



LET HER
LEARN

STOPPING SCHOOL PUSHOUT
for Girls Who Have Suffered Harassment and Sexual Violence

ABOUT THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER

The National Women's Law Center is a non-profit organization that has worked for more than 40 years to expand opportunities for women and their families, with a major emphasis on education and employment opportunities, women's health and reproductive rights, and family economic security.

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GIRLS WHO HAVE SUFFERED HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual assault in colleges has received much-needed attention in recent years, but the sobering reality is that girls suffer harassment and sexual violence beginning at much younger ages. In the National Women's Law Center's 2017 Let Her Learn Survey ("Let Her Learn Survey"),¹ 26 percent of Native American girls² and 27 percent of girls who identify as LGBTQ reported being harassed since the election. With respect to sexual assault, more than 1 in 5 girls (21 percent) ages 14 to 18 reported that they had been kissed or touched without their consent, with LGBTQ girls³ even more likely to report that they had been assaulted in this way. And across the country, girls, and Black girls in particular, are being bought and sold as victims of domestic sex trafficking.⁴

Not surprisingly, girls who suffer these forms of trauma are more likely to have serious behavioral, emotional and health problems.⁵ They also face barriers to succeeding in school. However, little attention has been paid to how such trauma affects their educational experiences and so their educational needs are often left unaddressed. Adding insult to injury, schools around the country are failing girls when it comes to preventing and appropriately responding to sexual violence and harassment, in violation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.

This report delves into the data on girls who are victims of harassment and sexual violence, examines the impact it has on their education, and offers solutions to better serve and support them in schools.

METHODOLOGY for Let Her Learn Survey and Focus Groups:

To better understand what healthy and safe schools look like for all girls, the National Women's Law Center collaborated with Lake Research Partners to conduct a study of girls from January 5-19, 2017. The study included an online survey of 1,003 girls ages 14-18 nationwide. Black, Latina, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and LGBTQ girls were oversampled. The data were weighted by age, race, and census region to reflect the actual proportions of the population. Oversamples were weighted down to reflect their proportions in the population. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%. The margin of error is higher among subgroups. The study also included six focus groups on barriers facing girls who are survivors of sexual assault and girls who are either currently pregnant or those who are parenting children. The focus groups were conducted in Washington, D.C., Chicago, IL, and Atlanta, GA. The focus group guide and nationwide survey were reviewed by Schulman Institutional Review Board to ensure they protected the well-being of all girls involved in the study.

Background on Girls Who Have Suffered Harassment and Sexual Violence

Girls and young women across the country face high rates of harassment, sexual violence and trafficking, and certain girls of color and LGBTQ girls are disproportionately affected. Yet very few girls actually report harassment and violence to an adult, their schools, or the police because they are scared,⁶ feel uncomfortable talking about it, do not want to get the perpetrators in trouble, or feel they should be able to handle it on their own.⁷

Harassment

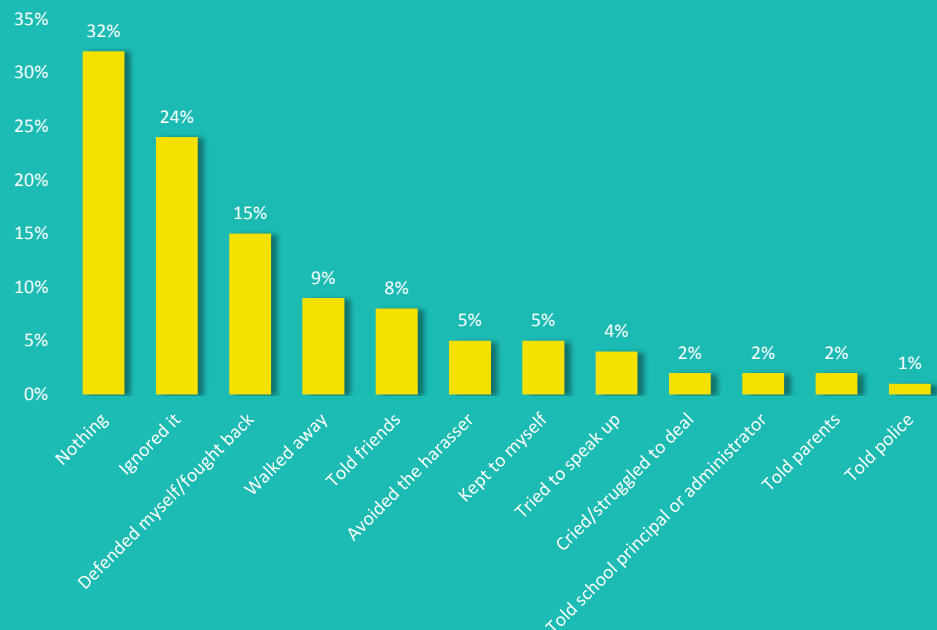
Harassment is prevalent among students in elementary and secondary school. According to the Let Her Learn Survey:

- More than 1 in 6 (or 17 percent) reported being harassed for any reason since the 2016 Presidential Election.
- Nearly 1 in 7 girls (14 percent) reported being harassed because they identify as a girl.
- Nearly 1 in 7 girls (13 percent) reported being harassed because of their name or family's country of origin.

Despite the prevalence of harassment, few girls who have been harassed in school opt to report the incident to school officials, family members, or the police. Instead, girls were more likely to do nothing or ignore the problem (**Figure 1**).⁸

Figure 1. Girls' Responses to being Harassed or Assaulted⁹

WHAT DID YOU DO IN RESPONSE TO BEING HARASSED OR ASSAULTED?



Source: National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey, Conducted by Lake Research Partners (2017).



According to another study, nearly half (48 percent) of students experience sexual harassment at school, either in person or online, and 87 percent of those students said that the harassment had a negative effect on them. Girls (56 percent) were more likely than boys (40 percent) to report that they had experienced harassment and were more likely to report that they had been harassed more than once.¹⁰

Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, schools are required to take steps to prevent sexual harassment and violence and respond to incidents quickly and fairly. Yet many schools around the country are not living up to their obligations.¹¹ Between 2009 and 2016, the number of sexual violence complaints at the elementary and secondary school level filed with the Office for Civil Rights increased over 600%, from 11 to 83.¹²

Sexual Violence

Girls are also subject to sexual violence at young ages. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study¹³ found that one in four girls is sexually abused before her 18th birthday.⁴ And the Centers for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System shows that most girls report first being raped between the ages of 16 and 17 years old (**Figure 2**).¹⁵ However, the actual number of girls and young women who have experienced sexual violence is likely even higher given that sexual abuse of children is grossly underreported: Only an estimated 36 percent of rape victims report to the police.¹⁶

In NWLC's Let Her Learn Survey:

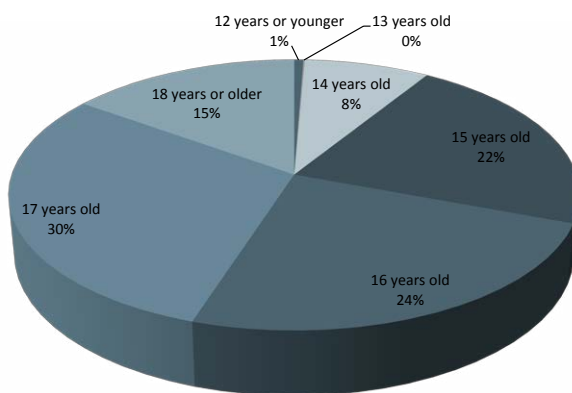
- More than 1 in 5 girls (21 percent) reported that they had been kissed or touched without their consent.¹⁷
 - 38 percent of LGBTQ girls reported being kissed or touched without their consent.
 - 24 percent of Latina Girls, 23 percent of Native American girls, and 22 percent of Black girls reported being kissed or touched without their consent.
 - 6 percent of girls overall reported being forced to have sex when they did not want to, and these rates were higher for LGBTQ girls (15 percent), girls who are 18 years old (13 percent), Native American girls (11 percent), Black girls (9 percent), and Latinas (7 percent).

31% of girls reported being a survivor of sexual assault or other violence.

(National Women's Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey.)

Some Black girls and young women in particular may feel pressure not to report sexual assault to avoid subjecting Black boys and men to the criminal justice system when they are the perpetrators.¹⁸ Coupled with the cultural expectation to be a “strong Black woman,”¹⁹ this means that Black girls may not get the help they need processing trauma from sexual violence. As a result, they can experience toxic stress—the frequent and prolonged activation of the body’s stress system that can cause a child to be in a constant state of emergency²⁰—which impedes learning and triggers behaviors in school that can lead to disciplinary action or even involvement with the juvenile justice system.²¹

Figure 2. Age of Girls at First Rape



Source: NWLC Calculations from 2015 Centers for Disease Control, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System.²²

WHAT GIRLS SAY:

“ I feel they teach girls to cover their selves [sic] but they don’t teach boys to respect women... They don’t teach boys to keep your hands to yourself or to always ask for consent... They teach us how to avoid it and that to me is kind of like they blame us... and I don’t like that at all. - NWLC Focus Group Participant



Teenage girls are especially at risk of suffering sexual and physical violence from a dating partner. NWLC's Let Her Learn Survey shows that about 1 in 11 girls (9 percent) ages 14-18 have been hurt or injured on purpose by someone they were dating, including 13 percent of Native American girls and 16 percent of LGBTQ girls. Similarly, according to the CDC's Youth Risk and Behavior Surveillance System, among high school girls who dated in the last year, 15.6 percent said they had been forced to do sexual things (being kissed, touched, or physically forced to have intercourse) by someone they were dating. The highest rate of sexual dating violence was among multiracial girls (**Figure 3**).²³ And while both boys and girls are victims of dating violence, boys are more likely to force sex or cause injury to their partners as compared to girls.²⁴

Figure 3. Percentage of girls who experienced sexual dating violence by race.



Source: NWLC Calculations from 2015 Centers for Disease Control, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System.²⁵

Sex Trafficking

Girls all over the country are being bought and sold. An estimated 100,000 girls in the U.S. are involved in commercial sex trafficking every year,²⁶ although the actual number of child victims is likely higher because trafficking is a hidden crime. Young girls who run away or are forced out of their homes are at particular risk for becoming victims; additionally, school failure, familial violence, and physical and sexual abuse also make girls vulnerable to sex trafficking.²⁷ Girls who are victims of sexual exploitation are also likely to have been in foster care, to have been involved in the juvenile justice system, and/or to be living in impoverished communities.²⁸

These conditions make young girls more vulnerable to adults who promise them love, food, shelter, and money. Sex traffickers work hard to understand their victims and use this knowledge to manipulate and abuse them, often targeting girls in schools, malls, and online.²⁹ Black girls are disproportionately at risk for domestic sex trafficking: Studies report that Black girls are more likely to be trafficked at younger ages and to not have access to school and community supports. Black girls also make up the majority of prostitution arrests for girls,³⁰ despite the fact that these girls are too young to consent to sexual activity and therefore should be considered victims of crime.³¹

WHAT
GIRLS
SAY:

“ People who go through [violence]... sometimes they are afraid to say it because we often make topics like that kind of taboo.”
– NWLC Focus Group Participant

Barriers to Success in School for Girls Who Have Experienced Harassment and Sexual Violence

Harassment and sexual violence can be incredibly damaging to girls' lives, affecting their mental, emotional and physical well-being as well as their educational outcomes.

Girls who are victims of harassment or sexual violence often suffer from trauma, the long-term effects of which can be significant. High doses of childhood trauma “can dramatically increase people’s risk for 7 out of 10 of the leading causes of death in the U.S.”³² Research has also shown that a traumatic experience can change the functioning of a child’s brain, which has long- and short-term consequences on mental health.³³ In particular, in NWLC’s Let Her Learn Survey, girls who reported that they had been hurt or injured on purpose by a family member were overwhelmingly likely to report symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (92 percent), depression (96 percent), or generalized anxiety disorder (98 percent).³⁴

In addition, girls who are survivors of sexual violence often suffer from a wide range of physical issues that can follow them throughout their lives, including chronic pain, diabetes, and eating disorders.³⁵ Survivors of childhood sexual abuse are also more likely to engage in dangerous behaviors with long-lasting effects, such as alcohol abuse, smoking,³⁶ and drug abuse and sexual activity that put them at a high risk for contracting HIV.³⁷

In addition to negatively impacting girls’ mental and physical health, harassment and sexual violence also impacts girls’ ability to succeed in school. For example, a child who experiences sexual abuse often feels powerless and as though she lacks the ability to control her life and its trajectory.³⁸ These feelings may develop into behavioral issues that are misunderstood and punished in school settings. In fact, children who experience trauma are 32.6 times more likely to have behavioral and learning problems than children who are not exposed to trauma.³⁹ And children harmed by adults who are supposed to protect them often become distrustful of all adults, including their teachers.

In 2015, a 13 year-old Brooklyn girl, with the help of a friend, told a school staff member that she was raped and videotaped by a fellow student who put the video online. The school staff member asked her if it was consensual and when she said “no,” the staff member failed to report the incident to authorities. Later, the girl reported the incident to the principal, who called the police and the girl’s mother but asked the girl to leave school while they investigated the incident. The investigation lasted a few days and the principal told the girl’s mother that she had arranged a “safety transfer” to another school. She spent a month out of school while the transfer was completed and was never contacted by the school’s Title IX coordinator or offered any support services. Instead, she was essentially suspended for being a victim.⁴²

NWLC’s Let Her Learn Survey reveals a number of negative educational outcomes suffered by survivors of sexual assault (Figure 4).⁴⁰

- 68 percent of survivors reported having difficulty concentrating, which can negatively affect their school performance.
- 30 percent of survivors reported being absent from school because they felt they would be unsafe at school or on their way to school.
- 25 percent of survivors reported experiencing exclusionary discipline,⁴¹ which can be the result of behavior associated with experiencing trauma at early ages.
- 25 percent of survivors, more than twice the rate of girls overall, reported that they had been in a physical fight in school, suggesting that girls who have suffered trauma need more support to help them recover and cope in non-violent ways.

Girls who are victims of sex trafficking are even more at risk of poor educational outcomes. Because they are subjected to ongoing abuse by their traffickers—including isolation, sexual and emotional violence, economic dependence, and blackmail—they often drop out of school. In some cases, predators may not allow them to go to school at all.⁴³ Collective ignorance by policymakers, educators and communities about the warning signs and risk factors for child trafficking makes these girls invisible and harder to reach.⁴⁴

Figure 4. Experiences of Survivors of Sexual Violence⁴⁵

	Girls Overall	Survivors of sexual violence
Have felt nervous, anxious, or on edge	78%	91%
Have felt down, depressed, or hopeless	66%	86%
Have had repeated memories, thoughts, or images of a stressful experience	49%	82%
Have trouble concentrating and staying focused in school	46%	68%
Have missed 15 days or more of school in a school year	25%	43%
Have been absent from school because felt unsafe at school or on their way to school	14%	30%
Have been in a physical fight at school	12%	25%
Have experienced exclusionary discipline	11%	25%

Source: National Women’s Law Center, Let Her Learn Survey, Conducted by Lake Research Partners (2017).

Recommendations for Helping Girls Who Have Suffered Harassment and Sexual Violence Succeed in School

With the proper attention and support, girls who have experienced harassment and sexual violence can overcome the barriers they face and thrive in school. The recommendations below describe ways that policymakers, schools, and communities can address the educational challenges faced by these girls.

Policymakers

- Policymakers should engage girls in the process of crafting solutions to the educational barriers they face, making sure to include a diverse set of voices. (One way of doing this is by creating youth advisory committees like the Young Women's Initiatives, first launched in New York City, <http://www.shewillbe.nyc/>.)
- The U.S. Departments of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice should provide technical assistance to schools to help them comply with federal requirements to prevent and address harassment and violence, including on the growing issue of cyberbullying and harassment.
- The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights should continue strong enforcement of Title IX to ensure that schools are appropriately investigating complaints of sexual and gender-based harassment and violence and providing student victims with the accommodations and services they need.
- Congress should change the legal standards for sexual harassment in schools to be the same as those that apply in the workplace to help prevent and address school-based harassment and violence.
- Congress should enact laws and policies that protect students from harassment and violence based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity by providing more explicit legal protections from discrimination for students at both the K-12 and higher education levels.
- Federal and state policymakers should require schools to conduct annual climate surveys to understand the environment their students are facing and to help fill the gap between what occurs in school and what gets publicly reported. (The U.S. Department of Justice offers a variety of tools and models for conducting climate surveys at www.NotAlone.gov.)

- Federal and state policymakers should regularly collect from schools and make public, in a way that protects student privacy and confidentiality, disaggregated and cross-tabulated data on incidents of harassment and assault based on sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, and actual or perceived gender identity.
- States should exercise their authority to enforce Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded education programs) and provide regular training on applicable civil rights laws for all Title IX coordinators and educators.
- States should ensure that their prostitution laws treat children under 18 as minors and should pass safe harbor laws that do not allow prosecution of minors for sex crimes and that provide support services for trafficking victims (such as immediate shelter, protection and rehabilitative services).
- States should require schools to annually provide all members of their school communities with mandatory, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, age-appropriate, and gender identity-sensitive training on bullying, harassment and sexual violence (including the definition of consent, healthy relationship skills, and bystander intervention) and how to identify and support sexual violence and trafficking survivors.

Schools

- Schools should make sure that they have adequate staff, including crisis counselors, to provide victims of harassment and sexual violence with culturally responsive, gender responsive, and trauma-informed support, such as mental health services. Schools should also be ready to refer students to community-based services.
- Schools should make sure that students with emotional disturbances (depression, anxiety, PTSD or similar diagnoses) after sexual assault and trauma are provided accommodations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and as required by Title IX.
- Schools should work with students who are victims of sexual harassment and violence to come up with individualized graduation plans and should utilize technology and other resources to allow them to keep up with schoolwork remotely if necessary.
- Title IX coordinators and other school officials should proactively disseminate information and conduct trainings for all members of their community on schools' policies and procedures for addressing sexual and gender-based harassment and violence.
- Schools should annually provide all members of their community with mandatory, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, age-appropriate, and gender identity-sensitive training on bullying, harassment and sexual violence (including the definition of consent, healthy relationship skills, and bystander intervention) and how to identify and support sexual violence and trafficking survivors.
- Schools should conduct annual climate surveys to understand the environment their students are facing and to help fill the gap between what occurs in school and what gets publicly reported. (The U.S. Department of Justice offers a variety of tools and models for conducting climate surveys at www.NotAlone.gov.)

- Schools should regularly collect and make public, in a way that protects student privacy and confidentiality, disaggregated and cross-tabulated data on incidents of harassment and assault based on sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, and actual or perceived gender identity.
- Schools should develop reenrollment and individualized graduation plans for students who have spent significant amounts of time out of school due to sexual violence.

Parents/Guardians and Advocates

- Parents/guardians and advocates should request their schools' policies and procedures for reporting and investigating sexual and gender-based harassment and violence and check to see if they meet the requirements set forth under Title IX (see <http://nwlc.org/resources/title-ix-requires-schools-to-address-sexual-violence/>).
- Parents/guardians and advocates should look up the name and contact information for each school's (or the district's) Title IX coordinator, a position required by law, and should ask that coordinators be appointed immediately if not already in place.
- Parents/guardians and advocates can learn the signs of sex trafficking to help identify children who need help and connect them with services and supports. (There are many groups that provide information on the signs of trafficking – for example, see <https://polarisproject.org/recognize-signs>.)
- Parents/guardians and advocates should encourage schools to develop partnerships with appropriate and responsive community-based organizations to whom they can refer students who have suffered harassment and sexual violence for counseling and other social services as needed.
- Parents/guardians and advocates can examine their schools' data on harassment and sexual violence—available from the Civil Rights Data Collection (<http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>) and starting in 2018 as part of state, local and school-level annual report cards—to evaluate school climate and advocate for changes as needed.

- 1 National Women's Law Center's Let Her Learn Survey was conducted online from January 5-19, 2017 by Lake Research Partners. The questions reached a total of 1,003 girls ages 14 to 18 nationwide. Black girls, Latinas, Asian/Pacific Islander girls, Native American girls, and LGBTQ girls were oversampled. The samples were drawn from online panels. The data were weighted by age, race, and census region to reflect the actual proportions of the population. Oversamples were weighted down to reflect their proportions in the population. The margin of error is +/-3.1%. The margin of error is higher among subgroups.
- 2 The Let Her Learn survey asked respondents to indicate their race as white, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, Multiracial, or other. Respondents could select all options that applied to them. "Black" is used to refer to girls who self-identified as "Black/African American" and "Latina" is used to refer to girls who self-identified as "Hispanic/Latino."
- 3 The Let Her Learn survey asked respondents about their current gender identity, allowing them to select from male, female, transgender male, transgender female, gender queer or gender nonconforming, or other. The survey also asked respondents about their sexual orientation, allowing them to select from heterosexual or straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual/biromantic, asexual, not sure, or other. Any data describing the experiences of LGBTQ girls reflects responses from those who self-identified their gender to be female or transgender female and those who self-identified their sexual orientation to be anything except heterosexual or straight.
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