

# Workplace Harassment Down, But Not Out



Workplace harassment has declined noticeably in Canada during the past two years, according to a poll commissioned by Queen's School of Business in Kingston, ON.

The 2014 poll found that 23 percent of Canadians surveyed said they have personally experienced workplace harassment. In 2012's Queen's poll, 28 percent of respondents reported having experienced harassment at work.

The latest Leger Marketing poll found that 25 percent of Canadians have witnessed harassment of co-workers, compared to 33 percent in the 2012 poll.

Here are some other details from the 2014 poll:

- Four percent of respondents reported that they were currently experiencing harassment on the job, or had been targeted within the past year. That number is unchanged from the 2012 poll.
- Thirty percent of men polled reported witnessing harassment of others in the workplace, compared to 20 percent of women polled. However, 31 percent of women reported having personally experienced harassment at work, compared to 22 percent of men.
- University-educated employees are the most likely to report that they have experienced or are currently experiencing workplace harassment (29 percent), compared to those who have a high school education or less (23 percent).
- The percentage of Canadians reporting a male harasser has declined from 50 percent in 2012 to 42 percent in 2013, while the percentage of Canadians reporting female harassers has remained the same at 23 percent.

"It's encouraging that incidents of workplace harassment appear to be declining. It suggests that recent legislation and increased education against workplace harassment in Canada is helping. However, the fact that roughly one out of four people still admit to experiencing it personally is hardly cause for a celebration," says Jana Raver, Associate Professor at Queen's School of Business. "Society has made great strides in virtually eliminating many traditional job-related risks, and now we must apply the same commitment to eradicating workplace harassment, which is often less obvious."

Raver adds that while Hollywood may stereotype workplace harassers as males, the survey showed that an increasing percentage of Canadians now report witnessing it from both genders.

The Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act defines harassment as “engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome.”

It includes bullying, intimidating or offensive communications, isolation of workers, hostile non-verbal displays, or sharing of offensive pictures or materials.

Supervisors cannot ignore an atmosphere of harassment. They must have clear policies in place, train workers on the fact that harassment and threats will not be tolerated, and act swiftly to confront workers who are accused of harassing others.

Workers at all levels in an organization who harass co-workers are courting serious trouble. Here are some possible outcomes:

- They can be disciplined and possibly fired.
- They can be sued for human rights violations, if the harassment is based on a worker’s race, sex, or religion, for example.
- They can be prosecuted for OHS violations.
- They can be arrested and prosecuted if the harassment is physical or sexual.