes during a 40-minute session with groups of students ranging in size from 20 to 25 students and students were given a highlighter and pencil.

### Consent/assent procedures

IRB approval to use a waiver of active consent was obtained from the University of Illinois and a certificate of confidentiality was granted by CDC. Parents were asked to sign and return the parent information letter only if they preferred that their child *not* participate in the study. Prior to data collection, investigators attended parent-teacher conference meetings and staff meetings, and the study was announced in school newsletters and emails to parents. Parents were provided with consent forms for their child's participation and assent was obtained from students at each wave of data collection. An informational packet was sent by mail and via email to parents of students in the five middle schools. Multiple safeguards were implemented to prevent students from becoming upset by the content of the surveys.

### Survey Measures

**SV victimization measure.** A modified version of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Sexual Harassment Survey<sup>18</sup> was used to measure the frequency with which students were targets of unwanted SV behaviors within the last year. Response options included *Not sure*, *Never*, *Rarely*, *Sometimes*, and *Often*. The AAUW scale was

subjected to an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring and a two-factor solution was indicated though the scree test, KMO measure of sampling adequacy (.72), and Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $\chi^2 = 2209.40$ ,  $df = 105$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the two-factor rotated solution, factor one (*Sexual Harassment*) contained nine items (e.g., receiving sexual comments, having rumors spread, and having clothing pulled), had internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and accounted for 23.62 percent of the variance in the factor score (factor loadings ranging from .39 through .79). Factor two (*Forced Sexual Contact*) contained three items (i.e., someone forced to kiss you, someone forced to do something sexual besides kissing, and someone forced to touch your private parts), demonstrated internal consistency ( $\alpha = .73$ ), accounted for 6.05 percent of the variance in the factor score (with factor loadings ranging from .66 through .70; Table 1). Three items were deleted that cross-loaded or had loadings lower than .30 on their primary factor loading.

**SV experience open-ended.** Once the student completed this modified AAUW victimization items, they were presented with the following question: Now, we would like you to think about the items above and think about the *most upsetting thing that happened to you*. Can you describe in one or two sentences in the space provided, what was the most upsetting thing that happened to you? They were also asked where they were sexually harassed.

## Data Analysis & Results

Open-ended responses were entered and coded by two independent raters. Raters identified the types of experiences that were described and the locations where the students experienced sexual harassment. Since the survey asked for the “most upsetting” sexually violent act, the raters deemed the first response as the most salient experience. Therefore, only the first response listed was included in this data analysis. Results of this analysis are presented in Figure 1. The most frequent experience was physical sexual violence, where 21.6% of students that experienced sexual harassment indicated being physically touched when they did not want to be. Some responses included “someone slapped my butt”, “someone rubbed against me sexually”, “[someone] forced me to kiss them”, etc. Rumor spreading (18.9%), verbal sexual commentary (18.2%), and homophobic name-calling (17.9%), were the other themes that were the most common. Some responses coded as rumor spreading included “when someone wrote on the bathroom stall [that] I was a skank”, “someone said I ‘did it’ with a guy [when] I didn’t”, or “people would sometimes write inappropriate messages on the chalkboard about me.” Responses identified as verbal sexual commentary included “someone asked me if they could touch my breast” or “someone asked me to bend over to look at my ‘parts’.” Furthermore, responses indicating homophobic name-calling involve phrases like “people say that I am gay because I have lots of friends that are girls”, “people tell me I am gay because my mom is”, “people make fun [and say] that I’m going out with my best friend just because they know I’m bi[sexual]”, “people call me lesbian just because I hang out with all girls.” Responses that were deemed to be

normalizing accounted for 8.6% of responses. These were often student responses suggesting that sexual harassment may have been occurring but the student considered it to be “just joking” or “not that bad or serious”. Further instances included phrases like “you get used to it” or “[these acts] don’t really bother me anymore”.

As the question asked for “the places” where sexual harassment occurred, there were sometimes multiple locations listed from a single participant. In order to capture all of the locations listed, multiple responses for a single participant were coded separately. Thus, results presented here are inter-dependent. Figure 2 shows the results of this analysis. Results showed that sexual harassment was most likely to occur in the hallway in the student’s school, with 22.7% of youth who were sexually harassed experiencing these behaviors in the hallway. Responses coded for this location involved variations of “in the school hallway” or “[in an] empty hallway.” The second most common location reported was in the student’s classroom (21.4%). Responses classified under this code included statements like “sometimes in English class” or “[in] math class, science class, etc.” Another 13.0% of respondents said that the harassment had occurred in the school gym. The other most common location mentioned was by the school lockers (9.7%). Further locations within the school where sexual harassment was reported included around the outside area of the school buildings, the cafeteria, bathrooms, through an electronic device, or during a school activity (like a school dance, etc.). Additionally, 4.5% of responses indicated a dismissiveness of sexual violence. An example of this dismissive response style is “I am not sexually harassed. All sexual harassment is just jokes made by kids wanting attention at this school.”

## Discussion

This study indicated that middle school-aged students are experiencing real acts of sexual violence. These findings are consistent with studies of high school and college-age students that find that sexual harassment is quite prevalent; two national studies found that by the time students are done with school, 81% have experienced some sort of sexual harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2007). Students who reported an upsetting sexual harassment experience often indicated that they were physically touched or forced to be kissed against their will. Sexual harassment experiences that were just verbal in nature (e.g., commentary about one’s body parts) were also common.

An interesting pattern that emerged when students were asked to describe the most upsetting sexual harassment experience was a tendency to describe the event as physical or verbal unwanted behaviors, but then to immediately dismiss the behavior as joking behavior. A sizable percentage of students who asserted that the joking, teasing, pinching, and grabbing “didn’t bother” them and was “just joking” seems indicative of a broader societal force to normalize and legitimize sexually violent acts. It is a cause of concern that these youth are at

such a young age dismissive of behaviors that are clearly distressing. One study found that being dismissive of sexual harassment creates a heightened risk for being a later perpetrator of sexual violence (Espelage & De La Rue, 2013).

Little is known about where sexual harassment occurs in middle school. A study of high schools identified spaces that lacked adult monitoring, like hallways, dining areas, and parking lots, as the most common locations for sexual violence (Astor et al., 1999). In this study, students who reported experiencing sexual harassment indicated that it was most likely to happen in the hallway; this finding is consistent with the previous research. However, the second most common location indicated was the classroom. Presumably, this would be one of the areas of the school that would be the most organized and monitored; the fact that students experienced the most sexual violence here raises some interesting questions. Is this result simply a consequence of the reality that the largest percentage of student time at school is spent in the classroom? In the cases mentioned by these students, was adult supervision absent in the classroom? Or, most worrying, was adult supervision present but in these instances unable to prevent the harassment from occurring?

The present study has some limitations; one is that only 59.7% of the total responded to the question concerning behaviors, while only 44.4% responded to the question regarding location. These response rates could be due to two things. First, the most upsetting sexual harassment experience tends to be physical in nature, but is still reported by a small percentage of middle school youth. Second, if students see these behaviors as almost a normal part of their middle school experience (Charmaraman, Jones, Stein, & Espelage, 2013) and not upsetting, then they might have skipped the open-ended question. Despite this limitation, those students that did respond provided a wealth of information about their own experiences with sexual violence in their schools; their voices and experiences need to be heard and considered as schools work to lessen the incidence of sexual violence in the future.

In summary, this study indicates that middle school youth have experienced a wide range of upsetting sexual violence experiences that seem to be unaddressed by adults in these schools. Prevention efforts to prevent sexual violence and homophobic name-calling must be targeted to young early adolescence before high school. Schools need to recognize that they are legally responsible to talk to youth and adults in schools about the definition of sexual harassment, the reporting of such behaviors, and youth need to understand their rights to attend schools without fear of sexual harassment.



Figure 1

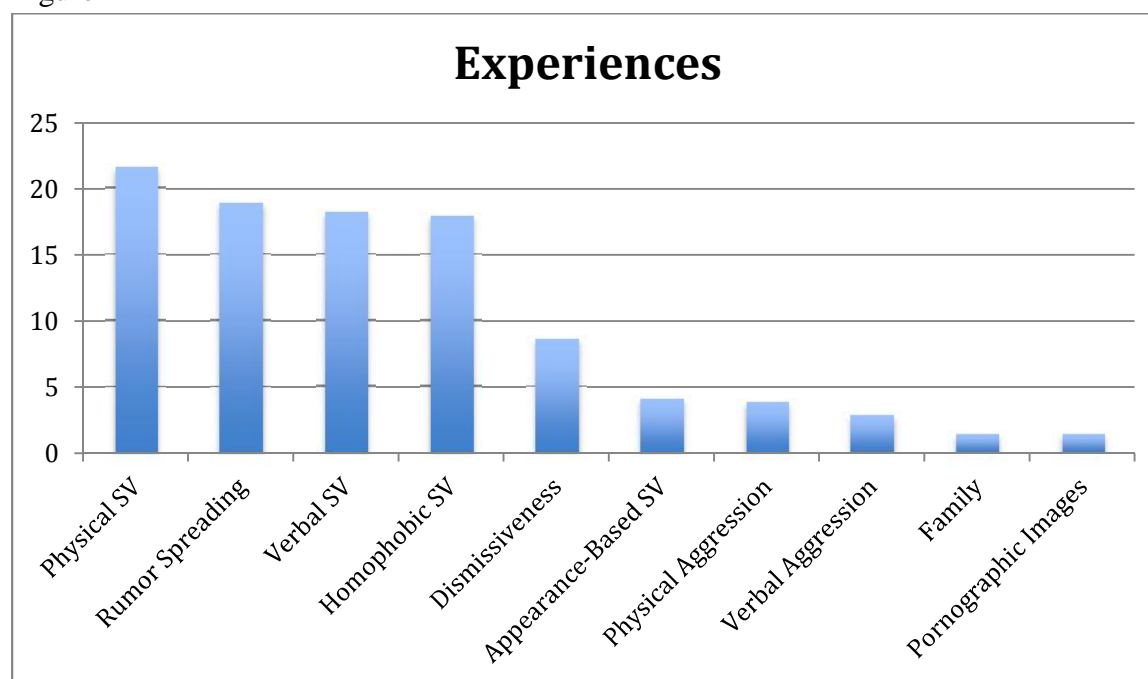
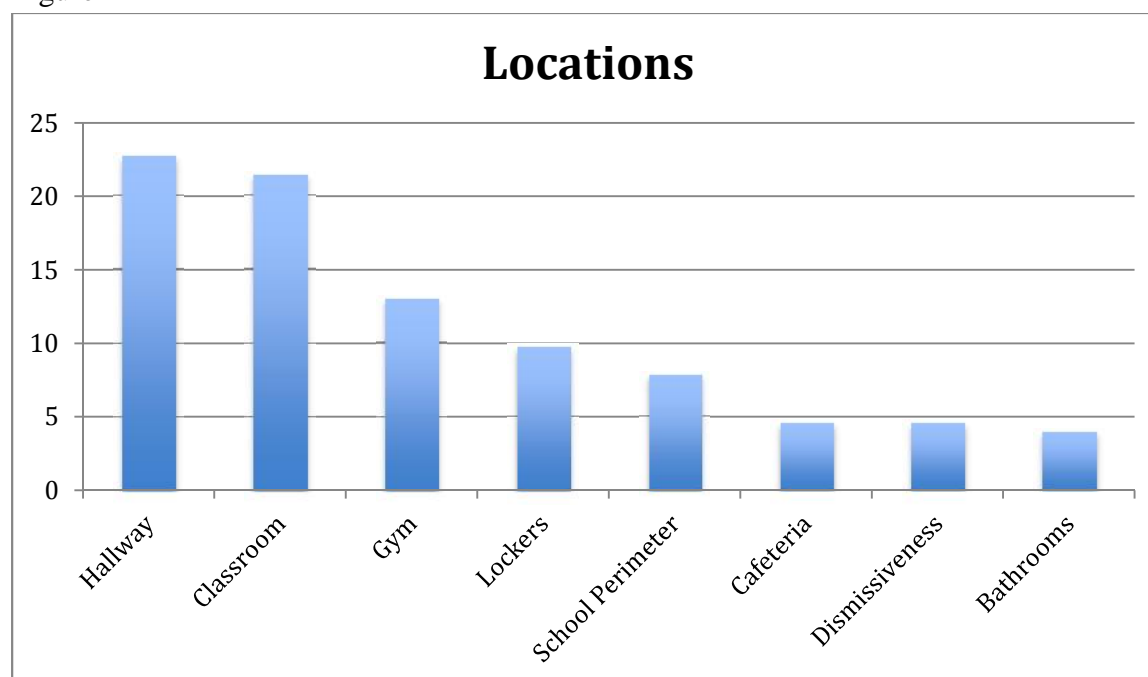


Figure 2





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