

HARASSMENT & VIOLENCE AGAINST EDUCATORS

IN HARM'S WAY:

The Epidemic of Violence Against
Education Sector Workers in Ontario

Summary Report

November 2021

By Chris Bruckert, Darcy Santor, and Brittany Mario

This summary report highlights key findings from the *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey*. The research examined the harassment and violence experienced by education sector workers who are not teachers – classroom-based workers such as education assistants (EAs), early childhood educators (ECEs), and child and youth workers (CYWs); and school support staff including clerical, maintenance/trade, and food service workers. These workers are critical to the smooth running of our schools and play a vital role in the education of Ontario's children. It is imperative that all education sector workers' experiences are acknowledged and that all workers are included in conversations about the workplace violence that increasingly characterizes elementary and secondary schools in this province. This research project is one step towards that goal.¹

Methodology

Between February 3, 2020, and March 13, 2020, shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, 3,854 CUPE Education Workers (Ontario) were surveyed about their experiences of harassment and violence in the 2018-2019 school year. The *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey* collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative analysis was generated using SAS/STAT software, Version [9.4] of the SAS System for Windows 10, while the open-ended questions were thematically coded using NVivo software v.12.

Demographics

Survey respondents were predominantly women (88%), over 50 years of age (35%) or between the ages of 41 and 50 (30%), white (84%), and had a college diploma (67%). Most respondents (69%) identified as being classroom-based (58% were educational assistants, 11% were early childhood educators) and worked full time (84%). The average number of years worked in the education sector was 13.5 years (see Full Report for complete demographics).

A word of caution: This summary report contains descriptions of workplace violence that may be triggering.

Report highlights

"Violence in the education system is becoming an epidemic and the problem is constantly being swept under the rug. [...] Violence and evacuations are becoming the norm for students. That is disheartening." (ECE)

The rates of workplace violence are shockingly high

89% of respondents experienced a threat, attempt, or act of physical violence from one or more sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, administrators), during the 2018-2019 school year; 70% experienced some type of physical force (e.g., hitting, kicking, biting, being hit by a thrown object), and almost 60% experienced one or more threats to use physical force. Overwhelmingly, the violence was perpetrated by students. The proportion of participants experiencing threats, attempts, and acts of physical force from parents, colleagues, and administrators was low but not insignificant; one in twenty reported experiencing a threat of physical force from a parent during the 2018-2019 school year.

Workplace violence rates for EAs amongst highest of any occupation

Findings for physical violence reported in the current study are consistent with rates of workplace violence events by EAs reported to and monitored by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). In 2014, 2016, and 2018, more instances of physical violence resulting in time off work due to injury were reported to WSIB by teaching assistants in elementary and secondary school than any other group of PSHSA² sector employees; the rates were higher than in occupations generally perceived to be exceptionally dangerous, such as law enforcement and corrections.

"The simple fact that I go into a classroom every day and 20-28 other children (aged 3-12) watch as I get physically abused should be significant. Every day that I finish work and I haven't been kicked, hit, punched, or bitten I consider a fantastic day. Children are literally beating up adults and we are subjecting other children to this violence. Talk about traumatic!" (EA)

¹ This research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Development Grant (#430-2018-00045).

² Public Service Health and Safety Association.

“The level of violence in mainstream classrooms has gone up very much, making EA’s job about working with students with behaviour problems. The students who have learning disabilities have no support at all and are further and further behind; those students often become behavioural students later on. (EA)

Workplace violence rates for education sector workers are increasing

Over 80% of participants indicated that the levels of harassment and violence had increased “a lot” or “somewhat.” Participants noted that increases in aggression coupled with decreasing staffing levels leave workers facing volatile situations without adequate support. Increasing rates of violence against these workers was also a significant finding of a longitudinal analysis of Ontario WSIB lost time claims between 2002 and 2015 conducted by Cynthia Chen, Peter Smith, and Cameron Mustard (2019); these researchers found that “a pronounced increase in workplace violence injury rates was observed in the education sector” (p. 3), and noted that the average annual percentage change was 7.0% for women and 4.1% for men.³

Workplace violence can be severe and result in significant injury

Participants described being kicked, hit, punched, slapped, choked, scratched, strangled, spat at, head butted, kned in the crotch, and threatened (and sometimes cut) with scissors. They also spoke of having to dodge thrown items, being assaulted by meter sticks, being tripped, being urinated on, having their hair pulled, getting their clothes torn, and being bit. These acts of aggression are not (as the general public might imagine) the ineffectual tap of an annoyed youngster but potentially serious and sometimes terrifying experiences. Participants reported significant physical injuries including concussions, fractures, dislocated joints, back and head injuries, infections, and whiplash. There can be long-term impacts on workers who find themselves off work, undergoing physical therapy, paying for counselling, unable to do everyday activities, and/or experiencing chronic pain.

“A student threw a desk at me and crushed my shin. I have a permanent disability now and can only work 9 hours a week and may not be able to continue working at all.” (EA)

“I was attacked by a student. Several punches to the head. I had a concussion, kidney trauma, a sprained ankle, major swelling, bruising, and bite marks on my leg.” (CYW)

“Typically, I would be harassed in person or over the phone by parents; it always made me feel inadequate like I am ‘just a woman’ or ‘just a secretary’.” (Clerical)

“Multiple emails from my principal belittling my work or handling of a situation. Personal put downs. Criticism causing me shame and embarrassment in front of co-workers.” (Clerical)

Exceptionally high rates of harassment and verbal violence

Results from the survey suggest that in any single year, 95% of classroom-based and support staff workers experienced some form of harassment from one or more sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, administrators). Findings showed that certain forms of harassment and verbal violence, such as insults, put-downs, and/or obscene gestures from students, are experienced by 75% percent of participants, whereas other forms, such as comments that ridicule, demean or offend (60%), being ‘ganged up’ on (32%), and the spreading of false accusations (25%) are experienced less frequently. Reports of harassment and verbal violence from parents, colleagues, and administrators, was less frequent but still disturbingly common.

Harassment and violence are repetitive and ongoing experiences

Participants who experience harassment and violence are likely to experience multiple instances of different types throughout the entire school year. Participants reported experiencing an average of 8.64 acts, 9.14 attempts, and 6.52 threats of physical force from students in the year and approximately 8.5 instances of insults, put-downs, and gestures from students, 1.22 from parents, 1.37 from colleagues and 0.70 from administrators in a single year.

“Getting spit at, chairs being thrown, being called demeaning names (cunt, bitch, whore, etc.), getting hit, punched, kicked, screamed at, my family demeaned and threatened, my life threatened. Not just one incident, but ongoing throughout every day.” (EA)

“Why does the board ‘normalize’ these incidents? There’s NOTHING NORMAL about going to work every day and getting hit, scratched, kicked, punched, pushed, and having your hair pulled.” (EA)

Violence against education sector workers is normalized and minimized

Participants reported a disturbing normalization of violence against education sector workers by administrators, educators, and students; all too often it appears that violence is increasingly understood to be “part of the job.” This normalization operates in conjuncture with widespread minimization and/or denial of the extent of violence and its multifaceted impacts on education sector workers.

³ Chen, C., Smith, P., & Mustard, C. (2019). Gender differences in injuries attributed to workplace violence in Ontario 2002-2015. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 76 (3-9).

The demands on education sector workers are increasing

Survey respondents explained that demands on their time have multiplied while resources have dwindled (e.g., “I worked in a grade one classroom with another EA and teacher. I had six kids with complex needs; four of the six students had one-to-one support the previous year and last year this support was cut down to two EAs with no coverage for our lunches and breaks”). This not only has a significant impact on workers, but it also means that children who need support but are not disruptive are passed over, while those who are disruptive are not having their needs met either – neither group is receiving the assistance that would allow them to thrive.

“There has been a decrease in the amount of EAs to a school. We are asked to support multiple students who are entitled to individual EAs. And students who are suspected to have a special need but are not diagnosed will be piggy backed onto a student who has an EA. Sometimes multiple students are placed in one EA’s care. This can result in an increase of behaviours and safety concerns.” (EA)

“We do not have time off and \$300-500 in benefits does not get you very far with a counsellor or physical therapist. And look at what we make. We can not afford to pay for that. And most of us have a part time or a second full time job so that we can survive while continuing to be in this field. [...] We love our jobs. We love our students. But we need support!” (EA)

Compensation is not commensurate with workplace risks

The pay that education sector workers receive does not reflect the workplace risks they navigate. For example, the starting salary for police officers (a job that continues to be male dominated and has similar educational requirements) is roughly twice that of educational assistants – a predominantly female occupational sector.⁴ As a result, these workers are not only facing unprecedented levels of violence and harassment but are often obliged to work second and even third jobs. In real terms, the personal, familial, and social costs of workplace violence are exacerbated when economic precarity hinders workers’ ability to recuperate and implement healthy healing and self-care strategies.

The job of EAs and other classroom support workers has changed dramatically

The Ontario Colleges (2021) describes the job of an educational assistant as “assisting teachers and other classroom staff in carrying out education plans. This may include working with students on their academic studies, assisting children with disabilities or special needs and more” (n.p.).⁵ Participants explained that their job has changed dramatically over the last decade and is increasingly focused on managing problematic behaviours and de-escalating students; professionals who pursued post-secondary studies for a career in education find themselves “putting out fires” instead of providing the educational supports students so desperately need.

“I put my body between the outburst and other students in the class. My job is no longer to assist in education it is to manage behaviour. That is not what I was originally hired for.” (EA)

“I was physically attacked by a student. Previously I had approached the principal about unsafe conditions. These were ignored. I immediately went to my doctor who diagnosed me with PTSD. When the attack happened the principal was off site. I have had counselling and am on multiple medications for depression. My life as I knew it ended with this episode.” (Clerical)

Workplace harassment and violence have profound lasting impacts

87% of classroom-based workers indicated that harassment and violence had a substantial (and often multifaceted) impact on their lives. Higher levels of harassment and physical violence were positively correlated with diminished physical health, mental health, and job performance both in the short term and when assessed some six months after the school year in which the harassment and violence occurred. Recurring themes included anxiety and panic attacks; general fearfulness, “jumpiness,” and being hyper-aware; depression, hopelessness, and overwhelming sadness; an inability to concentrate, and both excessive emotionality and emotional numbness.

Workplace violence impacts everyone in the school community

Workplace violence creates a stressful and even toxic environment for all education sector workers whether or not they themselves experience an act, attempt, or threat of aggression. Moreover, attention should also be given to the impact the witnessing of frequent and increasingly normalized violence against (predominantly women) education sector workers has on students: “We see huge increases in anxiety as well as school and social phobias for children who witness violence repeatedly and yet little is done for them” (EA).

“Although I am not directly impacted physically, it is wearing emotionally and mentally to see what is happening in the schools with student violence and the incapacity to help the staff member who is being physically assaulted by a student.” (Clerical)

⁴ The starting salary for officers in Ottawa is \$68,285.86 (Police Service salary and benefits; <https://www.ottawapolice.ca/en/careers-and-opportunities/sworn-salary-and-benefits.aspx>).

⁵ Ontario Colleges. (2021). *Education/Teaching/ Teaching Assistants; Education and Teaching Assistant Courses*. Retrieved 2021 August 12, 2021. <https://www.ontariocolleges.ca/en/programs/education-community-and-social-services/education-teaching-teaching-assistant> (n.p.).

“I have had 7 years of intensive psychological therapy (twice a week) due to PTSD brought on from the workplace. I have finally developed functioning coping skills. I remain in this job because it’s the highest paying in my field of work although I only make \$40,000 a year.” (ECE)

Rates of PTSD are shockingly high

Findings from this research suggest that 13.5% of EAs would be designated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following their worst incident of violence in the past year and that 18% would be designated with PTSD following their worst incident of harassment in the past year. The proportion of individuals designated as having PTSD was equitable to the rate reported by firefighters.⁶ Symptoms of PTSD were associated with lower levels of overall functioning and lower levels of job commitment, as well as a greater number of days off work.

There is a significant risk of occupational burnout

Results of the survey indicate that one in six education sector workers were either at imminent risk of burnout (7.21%) or would meet the formal criteria for burnout (7.86%). Features of burnout were associated with lower levels of overall functioning and lower levels of job commitment, as well as a greater number of days off work following the worst instance of harassment or violence. Further analysis showed that the degree of burnout predicted the number of days off work following an incident of harassment above and beyond any impact of symptoms of PTSD. The qualitative analysis of the data demonstrates that the risk of burnout is exacerbated when a lack of collegial and administrative respect, support, and acknowledgment operates alongside rapidly evolving/increasing workplace expectations.

“It causes extreme stress, anxiety, and frustration. I feel burnt out. I used to be passionate about my job and I’m only four years in and already feel like I can’t do this much longer. I don’t have energy after my days at work to do things I enjoy, or to go out with friends. I feel discouraged. Even filling out this survey I feel like I don’t have hope for things to change. On top of that, my salary and job description don’t line up with what I actually do in a day.” (EA)

“I have nothing left for my family. I don’t feel like engaging with them because of the extremely difficult days of violence and dysregulation in the children that I support. IT IS EXHAUSTING!! I am mentally done! I’m not sure how much longer I can do this job, and I’m only 35. I hate that I have nothing left to give to my own children and husband. My patience is shot, and I just want to be left alone. It’s a horrible feeling.” (ECE)

Workplace violence extracts a heavy toll on families

That ‘routine’ workplace harassment and violence impacts familial relationships, the lives of workers’ partners, and – most especially – their children, emerged as a striking but somewhat gendered impact of workplace harassment and violence. It was noted by 24% or almost one in four women but only one in ten men. Many participants wrote about coming home not only “mentally and physically drained” but also “grumpy,” “impatient,” “short tempered,” “irritable,” “stressed,” and “bitchy.” Many participants also noted that they “bring the stress home,” some “withdraw from the family,” while others find “it hard to come home and receive a hug from my spouse, or my kids.” One educational assistant wrote that she “would flinch when my own child came near me suddenly.” The inability to parent and enjoy a rich family life appears to be a hidden injury of workplace violence.

Economic and social costs are significant

Replacing education sector workers for time lost due to workplace harassment or violence is conservatively estimated to cost Ontario at least 3.5 million dollars annually (see full report for calculation). Furthermore, participants explained that in order to protect their health they sometimes needed to take short- or long-term leaves; others wrote about changing jobs, cutting back on their hours, or taking early retirement. Evidently, when experienced workers are unable to continue in the field and abandon their careers they trained for in order safeguard their physical and mental health, not only do students lose important supports but the education system as a whole is impoverished.

“I was punched in the head resulting in a concussion and prolonged brain injury that I’m still suffering from. I tried to explain to my principal that I was experiencing anxiety due to the extreme violence. He told me that it was my job to manage the behaviour of the students and I’d better figure it out. When I started to cry, he said I needed to behave professionally. I was scared to work with the student alone. I was written up for unprofessional behaviour. After that I experienced daily panic attacks and lived in fear. I worked in absolute terror as the principal said three write-ups and I’d lose my job. Eventually I was having panic attacks in class. I had to go on leave and into intense therapy for PTSD. My life will never be the same.” (EA)

⁶ Studies examining the rate of PTSD in firefighters have found rates of PTSD ranging from 13% to 18% 1–4 years following large-scale response events (Benedek, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2007; Carleton, Afifi, Turner et al., 2012).

“I can attest to the damage that hundreds of daily minor incidents can do to mental and physical well being. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. It’s demoralizing. The constant day to day blame and lack of support adds up.” (EA)

All too often the response to violence is inaction and/or blame

When asked about the administrative response to violence, some respondents wrote about supportive principals, while others described administrators who were at least somewhat sympathetic. However, many participants explained that their administrators provided minimal or no support – not even debriefs or check-ins. Participants also reported being blamed and held to account for the violence they experienced. Moreover, participants wrote about administrators who either subtly or explicitly discouraged the reporting of violence, including threats to employment.

One in ten participants experienced a workplace reprisal for reporting harassment

Workplace reprisals are any negative responses against an employee who was engaging in a legally protected activity (e.g., refusing to work in unsafe conditions, requesting adherence to occupational health and safety laws). One in ten participants (10.89%) described experiencing a reprisal following a report of harassment and one in fifteen (6.27%) experienced a reprisal following a report of physical violence in the 2018-2019 school year. The most common reprisals were professional and career costs (e.g., changes to job duties, being removed from roles, assigned undesirable tasks, being given bad references). Of course, when workers are reassigned, the retribution impacts not only the worker but also the students who are deprived of a trusted resource.

“Punishment [including] being excluded from class trips, from events at the school, having to show up to work earlier than other employees, shunned by principals, and ignored unless they needed to address something. Letter written in my HR file.” (ECE)

“Making less than \$45,000 a year does not reflect the work I do. This causes stress and anxiety. Every educational assistant I work with is a woman. Every one of us have second and third jobs. We are tired. We are broken. We take the abuse because we are too tired to expect better.” (EA)

Women experience higher levels of workplace harassment and violence and more impacts

Women participants reported higher levels of harassment from students and parents, as well as higher levels of violence from students.⁷ Several gender differences also emerged with respect to the impact. Compared to their male counterparts, women reported more overtime work, higher workload increases, less ability to meet workplace demands, and greater familial impacts. Women participants also reported higher levels of workplace burnout and more symptoms of PTSD following their worst instance of harassment than did men.

Participants who identify as having a disability report ableism and failure to accommodate

Participants identifying as having a disability reported significantly higher levels of harassment from colleagues and administrators than did participants who did not so identify. These participants described being disbelieved, disrespected, and humiliated about their disability by colleagues and administrators, including when the disability was the result of physical and/or mental injuries sustained in the workplace. Reprisals for reporting harassment were also significantly higher. Education sector workers who identify as having a disability reported lower levels of workplace functioning and commitment, and higher levels of burnout and PTSD symptoms following instances of harassment and violence.

“[My] principal ridiculed my anxiety and PTSD from a work-related injury. She laughed about it and spoke to other staff. [She] complained about accommodating me and caused tension with other staff as their duties changed due to my accommodations.” (EA)

“A student tried to pull on my hijab from the back, choking me while I was engaged in teaching another student. When the teacher tried to get him off, he tried to scratch and bite both her and me. He also tried to insert his hand under my shirt to scratch me.” (EA)

BIPOC⁸ workers report higher rates of workplace reprisals

Bias, racism, and Islamophobia underpin the harassment and violence that BIPOC workers experience – in the words of one EA *“It is hard to really get a feel for someone yelling in your face, ‘You are a son of a n*** bitch’”* – and also appear to impact the response. BIPOC participants experienced higher rates of reprisals for reporting instances of harassment and violence. Moreover, BIPOC education sector workers reported lower levels of burnout but higher levels of workplace commitment and functioning, more symptoms of PTSD, and greater increases in overtime work relative to non-BIPOC education sector workers.

⁷ See also, Chen, Smith, and Mustard, Gender differences in injuries attributed to workplace violence, 3-9.

⁸ Small samples necessitated collapsing racialized and Indigenous participants into the category of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) to undertake statistical analysis.

Workplace harassment and violence rates are correlated to incivility

The total amount of harassment and physical violence experienced by individual education sector workers is positively correlated with overall levels of student disrespect and incivility. These results suggest that reducing student incivility may mitigate the frequency of harassment and violence against workers in the education sector.

“I just want to say that schools are becoming zones of disrespect and violence. I have worked for 30 years. Kids have always had problems, but they didn't hurt their teachers.” (Clerical)

“People presume it is only teachers or EAs that are affected. I am a custodian and have had to deal with violence several times. We are not offered any type of training.” (Custodial)

Education sector workers would welcome additional training

Over half of participants indicated that they had little (23.61%) or no training (32.13%) to deal with instances of harassment and about one third of participants indicated that they have had little (13.57%) or no training (30.28%) to deal with instances of violence. Almost 50% of classroom-based workers wish to acquire training in how to teach students social-emotional skills (SEL) and to manage frustration and anger; almost 60% of participants would like to acquire Non-violent Crisis Intervention Training.

Recommendations

The crisis of workplace harassment and violence in the education sector requires *immediate action*, including:

Adequate resources for students: The student who is lashing out is not a perpetrator in the conventional sense but child in need of support. There is a desperate need for adequate resourcing to ensure students are afforded the help they require to meet their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural needs. It is vital that all students, but most especially those who are most vulnerable, have access to appropriate and adequate resources. This will require, among other things, augmented health services (e.g., early diagnosis and interventions), additional educational supports (e.g., EAs), and smaller classes to facilitate the individualized attention mandated by the *Education Act*.⁹ A truly inclusive education system needs to be able to respond to students' complex needs but this cannot be a one-size-fits-all model; the approach must be adaptable, comprehensive, and well resourced.

Support for education sector workers: Resources are needed to support education sector workers to address their mental and physical health needs in the context of the escalating harassment and violence they are experiencing. Participants in the current study who indicated that they were receiving psychological services mentioned an inadequate level of benefits, often as few as six sessions of treatment, an amount too few to adequately treat mental illness, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and far less than what other professions with similar rates of post-traumatic stress disorder can access.

Additional training: Training is required to ensure that administrators have the skills to adequately address harassment and violence in schools and provide meaningful support to educators who experience harassment and violence. Moreover, the high likelihood that most classroom-based workers will be exposed to frequent harassment and violence – as many as 30% report not receiving formal training in a variety of techniques and strategies to manage harassment and violence – is an important opportunity to ensure that all education sector workers are appropriately equipped to deal with the frequent occurrence of harassment and violence.

An important note on the language of violence

Recognizing that education sector workers experience student-initiated workplace violence is not paramount to saying students are *violent* in the conventional sense of forming intent. One EA explained, “*I think many of us struggle with terms like 'violence' [which] suggests intent to harm. Many behaviours we deal with are violent in nature, however, the students themselves are not violent in nature – they don't have the ability to express themselves in a safe/expected manner (e.g., poor communication or self-regulation skills).*”

Access full report at: <https://educatorviolence.net>

⁹ Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2.