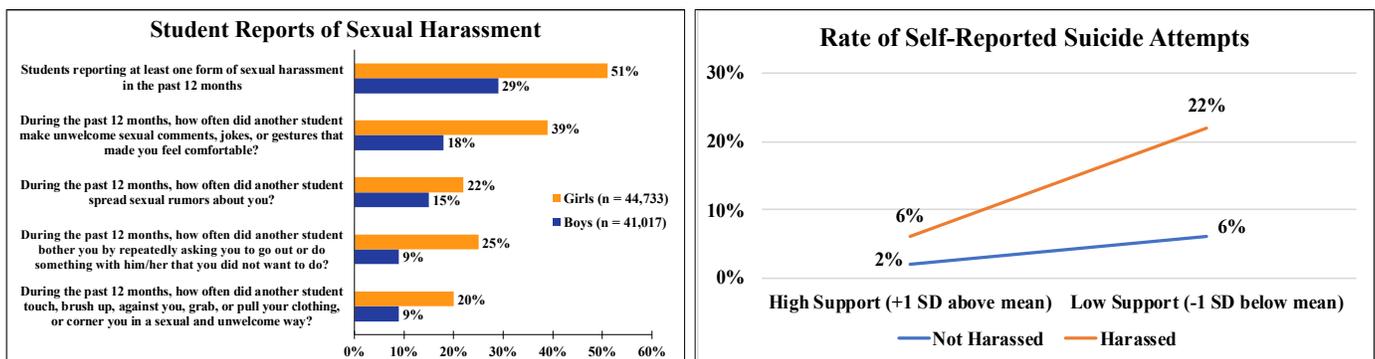


Practical Findings from the Virginia School Climate Survey

An Authoritative School Climate is Protective for Students Who Experience Sexual Harassment

School sexual harassment is a prevalent but frequently overlooked problem in Virginia high schools (see [Issues 10 & 13](#)). Because sexual harassment is associated with adjustment problems like depression, substance use, and suicidality, school authorities should understand how an authoritative school climate might facilitate prevention efforts. As described in [Issue 1](#), an authoritative school climate is one in which students report that their school has strict but fair discipline (high structure) and that their teachers are concerned and respectful toward them (high support).

The Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey in 2018 was completed by 85,750 students in grades 9 through 12 from 322 public high schools. The survey found that both male and female students report substantial levels of sexual harassment, and that experiencing sexual harassment is associated with worse outcomes for student mental health, substance use, and suicidality. However, findings also indicate that fostering an authoritative school climate can be protective for students who experience sexual harassment. Students who perceived their climates as highly structured and supportive, and thus felt more engaged in their schools, reported fewer problems with mental health, substance use, and suicidality after being sexually harassed. For example, the line graph shows that the rate of suicide attempts is higher among students who have been sexually harassed than students who have not been sexually harassed, but the difference is markedly smaller (4% versus 16%) when harassed students are in more supportive school climates. Schools that are high in structure, support, and engagement can buffer students from the potential negative effects of experiencing sexual harassment.



Practical Suggestions. Schools should teach students how to recognize sexual harassment, how they can obtain help, and how to support their peers. To build an authoritative school climate, teachers and other school authorities should communicate high disciplinary expectations that are strictly but fairly enforced. In addition, they should build supportive relationships so that students feel cared for and respected. Tips for preventing sexual harassment in schools are available from the [National Women’s Law Center](#).

Study Overview. The Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey was administered in the spring of 2018 as part of the annual School Safety Audit (§ 22.1-279.8.A) by the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety (VCSCS) in the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), in cooperation with the Virginia Department of Education. This project was supported by grant #NIJ 2017-CK-BX-007 awarded to the University of Virginia by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the researchers at the Youth Violence Project of the University of Virginia and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice or the Center for School and Campus Safety at the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. More detailed analyses are available from the [Virginia Youth Violence Project](#). A full list of one-page research summaries is also [available](#).