

## Background

Sexual harassment in secondary school is common but only recently acknowledged as a widespread problem in the United Kingdom. There is limited research on how schools handle the prevention of, and response to, sexual harassment. The aim of this study was to understand how school systems shape the dynamics of disclosure, reporting and handling of sexual harassment in school (including behaviours, processes, culture), and to identify opportunities for effecting systems change.

## Methods

We built a system map based on the perspectives of staff and students from 10 secondary schools in Scotland. We carried out 18 in-person workshops with students and 4 with staff from three secondary schools. We also used survey data (n=638 students; n=119 staff) to further illustrate findings. The final map was reviewed and finalised with students and staff from seven other secondary schools.

## Results

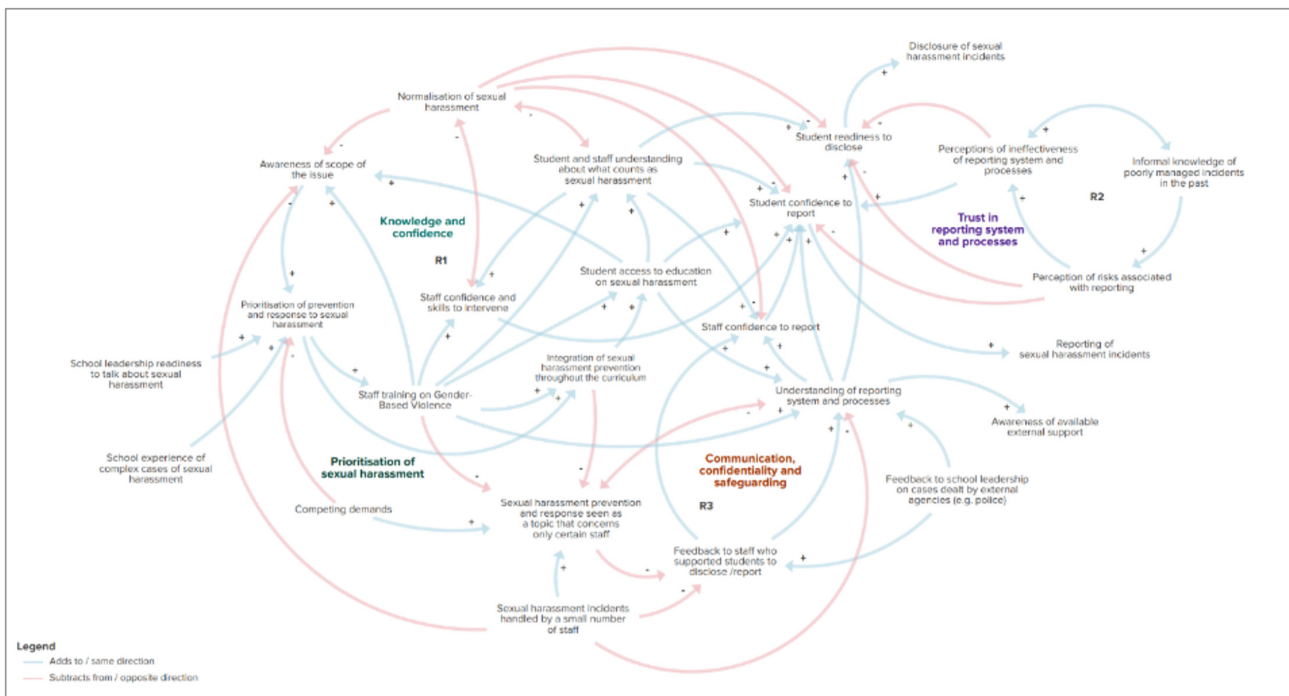
The map provides an overview of the interdependent factors that influence the reporting of and response to sexual harassment in schools. It highlights how prioritising the issue and educating students and staff can build knowledge and confidence. Conversely, ineffective reporting systems and limited communication around safeguarding undermine trust in the system, young people's willingness to report, and staff overall engagement with sexual harassment prevention and response. See the full paper for detailed findings, including maps and survey results.

## Potential levers of change

The system map highlights several areas where there is potential for strengthening schools' response to sexual harassment.

- 1. Staff training:** Comprehensive training for all staff to enhance knowledge and confidence in recognizing and responding to sexual harassment.

2. **Student education:** Further embedding of teaching and learning on gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV) across the curriculum.
3. **Reporting system:** Building trust in the reporting system both among staff and students by ensuring that it works effectively and its processes are well understood.
4. **Communication:** Improving information flows among staff, between staff and students, and with external agencies (e.g. police, social work), to promote better understanding of safeguarding processes, and support better coordination. Information flows should have due concern for young people’s privacy.
5. **Prioritisation of action on GBV:** School leadership prioritisation of GBV to enact the actions above, and to ensure schools have clear policies and guidance on GBV prevention and response, while also working on improving longer-term school culture.



## Conclusions

This is the first system map of sexual harassment in secondary schools. School-based sexual harassment, like many complex problems, requires solutions that consider the complexity of the school system. Key feedback loops (circular chains of influence) were identified in the map. These loops demonstrate how the problem can be perpetually amplified – impeding both the prevention of sexual harassment, and its reporting. Effective approaches will bring together school actors, including young people, and use the map to support discussion focused on system changes that build trust, and feelings of safety long-term.

## Link to paper

[Prevention of, and response to, sexual harassment at secondary school: A system map](#)

## Ongoing evaluation

Data presented in the paper is from the pilot stage of the Equally Safe at school (ESAS) programme, which is now being implemented in many schools across Scotland. The University of Glasgow is currently evaluating the programme in an NIHR funded Trial.

[More information on the ESAS evaluation](#)

[More information on the ESAS programme in schools](#)

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