



Sexual Harassment and Assault in California:
Findings from the #MeToo 2024 Survey



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Research • Action • Change
for Gender Equity



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Objective: To assess the scope and scale of sexual harassment and assault among adults in California.

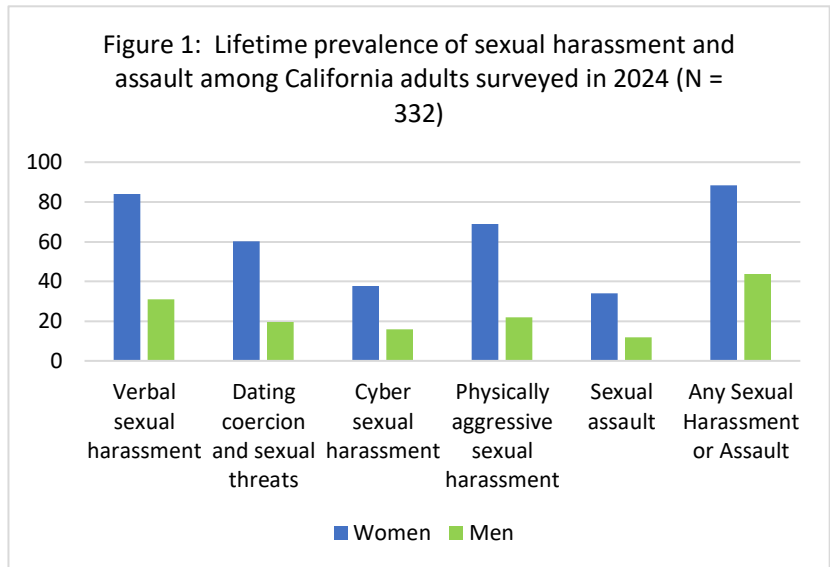
We conducted the #MeToo 2024 survey on sexual harassment and assault using NORC at the University of Chicago’s online panels of U.S. adults. We oversampled participants from four states—California, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas— to generate state-level #MeToo 2024 reports in these states of interest. The cross-sectional survey was conducted from April to May 2024 and provides nationally representative estimates for adults aged 18 and older, as well as state representative estimates for our states of focus, using weights created by NORC. Our [#MeToo Survey](#) website includes our national report findings and additional detail about our methodology. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation; this study was approved by the institutional review boards of NORC at the University of Chicago and Tulane University.

The study uniquely focuses on trends in California, capturing a broad range of sexual harassment and assault behaviors in public and private spaces among California adults aged 18+ (N = 332) (see Appendix Table 1).

How prevalent is sexual harassment and assault in California?

Most women (88%) and almost half of all men (44%) in California have experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault in their lifetime.

Figure 1 demonstrates that experiences of harassment are more common than assault, but even harassment can be quite severe and can include sexual threats and physical aggression. Women are more likely than men to experience all forms of sexual harassment and assault. More than one in three women (34%) has experienced sexual assault – defined in this study as forced sex – in her lifetime.



We also examined sexual harassment and assault experiences in the past year and found that 28% of women and 9% of men in California reported these types of experiences in just the past year.

Sexual harassment and assault in public spaces

Most women (84%) and one in four men (24%) experienced sexual harassment or assault in a public space during their lifetime (Table 1). One in four women (26%) have been sexually harassed on public transportation, and two in five (42%) have been sexually harassed in a bar or nightclub, compared with 10% of men who reported experiences in these types of spaces, respectively.

Verbal harassment, reported by 79% of women and 17% of men, is the most common form of harassment in these public spaces. However, nearly half of all women (49%) experienced physically aggressive sexual harassment in a public place; 29% experienced dating coercion and sexual threats, and almost one in ten women (9%) reported sexual assault in public spaces.

Table 1. Lifetime prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in public spaces among California adults (N = 332).

	Any form of Sexual Harassment or Assault		Verbal Sexual Harassment		Dating Coercion and Sexual Threats		Physically Aggressive Sexual Harassment		Sexual Assault	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
A public space (like a street, park, beach, store, restaurant, mall, library, movie theater, museum, swimming pool, gym)	84%	24%	79%	17%	29%	10%	49%	11%	9%	2%
Mass transportation systems (bus, subway, metro, train, or airplane)	26%	10%	21%	5%	9%	<1%	13%	5%	1%	<1%
Nightlife or entertainment venue (like a concert, bar, or club)	42%	10%	39%	7%	15%	1%	20%	3%	1%	<1%
All percentages reported above are weighted to be representative of state population demographics										

Sexual harassment and assault at work and at school

More than one in three women (38%) and one in ten men (13%) have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Table 2). Further, three in eight women (37%) and almost one in seven men (15%) have experienced sexual harassment in school or college. While this was most often in the form of verbal harassment (33%), among women, one in five reported dating coercion and sexual threats at work (20%) or in school (18%). Physically aggressive sexual harassment at work (12%) and school (17%) were commonly reported, as well.

Table 2. Lifetime prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace or at school/college among California adults (N = 332).

	Any form of Sexual Harassment or Assault		Verbal Sexual Harassment		Dating Coercion and Sexual Threats		Physically Aggressive Sexual Harassment		Sexual Assault	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
At your workplace, including temporary jobs and internships	38%	13%	33%	9%	20%	7%	12%	6%	2%	1%
At school or college	37%	15%	31%	9%	18%	3%	17%	6%	2%	<1%
All percentages reported above are weighted to be representative of state population demographics										

Sexual harassment and assault in private spaces

More than 40% of women experienced sexual harassment or assault in their home, while one in three women were harassed or assaulted in the home of someone they knew (35%), and 27% experienced these types of abuses in either their own car or that of someone known to them (Table 3). Importantly, cars and private residences were the spaces where women were sexually assaulted most frequently. One in six women had been sexually assaulted in her own residence or a known residence, respectively, while one in 25 had been sexually assaulted in a car.

Among men, 13% had experienced sexual harassment or assault in their home and 11% in the home of someone they knew, and 6% reported these types of experiences in a car. One in 25 (3-4%) had been sexually assaulted in their own or a known residence, and one in 50 had been sexually assaulted in their or a known person’s car.

Table 3. Lifetime prevalence of sexual harassment in private spaces among California adults (N = 332).

	Any form of Sexual Harassment or Assault		Verbal Sexual Harassment		Dating Coercion and Sexual Threats		Physically Aggressive Sexual Harassment		Sexual Assault	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Your home or place of residence	43%	13%	17%	6%	32%	10%	14%	4%	17%	3%
Someone else’s home or place of residence	35%	11%	26%	7%	6%	6%	11%	3%	16%	4%
Your car or the car of a person you knew	27%	6%	23%	3%	5%	6%	8%	1%	4%	2%
All percentages reported above are weighted to be representative of state population demographics										

Who is causing sexual harm in California?

We asked participants that disclosed experiences of sexual harassment or assault about the identities of their abusers (Table 4). The primary perpetrators of abusive behavior included the following:

Strangers. Strangers were the most commonly reported perpetrator of sexual harassment/abuse, with four in five women (80%) and almost one in four men (27%) experiencing sexual harassment or assault at the hands of an unfamiliar person. Verbal sexual harassment by a stranger is particularly common. More than seven in ten women reported verbal sexual harassment from a stranger (72%), compared with 16% of men. More than half of women (55%) reported physically aggressive sexual harassment from a stranger, and nearly half of women (47%) experience cyber sexual harassment from a stranger. One in ten women in California and one in fifty men were sexually assaulted by a stranger.

Friends, Acquaintances, and Peers. Almost one-quarter of women (24%) reported being sexually harassed or assaulted by a friend (defined as an unrelated person they know well) and 47% by an acquaintance. Among men, 14% reported sexual harassment or assault by a friend, and 13% reported being abused by an acquaintance. Verbal sexual harassment, dating coercion, and sexual threats are among the most common forms of sexual harassment perpetrated by friends or acquaintances for both men and women. However, 9% of women reported sexual assault from a friend and acquaintance respectively, and 1% and 3% of men, respectively, reported this.

A minority of women and men (8% and 4%, respectively) experienced sexual harassment or assault by teachers, professors, or other authorities at school. However, those reporting such an experience indicate that the majority of the harassment or abuse from school officials occurred in the form of verbal sexual harassment. Situating these results in the context of the findings reported above, of the 37% of women and 15% of men reporting sexual harassment or assault at school or college, only a small percentage indicate this abuse was perpetrated by teachers or administrators, suggesting instead that abuse in schools may be more often perpetrated by peers.

Bosses and Co-Workers. One in ten women (10%) and 3% of men have been sexually harassed or assaulted by a boss, employer, supervisor, or manager, most often in the form of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment from co-workers was even more common, reported by 24% of women and 13% of men. Sexual assault from a boss/supervisor or co-worker was not commonly reported by women or men.

Family Members: Almost one in six women (16%) and one in twenty-five men (4%) have been sexually harassed by a family member or relative. While verbal sexual harassment was the most common, reported by 15% of women and 3% of men, 3% of women reported sexual assault by a family member.

Intimate Partners. More than one in four women (28%) and 3% of men reported sexual harassment or assault from a current or former spouse, romantic partner or sexual partner. For women, this most commonly takes the form of verbal sexual harassment (13%) or dating coercion and sexual threats (12%); 16% of women reported that they had been sexually assaulted by a partner in their lifetime. Importantly, the findings indicate that women most frequently experience sexual assault at the hands of an intimate partner.

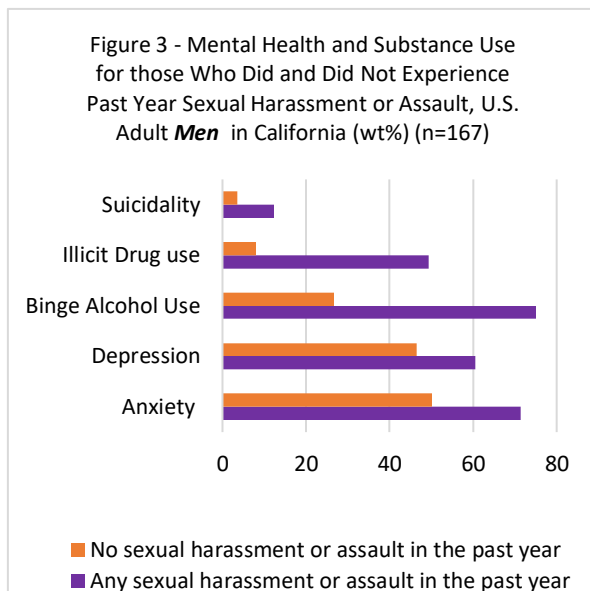
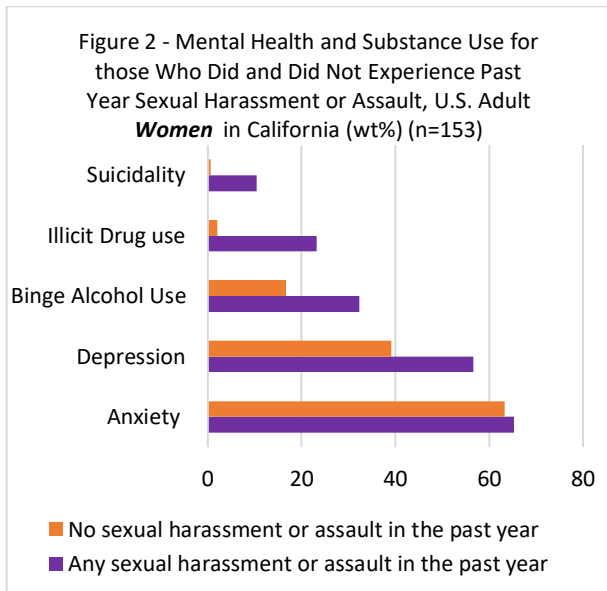
Table 4. Relationship to Perpetrator (N = 332).

	Any form of Sexual Harassment or Assault		Verbal Sexual Harassment		Dating Coercion and Sexual Threats		Cyber Sexual Harassment		Physically Aggressive Sexual Harassment		Sexual Assault	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Stranger	80%	27%	72%	16%	32%	10%	47%	12%	55%	13%	10%	2%
Acquaintance	47%	13%	37%	7%	29%	3%	11%	6%	22%	7%	9%	1%
Friend	24%	14%	10%	10%	16%	6%	8%	6%	8%	7%	9%	3%
Teacher	8%	4%	8%	3%	9%	3%	<1%	2%	5%	2%	<1%	2%
Boss	10%	3%	7%	2%	8%	6%	3%	<1%	5%	1%	<1%	<1%
Co-worker	24%	13%	20%	8%	12%	8%	4%	9%	4%	5%	2%	1%
Family Member	16%	4%	15%	3%	4%	4%	3%	3%	5%	3%	3%	2%
Partner	28%	3%	13%	1%	12%	5%	9%	2%	10%	1%	16%	1%

All percentages reported above are weighted to be representative of state population demographics

Potential Behavioral and Mental Health Effects of Sexual Harassment

We asked participants about their current mental health (depression and anxiety), recent substance abuse (past 30-day binge alcohol use and illicit drug use), and suicidality (thoughts of suicide) in the past year. Figures 2 and 3 display the prevalence of past year sexual harassment or assault by these symptoms. These findings show a significant association between behavioral and mental health concerns and experiences of sexual harassment in the past year, especially for suicidality, illicit drug use and alcohol use.



Conclusions

Sexual violence is pervasive for women and men, especially in the form of sexual harassment. Almost nine in ten women (88%) and 44% of men in California have experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault in their lifetime, and 28% of women and 9% of men have experienced this in just the past year. In 2019, a similar study found that 86% of California women and 53% of California men experienced sexual harassment and assault in their lifetime and 35% and 34% of men and women, respectively, experienced these abuses within a year of the survey (Raj et. al 2019). These data provide two pictures. First, it appears sexual harassment and assault have become less pervasive compared to the year 2019, especially for men. However, lifetime experiences of harassment and abuse have not fallen for women, although they have decreased for men. This is alarming.

Sexual harassment most often occurs in public spaces and is most often perpetrated by strangers, followed by acquaintances. While verbal sexual harassment is most common, sexual threats and physically aggressive sexual harassment is not uncommon, and also often occurs in public spaces.

Sexual harassment also occurs in workplaces and schools. This abuse is more often perpetrated by peers than those in authority positions. Perpetrator of the abuse notwithstanding, sexual harassment and abuse is likely compromising academic and employee productivity.

Sexual assault largely occurs in private places and is perpetrated by someone known to the person who is assaulted. Women are more likely than men to have experienced a sexual assault. Among women with this experience, acquaintances or partners are the most common perpetrators, and a residence is the most common location of this abuse. Men who reported sexual assault are most likely to report that it occurred at the hands of a friend or stranger and in someone else's residence.

Sexual harassment is associated with higher risk of depression and anxiety, substance misuse, and suicidality. Too often, sexual harassment is viewed as benign, but it has a decisive and detrimental effect on one's health and well-being.

Sexual harassment and assault are preventable. Results from the 2024 national-representative #MeToo Survey (Raj et al. 2024) suggest sexual assault and harassment are most prevalent among adolescent girls ages 13-17. According to these data, one in five women (20%) were abused before the age of 13. Most men and women with these abusive experiences did not disclose the incidents to anyone.

Preventative efforts should help individuals correctly identify behaviors that constitute sexual harassment and assault—even by friends and family members—and provide safe spaces for victims or bystanders to report these incidents to relevant authorities. Moreover, structures and policies to hold perpetrators of abuse accountable are crucial to end the impunity that has historically surrounded this behavior. Efforts to staunch sexual harassment and assault should concentrate on younger girls and boys, especially in schools, as this population is particularly vulnerable to abuse at this age and in educational settings. Finally, public policy at the local level should make spaces, such as bus stops, public transportation, parks, and streets, safer for women, as an astounding number of incidents of harassment and assault occur in public.

If you or someone you know has experienced sexual harassment or assault and would like help, you can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656. HOPE (4673) or chat online at online.rainn.org.

References

Johns N, Raj A, Lee D, and Kearl, H. Measuring #MeToo in California: A Statewide Assessment of Sexual Harassment and Assault. UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health, California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and Stop Street Harassment. May 2019. <http://www.calcasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CAMeTooReport-052219.pdf>

Raj A, Rao N, Patel P, Kearl H, Skolnick C. #MeToo 2024: A National Study of Sexual Harassment and Assault in the United States. Newcomb Institute. Tulane University. September 2024. <https://newcomb.tulane.edu/content/metoo-research>.

Appendix Table 1. Sexual Harassment and Assault Items and Variables

<p>VERBAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone whistling, honking, making kissy noises, “Pssst” sounds, or leering/staring aggressively at you. Someone saying things like, “Hey Baby,” “Mmmm Sexy,” “Yo Shorty,” “Mami/Mamacita,” “Give me a smile,” or similar comments in a way that is disrespectful and/or unwanted and/or made you feel unsafe. Someone calling you a sexist slur, like “Bitch,” “Slut,” “Cunt,” or “Whore”. Someone purposefully misgendering you or calling you a homophobic or transphobic slur, like “Fag,” “Dyke,” or “Tranny.” Someone talking about your body parts inappropriately or offensively (such as your legs, crotch, butt, or breasts), saying sexually explicit comments (“I want to do BLANK to you”) or asking inappropriate sexual questions. <p>CYBER SEXUAL HARASSMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone sending you sexual content without your permission, sexualizing you inappropriately, or threatening you with sex acts, in <i>private online spaces</i>, such as over e-mail or text. Someone sending you sexual content without your permission, sexualizing you inappropriately, or threatening you with sex acts, in <i>public online spaces</i>, such as on social media. Someone taking and/or sharing sexual pictures or videos of you without your permission. 	<p>DATING COERCION OR SEXUAL THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone making threats to harm you, to harm someone you know, or to share personal information you don’t want shared (examples could include your sexual orientation or drug use history or immigration status). Someone saying you must date them or do a sexual act for them in exchange for something (such as a good grade, a promotion, a job, drugs, food, or something similar) or instead of something (like paying rent or a citation, etc). Someone repeatedly texting or calling you in a harassing way. Someone repeatedly asking you for a date or your phone number when you’ve said no or ignored them. <p>PHYSICALLY AGGRESSIVE SEXUAL HARASSMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone flashing or exposing their genitals to you without your permission. Someone physically following you without your permission. Someone purposely touching you or brushing up against you in an unwelcome, sexual way. <p>SEXUAL ASSAULT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Someone forcing you to do a sexual act without your permission or one that you didn’t want to do (including while you were under the influence of alcohol or drugs).
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Citation: Thomas J, Rao N, Daniel C, Patel P, Raj A. Sexual Harassment and Assault in California: Findings from the #MeToo 2024 Survey. newcomb.tulane.edu/content/metoo-research. Newcomb Institute, Tulane University. January 2025.