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## **Sexual harassment common in high schools, study finds**

**Sexist comments and unwanted touching a major concern throughout southwest Ontario**

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Almost half of female high school students are subjected to sexual comments or gestures, and one-third are touched, grabbed or pinched in a sexual way, says a new study from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

In the wake of a report on school safety in Toronto showing troubling trends in violence and sexual harassment, psychologist David Wolfe said his study of 23 rural and urban high schools in southwestern Ontario shows the issue "is not a Toronto phenomenon."

"We're saying it, unfortunately, is a very common phenomenon," Wolfe said.

The study of more than 1,800 students in Grade 9, with a follow-up two years later, found that 46 per cent of girls were the target of sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks at some point in both Grades 9 and 11, and that 30 per cent were sexually "touched, grabbed or pinched" in Grade 9. That dropped only slightly – to 28 per cent – by Grade 11.

Almost one-third of the girls in Grade 11 felt pressured into taking part in unwanted sexual activity, and 15 per cent "had oral sex just to avoid having sex."

Thirty-six per cent of males in Grade 9 were subjected to sexual comments or jokes, which dropped to 27 per cent by Grade 11.

Slightly more than 20 per cent of Grade 11s reported being touched or grabbed sexually and about one-third have been called homophobic insults.

A recent survey of Toronto students at two city high schools, conducted by a safety panel headed by lawyer Julian Falconer, found "alarming rates" of sexual harassment and assault; in fact, 19 per cent of females at one school said they had been sexually assaulted at school in the past two years.

Following the release of Falconer's report last month, the board vowed to take action, especially where sexual violence is concerned.

"I believe we have to address (the issue) in a significant way," said Gerry Connelly, the board's director of education said in a recent interview. "I have met with the minister (of education) and she's also very concerned. We're talking about programs in place, changes to policy and the ways in which we could deal with healthy sexuality amongst our adolescent students.

"That's something I certainly want to make a priority."

Toronto trustee Cathy Dandy, who heads the board's school safety committee, agreed this is a significant issue.

One alarm bell is the increase in extremely violent pornography and degrading music videos and lyrics, she said. The board needs to talk to male and female students about how to relate to each other, as part of the curriculum.

Wolfe said teen harassment used to be more racist and sexist, and is now "more homophobic and misogynistic," a lot of which is driven by what they see in the media.

While such behaviour doesn't harm everyone, "it contributes to the feeling that it's okay to belittle others, and that it's okay as an adolescent to break all kinds of rules" that adults follow.

"This is the type of thing kids live with every day, and we in our jobs would have something to say about it. Kids don't think they can."

He also said people don't realize how tough it is for Grade 9 students and that more needs to be done to prepare and support them for the transition to high school.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health has created a program called "The fourth R" – relationships – that teaches teens to relate better to one another and is run in about 35 Toronto schools. And while the study found boys are doing most of the harassment, against both other males as well as females, the program targets both sexes.

Sexual harassment is considered a risk factor for substance use, low self-esteem and depression.