

# One in ten women students sexually assaulted in a postsecondary setting

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People who experience unwanted sexualized behaviours can feel disrespected, uncomfortable and unsafe, and this type of victimization can have immediate and long-term impacts on wellbeing and mental health.

About 1 in 10 (11%) students who identify as women at Canadian postsecondary schools were sexually assaulted in a postsecondary setting in 2019, compared with 4% of students who identify as men. The majority (71%) of students witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours—either on or off campus, or in an online situation that involved students or other people associated with the school. More women (45%) than men (32%) personally experienced these kinds of behaviours, which include inappropriate verbal or non-verbal communication, sexually explicit materials, and physical contact or suggested sexual relations.

Based on results from the Survey on Individual Safety in the Postsecondary Student Population conducted in 2019, the *Juristat* article, "Students' experiences of unwanted sexualized behaviours and sexual assault at postsecondary schools in the Canadian provinces, 2019," examines the prevalence of unwanted sexualized behaviours and sexual assault in the postsecondary setting, and the impacts they have on students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on the postsecondary setting. For instance, there is a general shift from in-person teaching to online learning at many schools. Readers should note that while these data predate the pandemic, they provide important insight for postsecondary schools on how to better prevent and address unwanted sexualized behaviours and sexual assault experienced by students at their institutions.

## One in ten women students were sexually assaulted in a postsecondary setting in the 12 months preceding the survey

Young women are consistently over-represented as sexual assault victims and this was reflected in the experiences of postsecondary students. More specifically, about 1 in 10 women students (11%) reported being sexually assaulted in the previous 12 months, while this was the case for 4% of men students. These were higher proportions than the general population. According to the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces—which measured sexual assault among Canadians in general—3% of women and 1% of men in the provinces were sexually assaulted in 2018.

In 2019, sexual assaults in a postsecondary setting most often took the form of unwanted sexual touching (86% of women and 83% of men sexual assault victims). The majority of sexual assaults were perpetrated by fellow students. This was the case for similar proportions of women (60%) and men (61%) who had been sexually assaulted.

## Women more likely than men to experience unwanted sexualized behaviours in the postsecondary setting

In the postsecondary setting over the previous 12 months, women students were more likely than men to have experienced any of the 10 unwanted sexualized behaviours measured by the survey. The largest gaps between women and men were with unwanted sexual attention such as whistles and "catcalls" (experienced by 27% of women and 6% of men) and unwelcome physical contact or getting too close (21% of women versus 7% of men).

Most women (80%) and men (86%) who had experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours said that a fellow student had carried it out. While relatively few students indicated that a person in authority—such as a professor—was responsible, it was more common for women (5%) than men (2%) who had experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours.



## **Unwanted sexualized behaviours have negative impacts on various aspects of students' lives**

Negative emotional impacts were felt by both women and men who experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours in a postsecondary setting, and this was particularly the case for women. For example, almost one-quarter (23%) of women felt fearful as a result of these experiences, compared with 4% of men.

Students also experienced negative impacts on their academic life, including stopping going to one or more classes (7% of women and 3% of men), and changing their routines in response to what had happened (such as avoiding specific buildings at school; 18% of women and 5% of men).

## **Few students who experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours or sexual assault spoke with someone associated with their school**

Few students who experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours spoke with someone associated with the school—such as a faculty member, student support service or campus security—about what happened (9% of women and 4% of men). Many stated that what happened was not serious enough to report (74% of women and 72% of men), and some indicated that they were not aware that this type of incident could be reported (26% of women and 10% of men).

Similarly, 8% of women students and 6% of men students who had been sexually assaulted in a postsecondary setting spoke about it with someone associated with their school. Generally, few students who were sexually assaulted consulted or used any formal resources, regardless of whether or not these were affiliated with their school. Aside from resources available from the school, 11% of women who were sexually assaulted in the postsecondary setting spoke to a mental health resource not affiliated with the school, while 3% reported an incident to the police.

## **Many students see unwanted sexualized behaviours as offensive, and some intervene to stop them**

Students who witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours considered some to be more offensive than others. For example, taking or posting inappropriate or sexually suggestive photos or videos of any student without consent was seen as very offensive by a large proportion of both women (59%) and men (42%). Sexual jokes, in contrast, were seen as very offensive by a minority of students (7% of women and 2% of men). Notably, women were more likely than men to consider unwanted sexualized behaviours to be offensive, regardless of the type of behaviour in question.

Likewise, the general attitudes of students about issues related to unwanted sexualized behaviour varied—especially when comparing the views of women and men. For instance, 40% of men agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "people get too offended by sexual comments, jokes or gestures," almost twice the proportion of women (22%) that held that view.

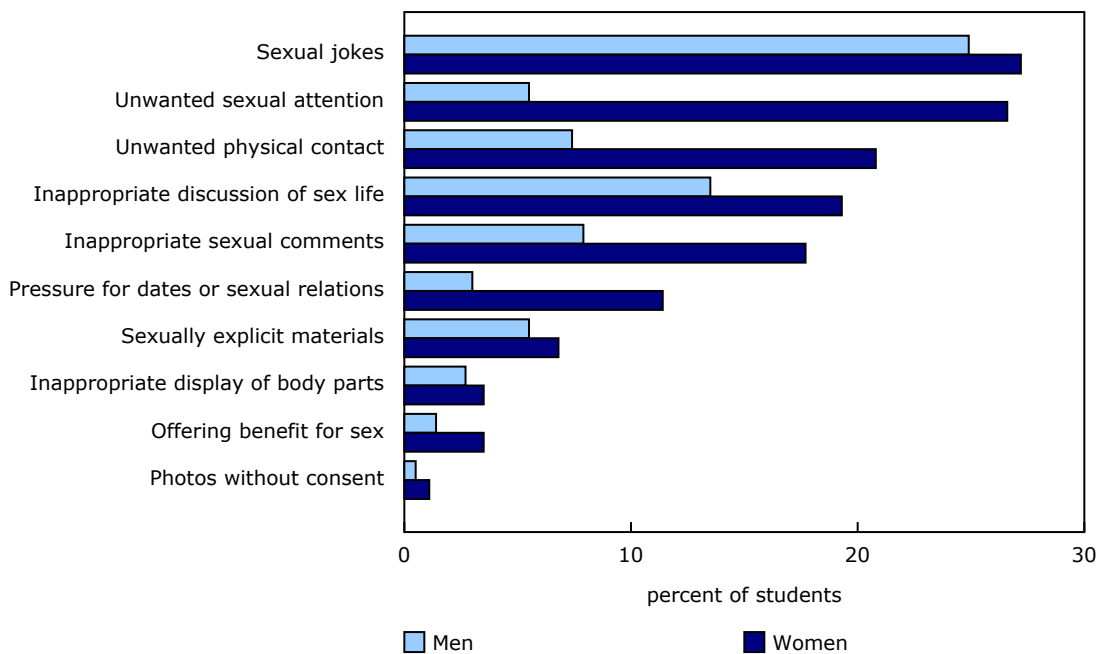
Among students who witnessed unwanted sexualized behaviours, more than half (55%) of women and 41% of men indicated that they had intervened at least one time. However, most students (91% of women and 92% of men) who had witnessed unwanted sexualized behaviours stated that there was at least one occasion where they did not take action. The most common reason for not taking action was that they did not see the behaviour as serious enough (69% of women and 81% of men). It was more common for women than men to say that they did not act because they felt uncomfortable (48% versus 25%), feared negative consequences (28% versus 18%) or feared for their safety (18% versus 8%).

## Sexual assault and unwanted sexualized behaviours tied to negative opinions about schools' policies

In general, most students had positive attitudes about the policies, procedures and services that their school had in place to prevent and address sexual assault and unwanted sexualized behaviour. However, negative opinions were more common among women. For instance, women more often disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school does a good job of trying to prevent harassment and sexual assault (14% of women versus 6% of men) or that their school does a good job of providing needed services to victims of harassment and sexual assault (12% of women versus 5% of men).

In addition, students who had been sexually assaulted or who had experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours generally had more negative perceptions of school policies aimed at addressing these behaviours than those who had not had those experiences. For example, 23% of students who had been sexually assaulted said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school does a good job of trying to prevent harassment and sexual assault—almost three times higher than for students who had not been sexually assaulted (8%).

**Chart 1**  
**Unwanted sexualized behaviours experienced by students in a postsecondary setting in the past 12 months, by type of behaviour, provinces, 2019**



**Note(s):** The categories "women" and "men" include cisgender and transgender women and men. Each number for women is statistically different from the corresponding number for men ( $p < 0.05$ ). The statements describing unwanted sexualized behaviours have been condensed for this chart in *The Daily*. To see the full statements, please refer to the *Juristat* article.

**Source(s):** Statistics Canada, Survey on Individual Safety in the Postsecondary Student Population (5279).

### Note to readers

The Survey on Individual Safety in the Postsecondary Student Population (SISPSP) collects information on sexual assault, sexualized behaviours and discrimination on the basis of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation from students aged 18 to 24 (17 to 24 for those in Quebec) attending a public or private postsecondary school, college, CEGEP or university in the Canadian provinces (or who attended such an institution in the 12 months preceding the survey). The categories "women" and "men" include cisgender and transgender women and men. Some analysis specific to transgender students is included in the Juristat article.

For information on the methodology of the survey, see: [Survey on Individual Safety in the Postsecondary Student Population](#).

The survey defines "postsecondary setting" as including:

- On campus
- While travelling to or from school
- During an off-campus event organized or endorsed by the postsecondary school, including official sporting events
- During unofficial activities or social events organized by students, instructors, professors, either on or off-campus
- Employment at the school
- At a co-op or work term placement organized by the school
- Behaviours that occurred online where some or all of the people responsible were students, teachers or other people associated with the school.

In addition to information on sexual assault, the survey collects details on 10 sexualized behaviours related to inappropriate verbal or non-verbal communication, sexually explicit materials, and unwanted physical contact or suggested sexual relations.

The development and collection of the SISPSP and the analysis of its results was funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.

### Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number 5279.

The article "[Students' experiences of unwanted sexualized behaviours and sexual assault at postsecondary schools in the Canadian provinces, 2019](#)" is now available as part of the publication *Juristat* (85-002-X).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; [STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca)).