VIOLENCE & HARASSMENT AGAINST EDUCATORS

FEBRUARY 2026

CANADIAN SCHOOLS

A hazardous workplace

Darcy Santor, Hanya Ismail, Darby Mallory, and Chris Bruckert
University of Ottawa

uOttawa

www.educatorviolence.ca

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Survey Demographics 3

Section 1: RATES AND FREQUENCIES OF VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT 5
- 1.1. Alarmingly high rates and frequencies of violence 6
- 1.2. Harassment is disturbingly pervasive 7
- 1.3. Who is at elevated risk for violence and harassment? 8
- 1.4. The unrelenting, yet unsurprising, rise in violence and harassment 9

Section 2: IMPACTS AND HARMS ON WORKERS 10
- 2.1. Health and wellbeing are being compromised 11
- 2.2. The erosion of job satisfaction and commitment 12
- 2.3. Comparing violence and harassment 13

Section 3: COLLATERAL DAMAGE 14
- 3.1. Impacts on students 15
- 3.2. Impacts on workers' families 16
- 3.3. The impact of "just" witnessing violence and harassment 17
- 3.4. The economic costs of violence and harassment 18

Section 4: INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT OF HAZARDS AND HARMS 18
- 4.1. Underreporting of violence and harassment 19
- 4.2. Proactive and dismissive responses 20
- 4.3. Unfair treatment and reprisals 21
- 4.4. Rates of reprisal are not equal 22
- 4.5. The impact of reprisals and responsibilization 23

Section 5: CONCLUSION 22
- 5.1. Canadian schools are hazardous workplaces 22
- 5.2. Education sector workers are on the frontline of Canadian schools 23
- 5.3. Recommendations 23

Works Cited 27

Introduction

> *Well I'm not allowed to discuss stuff so it makes it hard. My current partner works in a prison and the stuff I deal with is comparable to his job. But he gets a higher pay, decent health benefits, and more safety plans in place."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Over the last decade, workplace violence in the education sector has increasingly been acknowledged as a serious issue that impacts the physical and mental health of workers, the wellbeing and educational attainment of students, and society at large (Bruckert et al., 2021; McMahon et al., 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2023; Santor et al., 2019). Although longstanding policies are in place to promote school safety among students, little has been done to reduce workplace violence and harassment. Indeed, education sector workers across Canada continue to experience extraordinarily high levels of violence and harassment, and it would seem that the situation is unlikely to improve under the current conditions.

This report summarizes the results of a subsample from the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey*. Throughout the report, we examine the experiences of two different occupational groups: direct student support workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and indirect student support workers (e.g., custodial workers, clerical staff), and attend, in particular, to the unique experiences of equity-deserving and sovereignty-seeking groups (i.e., individuals who identified as women, disabled, racially minoritized, and/or 2SLGBTQIA+). The report presents data on workers' experiences of violence and harassment from four different sources: students, parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors, during the 2022-2023 school year. This research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

In this report, we argue that the frequency and severity of workplace violence and harassment, as well as their impacts on the health and wellbeing of education sector workers, warrant considering Canadian schools as hazardous workplaces. Using quantitative data from a survey of 4,266 CUPE education sector workers across the country, we examine the implications of recognizing workplace violence in schools as a hazard and provide recommendations to manage the risks and harms education sector workers confront. We situate these findings within existing occupational health and safety frameworks to highlight gaps in the current protections and accountability mechanisms available to workers.

A note on the use of the term "violence"

The term "violence", much of which is perpetrated by students, is used throughout this report. Recognizing that education sector workers experience student-initiated workplace violence is not paramount to saying that students are violent in the conventional sense of forming intent. Indeed, children who are lashing out may well be victims of social and structural forces which deny them access to the support and resources they need to succeed.

A note on "hazards" and "harms"

We use the terms "hazards" and "harms" to describe the risks faced by education sector workers – including educational assistants, clerical workers, and custodial staff – in their workplaces. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2025) defines hazards as "any source of potential damage, harm or adverse health effects on something or someone." Hazards in the workplace can come from a wide range of sources, including "any substance, material, process, practice, etc. that has the ability to cause harm or adverse health effect to a person or property" (CCOHS, 2025). The identification, control, and elimination of hazards in the workplace typically falls under provincial jurisdiction, such as the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) in Ontario, which governs the duties and obligations of an employer. Section 32.0.1 of the OHSA states that an employer shall (a) prepare a policy with respect to workplace violence, (b) prepare a policy with respect to workplace harassment, and (c) review the policies as often as is necessary, but at least annually. The *OHSA* also stipulates that employers have a duty to protect workers from workplace violence and harassment.

Methodological approach

Between October 16 and December 30, 2023, 4,266 CUPE education sector workers completed the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey*. The questionnaire asked participants about their experiences of workplace violence (i.e., acts, attempts, and threats of physical force) and harassment (e.g., slurs, insults, and put-downs) from four different sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors) during the 2022-2023 school year, as well as the responses to these incidents. As we have done in several previous reports (see Bruckert et al., 2021; Santor et al., 2019), we assessed a number of harms and adverse effects, including physical and mental health difficulties, diminished commitment to work, workplace burnout, as well as the emergence of PTSD symptoms following the most severe instance of violence and/or harassment. The data analysis for this report was generated using SAS/STAT software, Version 9.4.

The research team

In 2018, Drs. Chris Bruckert and Darcy Santor (University of Ottawa) launched the *Violence and Harassment Against Educators Project*. Chris Bruckert is a professor of criminology, and Darcy Santor is a practicing clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology. Two doctoral students are also on the team: Darby Mallory (Criminology) and Hanya Ismail (Clinical Psychology). More information about our research can be found at www.educatorviolence.ca.

A note from the authors

We would like to thank the thousands of education sector workers who took time from their daily lives to share their experiences of workplace violence and harassment. The current survey represents one of the most in-depth examinations of the experience and impact of harassment and violence among education sector workers ever conducted in Canada.

Recommended citation

Santor, D., Ismail, H., Mallory, D., and Bruckert, C. (2025). *Canadian schools: A hazardous workplace*. Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa.

Survey Demographics

Over four thousand (N = 4,266) CUPE education sector workers completed the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey*. Participants represented a large and diverse group, varying in age, gender, race, disability status, 2SLGBTQIA+ identity, and years of experience in the education sector.

Gender: The education sector is predominantly staffed by women. It is therefore not surprising that 86% of participants identified as women, 11% identified as men, and 3% identified as other (e.g., Two-Spirited, non-binary, gender-fluid).

Race: The sample was predominantly white (86%), with 4% identifying as Indigenous and 5% identifying as racially minoritized (e.g., Black, Middle Eastern, East Asian).

Disability: While most of the sample (72%) did not identify as having a disability, 17% identified as having a diagnosed mental illness, 6% a neurodevelopmental disorder, and 4% a physical disability. In addition, 3% of the participants indicated they had a learning disability. Among those who self-identified as having a disability, the majority (66%) indicated that their disability was somewhat impairing but that they were still able to do their job. Another 12% indicated their disability was very impairing, 3% indicated that they were off work due to their disability, and the remaining 19% indicated that their disability was not at all impairing.

2SLGBTQIA+: Individuals from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were underrepresented in the sample relative to the general population – just 4% identified as 2SLGBTQIA+.

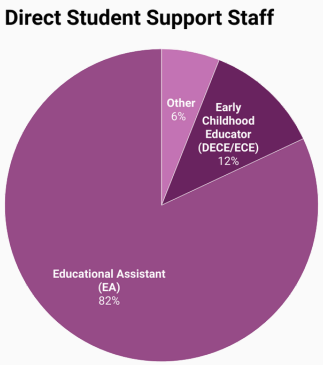
Age & Experience: The sample skewed towards seasoned workers. More than a third (39%) were over 50 years of age, and 33% were between the ages of 41 and 50. In addition, 20% were between the ages of 31 and 40, and 7% were under the age of 30. The average number of years worked in the education sector was 13.1.

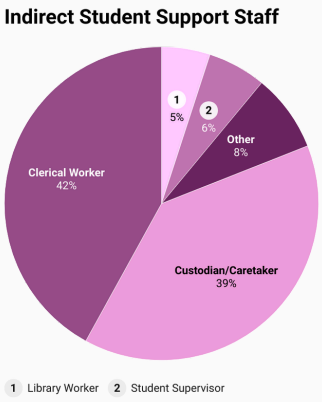
Regional groups: The majority of participants (71%) indicated that they worked in the province of Ontario, 17% in British Columbia, and 9% in Saskatchewan. The remainder of the sample (3%) worked in other provinces and territories across the country.

Professional demographics

Recognizing the range of labour processes and practices in the education sector, the survey grouped participants' primary positions into the following categories:

1. Direct Student Support Workers (e.g., Educational Assistant [EA], Early Childhood Educator [ECE], Child and Youth Worker [CYW])
2. Indirect Student Support Workers (e.g., Custodial Worker, Clerical Worker, Bus Driver)





Labour characteristics

The vast majority of participants were employed full-time (91%), and most were permanent workers (89%). Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) worked in the elementary panel (junior kindergarten through grade 8), while 27% worked in the secondary panel (grades 9 through 12). The overwhelming majority (80%) of survey respondents worked in a single school, while 20% worked in two or more schools (i.e., as supply staff or occasional workers). Over 70% of workers reported doing one or more hours of unpaid work each week.

Section 1: Rates and frequencies of violence and harassment

Traditionally, violence in schools has been conceptualized as student-to-student bullying, prompting schools to invest considerable efforts in ensuring student safety. However, maintaining a safe work environment for staff has historically received less attention, even as education sector workers across Canada are now experiencing unprecedented levels of workplace violence and harassment.

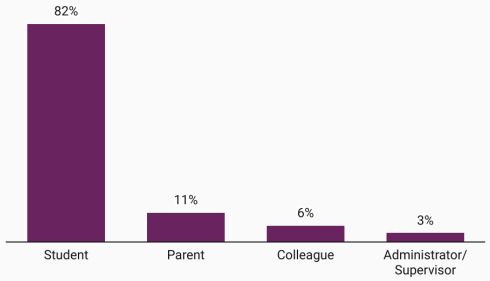
Alarmingly high rates & frequencies of violence

In the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey*, we examined both the rates and frequency of violent incidents. While rates tell us about what percentage of individuals experience different types of violence, the frequency indicates the average number of instances experienced by an individual. In the current survey, violence was defined as any act, attempt, or threat of physical force. Examples of such behaviours include: hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling, and being hit by a thrown object.

Most, but not all, violence is student-initiated

Our results indicated that 78.3% of CUPE National education sector workers reported experiencing at least one act, attempt, or threat of physical force from any of the four sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors) during the 2022-2023 school year. Overwhelmingly, the violence directed at education sector workers was student-initiated (82%).

Source of violent acts, attempts, and threats



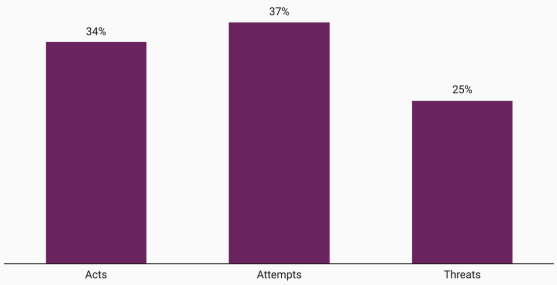
Our findings also revealed that the rates of acts, attempts, and threats of physical force were relatively comparable. Indeed, 69% of respondents reported experiencing one or more acts of physical force from a student; 72% of respondents reported experiencing one or more attempts of physical force from a student; and 59% of participants reported experiencing one or more threats of physical force from a student.

> *"I brought a dysregulated student into the calming room where he became physically violent towards me and a coworker. We removed any objects that could be used to hurt the student or us. [The] student began threatening to hurt himself and us and then hit, spit, kicked, bit, pinched, scratched, screamed, consistently for hours before finally tiring himself out. It is heartbreaking watching a child struggle so much and not being able to help them through it, as well as exhausting trying to keep students and staff safe."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Exposure to violence is frequent and ongoing

Results of our analyses indicate that the vast majority (70%) of education sector workers were exposed to repeated acts, attempts, and threats of physical force. Indeed, 34% of those surveyed had experienced more than 20 unique instances of student-initiated acts of physical force during the 2022-2023 school year. Moreover, survey participants reported slightly higher frequencies of both acts (M = 8.20) and attempts (M = 8.94) than threats of physical force (M = 6.40).

Percentage of education sector workers reporting more than 20 student-initiated acts, attempts, or threats of physical force



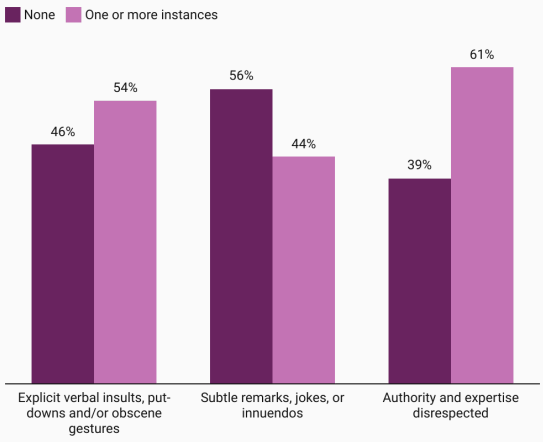
Harassment is disturbingly pervasive

Education sector workers were also surveyed about their experiences of workplace harassment. Harassment was defined as "unwelcome words or actions that are known or should be known to be offensive, embarrassing, humiliating, or demeaning to a worker or behaviour that intimidates, isolates, or discriminates against the targeted individual(s). It includes bullying, psychological harassment, and sexual harassment" (OHSA, R.S.O. 1990, Part III.0.I).

Results of the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey* showed that, as with rates of violence, rates of harassment against education sector workers are exceptionally high: 84% of workers reported experiencing harassment at least once from any of the four sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors) during the 2022-2023 school year. In addition, similar to the experience of violence, incidents of harassment were ongoing and frequent. Education sector workers reported an average of 30 unique instances of harassment during a single school year.

Unsurprisingly, education sector workers shared that harassment was largely student-initiated. Overall, 71% of participants reported one or more instances of harassment from a student, which included: (a) insults, put-downs, gestures (M = 5.11), (b) jokes or innuendo that demean (M = 3.45), (c) disrespect of authority or expertise (M = 6.56), (d) being 'ganged up' on (M = 0.46), (e) threats of false accusations (M = 0.82) and (f) actual false accusations (M = 0.54). The most common types of student-initiated harassment are depicted in the adjacent figure. Notably, one in eight participants (13.3%) experienced at least one instance of sexual harassment from a student (e.g., inappropriate gender-based comments or unwelcome sexual remarks).

Percentage of education sector workers who reported the three most common types of student-initiated harassment



> *There were many incidents. One that sticks in my mind is when I was working with a student who told me directly that if I didn't let him do what he wanted to do, he would tell the principal and his parents that I was touching him inappropriately. It was at that moment that I realized how vulnerable we could be. I didn't react to his threat at the time, just told him that he needed to do his work. Afterwards, I reported the incident to the principal and teacher, I found out that he made this threat regularly. I made sure I was not in a situation where I was alone with him again."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

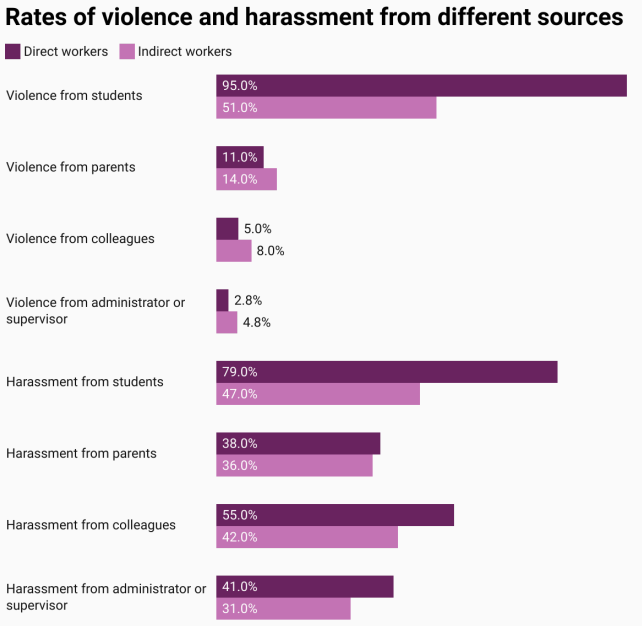
Who is at elevated risk for violence & harassment?

Not all education sector workers experienced the same levels of violence and harassment. Indirect education support workers (hereafter, “indirect workers”) (e.g., clerical workers) might be expected to experience less violence and harassment than direct education support workers (hereafter, “direct workers”) who are classroom-based (e.g., education assistants). However, our analyses revealed that exposure to violence and harassment from various sources is complex. Exposure to violence and harassment varied significantly by job type. Namely, direct workers were more likely to experience student-initiated violence, while indirect workers were more likely to experience violence from parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors. Other identity markers, such as race, gender, and age, also impacted workers’ vulnerability.

Occupational groupings

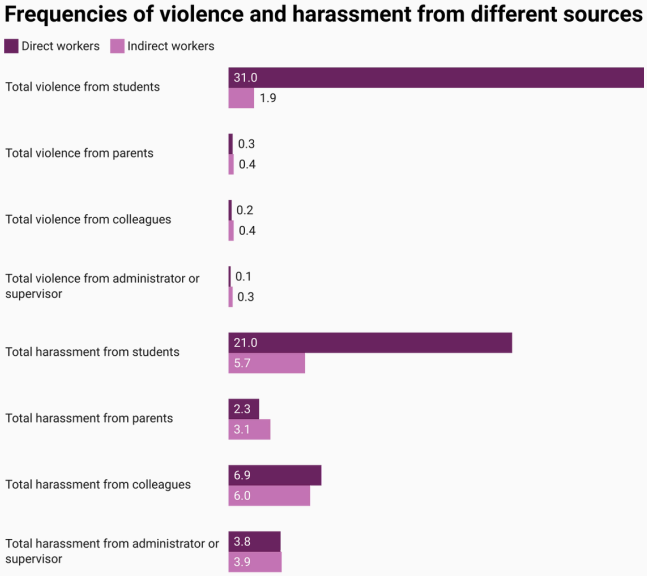
Rates of violence and harassment

Rates of violence and harassment are depicted in the adjacent figure. These results indicate that rates of violence from parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors were slightly higher for indirect workers (e.g., clerical workers) than for direct workers (e.g., educational assistants). It is notable that, despite not being classroom-based, one in two clerical workers experienced at least one instance of student-initiated violence during the 2022-2023 school year. On the other hand, direct workers reported higher rates of harassment from students, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors, as well as higher rates of violence from students, than indirect workers.



Frequency of violence and harassment

In addition to an analysis of rates, we also examined the frequency of instances of violence and harassment. Our findings indicated that direct workers generally experienced more instances of violence and harassment from students than indirect workers (see adjacent figure). On average, direct workers experienced 15 times more instances of student-initiated violence and 4 times more instances of student-initiated harassment compared to indirect workers. However, the frequency of violence and harassment from all other sources (i.e., parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors) was remarkably similar across groups.



Identity markers

Gender

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Bruckert et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019; Santor et al., 2019), the current survey found that education sector workers who identified as women were more likely to experience workplace violence than workers who identified as men. Results showed that 82% of education sector workers who identified as women reported one or more acts, attempts, or threats of physical force from a student, compared to 50% of men. Not only were women at higher risk of experiencing violence, but they also reported dramatically more incidents than men. On average, education sector workers who identified as women experienced 26 unique acts, attempts, or threats of physical force from a student(s), whereas respondents who identified as men reported an average of 12 unique instances. Notably, however, education sector workers who identified as men reported higher rates of violence from administrators/supervisors (6% vs. 3%) and colleagues (10% vs. 6%) than those who identified as women.

Rates of harassment from all sources were 20% higher among education sector workers who identified as women (86%) compared to those who identified as men (66%). Consistently, education sector workers who identified as women reported significantly higher rates of harassment from students (78% vs. 67%) and slightly higher rates of harassment from parents (48% vs. 40%) compared to education sector workers who identified as men.

Race

Differences in rates of violence and harassment between racially minoritized and white individuals were not consistent. Racially minoritized education sector workers reported higher rates of violence from colleagues (8.5% vs. 5.8%) and administrators/supervisors (5.4% vs. 3.1%) than white workers, while rates of violence from parents were equal (11% vs. 11%). In contrast, white workers experienced more violence from students (83%) compared to racially minoritized workers (75%). Patterns of harassment varied somewhat by source. Rates of harassment from colleagues were comparable between groups (51% vs. 52%), whereas white workers reported slightly higher rates of harassment from students (72% vs. 65%), parents (36% vs. 31%), and administrators/supervisors (39% vs. 34%).

Disability

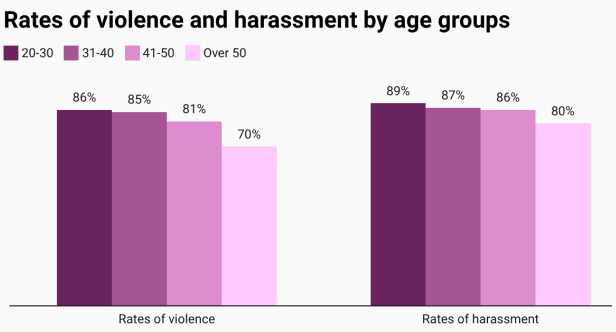
Education sector workers who identified as having a diagnosed mental health disability reported higher rates of violence (84% vs. 64%) and harassment (92% vs. 83%) than those who did not.

2SLGBTQIA+

Education sector workers who belonged to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community reported higher rates of harassment from parents (42% vs. 34%) and colleagues (64% vs. 51%) than individuals who did not so identify.

Age

Results of the survey also showed that younger education sector workers (less than 40 years of age) reported nominally higher rates of violence (86% vs. 76%) and harassment (88% vs. 83%) than more seasoned education sector workers (aged 41 and over). It is noteworthy that years of experience working in the education sector had no effect on the frequency of harassment and violence experienced.



The unrelenting, yet unsurprising, rise in violence and harassment

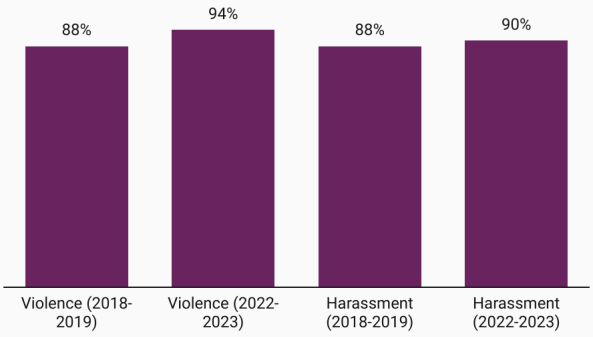
Education sector workers have been sounding the alarm about high levels of violence and harassment in schools for many years. Research on the frequency and impact of violence and harassment is only now beginning to catch up with the reality that education sector workers routinely face. Although a number of reports – largely conducted by unions and federations representing education sector workers – have documented a substantial increase in the rates of violence and harassment in recent years, few studies have directly examined the extent to which these rates have changed over time.

Comparing rates over time

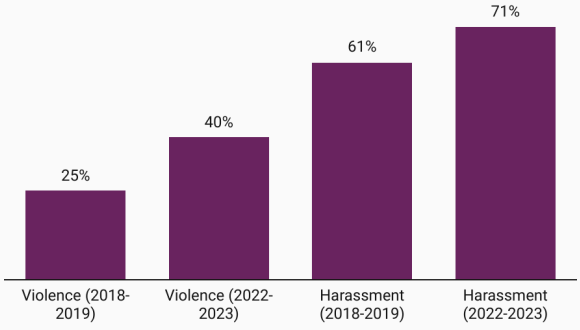
We compared the results from the current national survey with those from our 2019 survey of education sector workers in Ontario. Results demonstrate a trend of increasing rates and frequencies of violence and harassment against both direct and indirect education support workers.

In 2020, direct and indirect workers from CUPE Ontario were surveyed about their experiences of workplace violence during the 2018-2019 school year. A comparison between the results of the two surveys (2018-2019 and 2022-2023) revealed that rates of student-initiated violence have increased from high to even higher. More specifically, student-initiated violence has increased from 88% to 94% among direct workers and from 25% to 40% among indirect workers. Similarly, rates of student-initiated harassment have also increased: from 88% to 90% among direct workers and from 61% to 71% among indirect workers.

Comparison of student-initiated violence and harassment over time: Direct workers



Comparison of student-initiated violence and harassment over time: Indirect workers



> *I am dealing with so much violence this year. I lose sleep and question whether it is time to leave this profession. This really makes me sad because there are so many kids who want our help and deserve the best. The violence is out of control in the school system. Not only do staff suffer, but so does every single child who has to witness this. I have been actively looking for alternative jobs when I used to love working in this field. It makes me sad, discouraged and angry that staff and students are being impacted by violence daily. We are minimizing the effects of violence and justifying violent behaviours. No one should have to deal with any violence in a school - not our students, not our staff.*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Section 2: Impacts and harms on workers

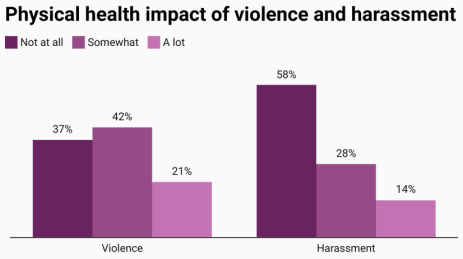
The impacts of workplace violence and harassment are deep and far-reaching, including negative effects on the health and wellbeing of education sector workers, their satisfaction and commitment to their job, the wellbeing of their families, and the learning environment in the classroom.

Health and wellbeing are being compromised

Unsurprisingly, frequent exposure to violence and harassment in the workplace, combined with a lack of interventions, support, and resources, takes a toll on workers' wellbeing and job satisfaction. The negative effects of workplace violence and harassment on the physical and mental health of education sector workers are significant and, in many instances, severe.

Physical health impact

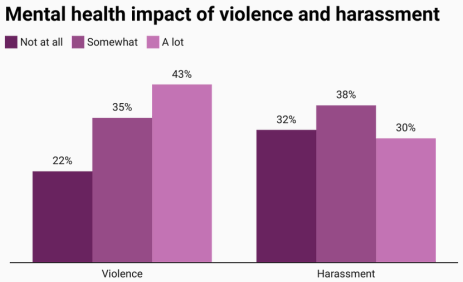
The rates of education sector workers experiencing physical health impacts due to exposure to violence and harassment were concerning: 63% of respondents reported negative physical health impacts ("somewhat" or "a lot") resulting from violence, and 42% reported such impacts from harassment.



> *I was hit across the head with a large wooden object by a student. It's been over a year and I still suffer from headaches and extreme nausea. I cannot drive because of how it has affected my vestibular system. I am back at work part-time, and I find that I am much more fearful of loud noises and very sudden movements. My cognitive abilities still suffer."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Mental health impact

The majority of respondents (78%) reported that workplace violence impacted their overall mental health 'somewhat' (35%) or 'a lot' (43%). As for harassment, 68% of participants indicated that it negatively impacted their mental health ("somewhat" or "a lot").



> *I am exhausted and frustrated daily. I have no energy left for my family. I am extremely tired and achy all the time. My anxiety is at debilitating levels at times. On weekends, it takes me until Sunday to have energy to do anything. My family life and social life suffer more than I want to share. Many of my colleagues also feel hopeless."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

In addition to assessments of overall mental health, survey participants were also asked about the degree to which the most severe instances of violence and harassment they experienced were followed by symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although not diagnostic, results demonstrated that 1 in 4 workers (26%) reported PTSD-like symptoms following their worst instance of violence, and that 1 in 5 workers (22%) reported such symptoms following their worst instance of harassment.

One Child and Youth Worker (CUPE) described their experience: "*I have PTSD from the violence in my workplace. Every aspect of my life has been affected. I stopped sleeping. I haven't slept more than 2 hours in a row in 9 months. This alone has made me unable to have a social life. I'm truly barely hanging on.*"

Rates of PTSD of this magnitude are not only alarming, but also, perhaps surprisingly, comparable to rates of PTSD typically reported by first responders. Studies examining the experiences of firefighters have found rates of PTSD that range from 13% to 18% within one to four years following large-scale response events (Benedek, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2007; Carleton, Afifi, Turner et al., 2012). Notably, however, unlike first responders, education sector workers do not generally have the level of access to health benefits required to address severe mental health illnesses, such as PTSD. Indeed, the benefits for psychological services that education sector workers receive may well be limited to just a few sessions. Moreover, unlike first responders, compensation boards' guidelines do not automatically assume that PTSD is a likely outcome of education sector workers' jobs, requiring them to appeal decisions to access the benefits they require.

> *I have had numerous attempts and threats from students that have led to me receiving a doctor's note stating that working with this student is causing me to have anxiety and panic attacks and is negatively affecting my mental health. I was working with him in his workspace when he came towards me with a pencil in a stabbing motion and said, "I want to kill you." For perspective, this student is in high school and significantly taller and stronger than me."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Time off as a result of worst incidents of violence and/or harassment

One in four education sector workers reported taking (often unpaid) time off as a result of their worst incident of harassment; over half (57%) took one to two days off and 43% took three or more days off. Importantly, 15% of participants who took time off reported being on leave for more than 4 weeks. Further, and mirroring the patterns observed for harassment, one in three education sector workers reported taking (often unpaid) time off due to their worst experience of violence. Of these, 57% took one to two days off, while 43% took three or more days. Sixteen percent of participants who took time off due to their worst experience of violence reported their leave lasted at least 4 weeks.

The erosion of job enthusiasm and commitment

The *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey* examined the professional consequences of violence and harassment, finding that many education sector workers experienced significantly reduced job satisfaction, enthusiasm, and commitment, as well as high levels of burnout. While these findings do not fully reflect the long-term impacts of repeated exposure to violence and harassment across a worker's entire career, they provide a snapshot that speaks to the devastating impacts.

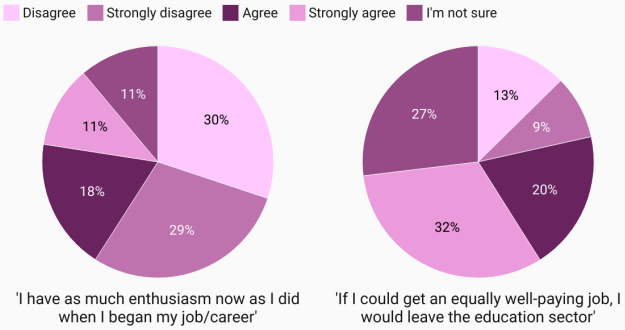
Job enthusiasm

Less than one in three respondents (30%) agreed with the statement: 'I have as much enthusiasm now as I did when I began my job/career'. This finding provides evidence of challenges to morale and decreasing job satisfaction among education sector workers. As one educational assistant described: "*All of this violence and harassment has changed me. I once had passion and excitement for what I do. I had curiosity and hope, and believed in my profession. I was commended for the joy, creativity and wonder I brought to a child's day. I was excited to collaborate with as many people as I could, because it had been instilled in me that collaboration strengthens our understanding of early learning and allows us to thrive as a community of learners. What a fairytale.*"

Job commitment

One in two (52%) respondents said they would leave the profession if they could get an equally well-paying job. Some wrote that they had already decided to leave: *"I have quit my job as an EA. There is no other job out there where you are expected to be subjected to verbal/physical abuse all the time, all the while not even making a living wage."* When existing education support workers leave the profession, the workloads of remaining employees inevitably increase, leaving students with even fewer supports.

Impact of violence and harassment on job enthusiasm and job commitment

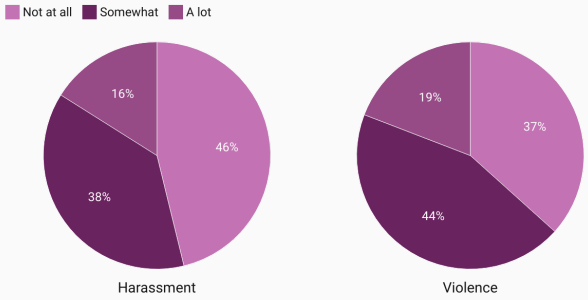


> *I will retire as soon as possible because this job isn't the same; it takes a way more physical toll than it did 10-20 years ago...It is no longer a job supporting students needing extra support academically, but rather extreme behaviour support instead."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Ability to do the job

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) reported that workplace violence negatively impacted their ability to do the job, either 'somewhat' (44%) or 'a lot' (19%). Similarly, 54% of education sector workers surveyed indicated that workplace harassment negatively impacted their ability to do the job ("somewhat" or "a lot").

Negative impact of violence and harassment on education sector workers' ability to do the job

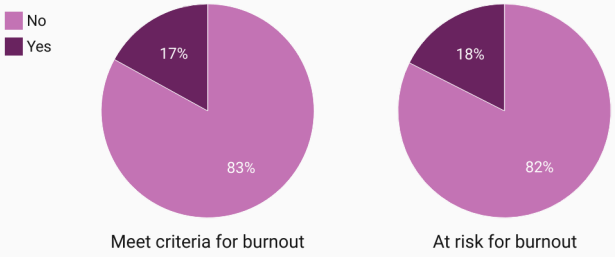


Workplace burnout

The World Health Organization (2019) defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is not a diagnosable medical condition but a work-related phenomenon marked by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of professional efficacy, often accompanied by physical and mental health difficulties. Burnout can stem from several factors, including excessive job demands, inadequate organizational support, and prolonged exposure to workplace hazards. Addressing burnout typically requires changes to working conditions; as such, it is a shared responsibility between employers and employees.

Participants were asked questions designed to screen for workplace burnout, including if they felt (1) tired or exhausted, (2) uninterested or disengaged, (3) negative or cynical, and (4) less effective or unproductive. Results showed that more than one in six respondents (17%) would be designated as meeting the formal criteria for burnout; an additional 18% would be considered at risk of burnout.

Rates of workplace burnout



One educational assistant described the severity of the situation: *"There is one word to describe our entire field right now: BURNT OUT. This job is hard work and requires a high level of patience, dedication, and skill. We represent the most violent job in Ontario right now, and we are tired. More and more people will run from this field if we don't do something drastic to change the trajectory of education in Ontario. We need more support, or these kids will continue to fall farther and farther behind."*

Comparing violence and harassment

The impacts, frequency, and significance of harassment in the workplace are often overlooked, and in fact, all too often, such behaviours are framed as "just a joke." Violence and harassment are very different experiences – violence may often result in physical harm, while harassment can result in psychological harm. In this sense, the impacts of violence are often more visible and readily recognized, whereas the harms caused by harassment may be more subtle and therefore more readily dismissed. Although both violence and harassment are routinely highlighted and addressed in labour legislation, the policies and practices that govern how schools and school boards manage incidents of violence and harassment differ significantly. For example, Ontario's *OHSA* mandates the direct reporting of all incidents of workplace violence that result in a 'critical injury' to the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. Reporting instances of physical violence or verbal harassment are still required under the *OHSA* but reports are made to a Joint Health and Safety Committee established within each school. Under Ontario's *OHSA*, employers are required to develop "measures and procedures for workers to report incidents of workplace harassment and violence to the employer or supervisor, and to another person if the employer or supervisor is the alleged harasser." Reporting of instances of violence and harassment are also required under the *Education Act* (s.300.2, s.306, s.310), namely, the Safe Schools Incident Report Form. This form explicitly identifies some, but not all, forms of violence (e.g., uttering a threat to inflict serious bodily harm on another person; bullying) but only explicitly mentions one type of verbal harassment (e.g., swearing at a teacher or at another person in a position of authority).

For a variety of reasons, there is an assumed hierarchy of harassment and violence. For example, certain types of harassment (e.g., demeaning remarks) may seem to be less severe than others (e.g., false accusations). Similarly, some types of violence (e.g., threats) may seem less severe than others (e.g., acts). However, similar to findings from previous research on elementary school teachers (Santor et al., 2019) and education support workers (Bruckert et al., 2021), results of this survey showed that every form of violence (i.e., acts, attempts, and threats of physical force) and harassment (e.g., insults, inappropriate jokes and innuendo, actual or threats of false accusations) is separately and directly related to a variety of negative impacts, including workers' physical health, mental health, and job commitment. In other words, all forms of violence and harassment have significant impacts on education sector workers.

> *"Verbal abuse from parents is the most frequent form of harassment I experience in my workplace - yelling about situations involving their child, even when I am not the person involved or able to resolve the situation. I do not feel the harassment is adequately addressed at my school. Parents are not often held accountable for the way they speak to office staff (or other school staff). It has the biggest effect on my mental health and my decision about whether I will remain in this job or seek employment in the private sector."*
>
> – Clerical Worker, CUPE

In the table below, we present the correlation coefficients between nine different types of violence and harassment with measures of job burnout, job commitment, and job satisfaction, as well as physical health and mental health. Correlation coefficients facilitate comparison across different types of violence and harassment. Correlations take on values that range from -1.0 to +1.0. A large, positive correlation (e.g., 0.3) says that as the frequency of insults, for example, increases, so does the frequency of individuals reporting difficulties with physical health, mental health, job satisfaction, and job commitment. The results shown in the table below indicate that every type of violence and harassment is directly related to workplace burnout, job commitment, and job enthusiasm, as well as physical and mental health. For example, insults were as strongly related to negative impacts as were false accusations. In terms of student-initiated violence, all three forms (i.e., acts, attempts, and threats of physical force) were positively correlated with job burnout and negatively correlated with job commitment, job satisfaction, mental health, and physical health. Similar patterns were observed for all types of harassment. In other words, as the frequency of any form of violence or harassment increases, the risk of job burnout rises, job commitment and satisfaction decrease, and mental health and physical health worsen.

	Job Burnout	**Job Commitment**	**Job Enthusiasm**	**Mental Health**	**Physical Health**
Acts of physical violence	0.28	-0.3	-0.25	-0.26	-0.24
An attempt to use physical violence	0.28	-0.31	-0.26	-0.27	-0.24
Threats to use physical violence	0.29	-0.32	-0.26	-0.26	-0.23
Sexual harassment	0.17	-0.16	-0.17	-0.15	-0.12
Insults or disparaging remarks	0.25	-0.27	-0.24	-0.24	-0.21
Jokes from a student	0.24	-0.24	-0.24	-0.24	-0.21
Authority and expertise disrespected	0.3	-0.29	-0.26	-0.26	-0.23
Ganged up on by a group of students	0.16	-0.14	-0.15	-0.13	-0.12
Threats of false accusations	0.18	-0.18	-0.17	-0.15	-0.14
Actual false accusations	0.15	-0.14	-0.16	-0.15	-0.13
Witnessing violence	0.33	-0.33	-0.27	-0.28	-0.25
Witnessing harassment	0.29	-0.29	-0.24	-0.26	-0.22

> *"I experience regular verbal attacks from a student who acts out daily. It affects your mental health and makes it difficult to look forward to going to work."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

> *"[I experience] constant verbal abuse from parents. It affects you as much as a physical punch. It has made my hands shake; I've required medication and several months off work."*
>
> – Clerical Worker, CUPE

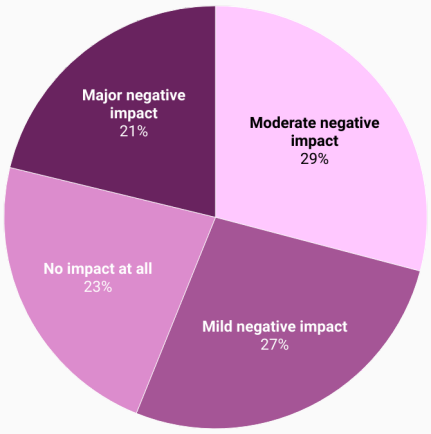
Section 3: Collateral damage

The impacts of violence and harassment go well beyond the physical and mental injuries sustained by workers. Violence and harassment also affect students in the classroom, the families of education sector workers, as well as those who witness it. Moreover, violence and harassment have a variety of economic costs, including the costs of replacing workers who are off work due to incidents of violence and harassment.

Impact on student wellbeing

Studies have shown that witnessing bullying is strongly associated with high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among middle school students (Copeland et al., 2013). The mental health impacts of witnessing bullying have been found to be particularly profound in students who were both targets and witnesses, likely due to witnessing being a form of re-victimization (Midgett & Doumas, 2019). Similarly, survey respondents reported that violence and harassment negatively affected the physical health and wellbeing of students in their school(s). Specifically, 77% of education sector workers indicated that witnessing harassment adversely impacted student wellbeing (i.e., mild, moderate, or major negative impact).

Impact of witnessing harassment on student wellbeing



> *"It is deflating to see the normalization of violence, especially against women. Students who are not exposed to violence in their homes are being traumatized by it daily in schools. We are creating a new generation of traumatized students who are all falling behind in school."*
>
> – Clerical Worker, CUPE

> *"I have worked with very physically violent students who chase, hit, kick, and bite teachers and ECEs [Early Childhood Educators]. Students who witnessed [the behaviour] would scream and be scared and frightened to be around certain students."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Impact on workers' families

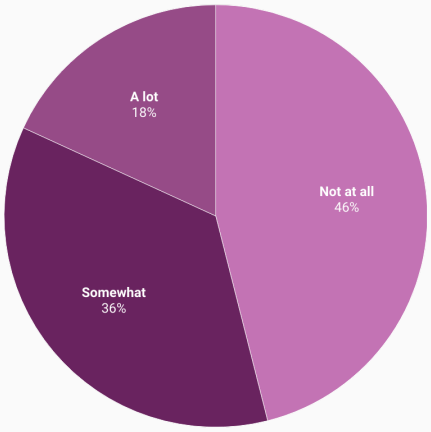
An emerging body of research on first responders has found that workplace trauma can extend beyond the individual, negatively affecting workers' relationships with their partners and families (Sharp et al., 2022). Our findings suggested that education sector workers experience similar spillover effects. Specifically, more than half of respondents (54%) reported that workplace violence negatively impacted their personal relationships ('somewhat' or 'a lot'), while 39% reported the same for workplace harassment.

As one Educational Assistant (CUPE) wrote: "I feel like I don't have any energy to spend with family/friends. I want to be alone and sleep a lot to forget about my day. I have less patience with my loved ones."

> *My partner knows that the first 15-20 minutes after I am off will be a venting session daily; then I will need 20 minutes to myself to simply decompress. This is the time I need to just be able to function. I go to bed much earlier now and at 31, I simply should not be this exhausted. My partner is a labourer and is nowhere near as drained after their work day."*
>
> – Clerical Worker, CUPE

> *It is very draining and impacts how I feel and the energy I have at the end of the day when I'm home. I'm often exhausted and have very little interest in cooking, cleaning, or other activities with my family. Often I am "touched out" which is hard when my kids would like to sit with me or cuddle."*
>
> – Early Childhood Educator, CUPE

Impact of violent incidents on personal relationships outside of work (e.g., friends, family)



These results highlight the importance of taking a holistic approach to evaluating the impact of violence and harassment; attending not only to the health and wellbeing of education sector workers, but also to the impact on family members who become collateral damage.

The impact of "just" witnessing violence and harassment

Instances of workplace violence and harassment in schools are frequently witnessed by others. Indeed, the results of the survey showed that 83% and 70% of participants witnessed an instance of violence and harassment, respectively. Furthermore, results showed that 82% of participants witnessed at least one student-initiated act, attempt, or threat of physical force against a co-worker, with an average of 10 incidents during the 2022-2023 school year. In addition, more than one in five (23%) witnessed at least one parent-initiated act, attempt, or threat of physical force against a colleague. Just 554 (13%) of the education sector workers surveyed reported not experiencing or witnessing any violence, and 507 workers (12%) reported not experiencing or witnessing any harassment.

Research on healthcare professionals has demonstrated that there are serious and enduring impacts of witnessing workplace violence, including psychological distress, fear, hypervigilance, moral distress, and guilt (Jeffery & Fuller, 2016; Opie et al., 2010; Tee et al., 2016). Such studies suggest that witnessing violence and harassment constitutes another type of exposure that can impact an individual's health and wellbeing. However, separating the impact of witnessing violence and harassment from the direct experience of violence and harassment can be difficult, given that most individuals who witness such instances will also have experienced it themselves. This is particularly true in schools, where, as we have established, violence and harassment against education sector workers are pervasive. Here, quantitative methods can help disentangle the effects of direct experience from witnessing and assess whether witnessing carries additional adverse consequences.

Results of this survey demonstrated that education sector workers had increasingly poorer mental and physical health as the frequency of witnessing violence and harassment increased. Our statistical analysis indicated that the experience of witnessing violence and harassment was still related to poor physical

physical health and mental health, even after accounting for direct exposures to violence or harassment. In other words, regardless of whether the individual experienced violence and/or harassment themselves, witnessing an incident was enough to predict poor physical and mental health outcomes. As such, we can conclude that working in schools exposes staff to hazards that arise not only from direct experiences of violence and harassment but also from witnessing such incidents.

> *A colleague had her head struck against the wall by a student. She has experienced a traumatic brain injury. The impact it has had on me is a general, constant sense of fear for myself and others. I am always thinking about how I approach students, and I am always in fight or flight mode."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

> *I love my job, but the violence I witness every year and the lack of support make me want to quit. I used to help students with their work, and now I teach behaviour management and follow students around the school when they don't listen. The schools are hurting, and soon there won't be enough support to keep us afloat."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

The economic cost of violence and harassment

Undoubtedly, some workers required time off following their worst experiences of violence or harassment. The analysis below estimates the economic costs of replacing employees (e.g., with substitute EAs) who are off due to injury or illness related to these incidents. These high costs underscore the urgent need to address workplace violence and harassment in the education sector.

Replacement costs of a single instance of harassment or violence

Of the 3,166 (71%) education support workers who reported a significant incident of physical violence in the 2022-2023 school year, 1,062 individuals (33%) reported taking time off work. The mean number of days taken off work for the 1,062 individuals was 6.17. Using the per diem rate of $132.00 (roughly $22/hour), the cost associated with hiring a replacement worker is $814.19 per year for a single instance.

Of the 2,674 (61%) individuals who reported a significant incident of harassment in the 2022-2023 school year, 670 individuals (25%) reported taking time off work. The mean number of days taken off work for the 670 individuals was 5.9. Using the per diem rate of $132.00, the cost associated with hiring a replacement worker is $781 per year for a single instance.

Estimating population-level costs

If we extend these rates and costs to the entire population of education sector workers, some 130,000 EAs, ECEs, administrative and custodial staff, we can estimate the financial costs associated incurred in hiring replacement workers for individuals who require time off following a single instance of violence or harassment.

If we assume that 33% of the 71% of workers who experienced a worst instance of violence take time off, this translates to approximately 43,607 education sector workers missing an average of 6.17 workdays per person per year, at an estimated cost of $814.19 per person annually, amounting to roughly $35.5 million in replacement costs each year. It is important to keep in mind that this only estimates the costs associated with one incident (of violence) in just a single year.

If we assume that 25% of the 61% of workers who experienced their worst nstance of harassment take time off, this translates to approximately 32,572 education sector workers missing an average of 5.9 workdays per person per year, at an estimated cost of $781 per person annually, amounting to

roughly $25 million in replacement costs each year. It is important to keep in mind that this only estimates the costs associated with one incident (of violence and harassment) across a single year.

> *Education workers are struggling mightily. Support staff are struggling mentally, financially, and are at severe risk of burnout. Support staff are actively seeking new careers that are less stressful and with better or similar pay. It will be increasingly difficult to find new people to do this job with the current violence and stress levels combined with ridiculously low pay. The education system will become even harder to work in when the decline in support staff makes violence and stress an even bigger concern for the remaining staff."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Section 4: The institutional management of hazards and harms

The high rates of violence and harassment (see Section 1) experienced by survey respondents raise important questions about how organizations, administrators, and education sector workers respond to such incidents. And, relatedly, questions about how individuals and organizations can mitigate the frequency and impact of violence and harassment.

The identification, control, and elimination of hazards in the workplace typically falls under the jurisdiction of provinces. For example, in Ontario, *the Occupation Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) establishes the duties and obligations of the employer with respect to a number of workplace hazards, including violence and harassment (R.S.O. 1990, c. 01). This includes identifying hazards, assessing risks, and implementing measures to control, minimize, or eliminate those hazards and harms, as well as measures to enforce and ensure compliance. The main purpose of the OHSA is "to provide the legal framework to achieve our goal of protecting workers from health and safety hazards on the job by, setting out duties for all workplace parties and rights for workers to help establish a strong *internal responsibility system* (IRS) in the workplace, establishing measures and procedures for dealing with workplace hazards and providing for enforcement of the law where compliance has not been achieved voluntarily" (Government of Ontario, 2022).

The internal responsibility system (IRS) within the OHSA legislation articulates a number of employer and worker responsibilities. For example, workers who witness a health and safety problem, such as a hazard or contravention of the OHSA guidelines, have a statutory duty to report the situation to their employer or supervisor. Employers and supervisors are required to address those situations and acquaint workers with any hazards. In addition to preparing policies that prevent violence and harassment, the legislation also stipulates the duties of the employer with respect to both violence and harassment, including how incidents or complaints of workplace violence and harassment are to be investigated and addressed.

> *To address the issues of violence and harassment against workers in the education sector, [schools] need to properly assess and identify hazards of violence, create safety plans and policies, develop and implement emergency and communication procedures, [and] have training programs to help workers diffuse potential violent situations."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Underreporting of violence and harassment

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) establishes shared legal responsibility for both employers and employees to report instances of violence and harassment. Despite clear expectations and, in many instances, legal requirements, most instances of workplace violence and harassment in schools are not formally reported.

Formal reporting

Most schools have procedures in place for reporting an instance of violence. In Ontario, for example, this is referred to as a Safe Schools Incident Reporting Form. Education sector workers are required to complete and submit this form when incidents of violence occur in the workplace. Completing the form takes time, and in most jurisdictions, relies on school administrators forwarding the information to the school board.

Overall, 57% of the sample indicated they had formally reported at least one incident of violence or harassment, while more than 4 in 10 participants did not formally report any incidents. Our analyses revealed, however, that participants formally reported far fewer incidents than they experienced – on average, participants formally reported just 2.5 unique incidents of violence and/or harassment, which was significantly lower than the average number of incidents they had experience (i.e., 25 unique instances of violence and 30 unique instances of harassment during a single school year). Further evidence that instances of violence and harassment are not being formally reported comes from some 68% of education sector workers who indicated that they experienced one or more instances of violence that should have been reported but were not.

Taken together, our findings suggest that any estimate concerning the prevalence or frequency of violence and harassment occurring in schools that is gathered, interpreted, or disseminated by school boards and/or Ministries of Education will represent a significant underestimate of the number of such incidents being experienced by education sector workers. Consequently, the allocation of resources are often based on information that fails to capture the full extent and impacts of the violence and/or harassment faced by education sector workers in schools.

Reasons for not formally reporting

Participants indicated several reasons why they did not formally report incidents of violence or harassment, the most common of which were: that 'it would not result in changes or improvements' (31%), that they 'did not have the time [to file a report] because of routine workplace demands' (27%), or that they 'felt the incident was too minor to warrant a report' (24%).

> *"I did not have access to the forms, or the time to fill them out. I was strongly discouraged about half the time. I was told things like 'the vice principal is too busy, don't bother him'. I would be discouraged and told about mitigating factors."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

> *"Honestly, I was told to report it in an effort to 'put it on paper' and record the incident so that will follow this student around in their file, but nobody looks at those. Educators don't have time to read these, and we sometimes don't even get the students' records until midway through the school year, so I knew it was pointless."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Informal reporting

In addition to investigating the extent to which incidents of violence were formally reported, we also examined the frequency with which education sector workers made informal reports to their administrators or supervisors about workplace violence or harassment. Results suggested that rates of informal reporting were in fact higher than rates of formal reporting. Indeed, more than two-thirds of respondents (69%) 'always' or 'often' informed their administrator or supervisor about an instance of workplace violence or harassment.

Reasons for not informally reporting

The most common reasons participants indicated for not informally reporting workplace violence or harassment were: they 'felt that the incident was too minor or [that they] could deal with it on their own' (19%), that 'talking to an administrator or supervisor would not be helpful' (19%), or that '[they] did not have the time to file a report because of routine workplace demands' (18%).

> *"My admin routinely says we should have done things differently or questions how we handled it. They are not in our shoes and it's easier for them to blame the EA rather than just help us deal with the situation or provide any actual resources to mitigate further incidents."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

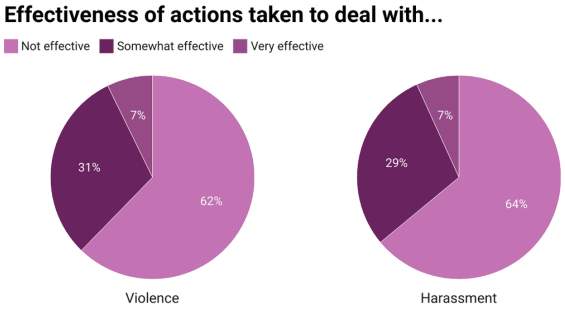
Proactive and dismissive responses

Our analyses found that safety plans were rarely implemented, despite the known benefits of proactive strategies. Indeed, only 18% of respondents indicated that safety plans were 'always' put in place (or updated) following violent incidents, and 26% reported this was 'often' the case. On the other hand, 10% indicated that no safety plan was implemented in response to an instance of violence they experience, while 19% said they were rarely implemented. Similar findings emerge in relation to behaviour management strategies: less than 32% of participants indicated behaviour management strategies were 'always' or 'often' put in place (or updated) following an instance of harassment.

Effectiveness of responses

We asked participants about the effectiveness of actions taken to deal with the violence and harassment they experience. Most participants reported that actions taken by their administrator or supervisor following an incident of violence were not effective (62%). Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (64%) of participants reported that actions taken by their administrator or supervisor following an incident of harassment were not effective.

We also surveyed participants with respect to the effectiveness of proactive responses, such as safety plans. Results showed that even when implemented, only one third (33%) of participants reported that these plans were 'somewhat effective' and just 3% said 'very effective'.



> *They usually blame us for the students' actions and behaviour, saying, 'What did you do to cause this behaviour?' We don't get asked if we are okay after, [we are] just expected to carry on with the day as if nothing happened. Parents are usually not even called to pick up their kids."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Dismissive responses

Whether proactive strategies, such as safety plans, are implemented will likely depend on a variety of factors that include the availability of resources, as well as administrators' attitudes toward reporting incidents of violence. Results of the national survey showed that the seriousness of instances of violence was frequently minimized by administrators and that education sector workers were often blamed. Nearly one in three participants (31%) indicated they were blamed for student-initiated violence or harassment at least once during the 2022-2023 school year.

> *"My principal was condescending and dismissive when I tried to report, said 'We should be thankful to have a job.' She did nothing but set us up for failure. I had to call my union who was very good and stoof up for me but then the principal was mad so I was given extra duties, she increased my hours and she wouldn't take into consideration my accommodations."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Consequences of reporting

In addition to collecting information on the prevalence of workplace violence and harassment, the survey examined workers' experiences with administrative responses and potential consequences of reporting.

Being treated unfairly

More than one in four (28%) participants indicated they felt they were treated 'unfairly' by their administrators or supervisors. Feeling unfairly treated may serve as a powerful disincentive to reporting any future incidents of workplace violence and/or harassment. In some cases, this unfair treatment escalates into reprisals against those who report incidents.

> *"We had the bus driver complaining about students on the bus. We said to fill out bus reports, our admin came out a yelled at us for suggesting it as we are not allowed to do so. Then I got the cold shoulder for several days and watched while we did bus duty."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Reprisals for reporting

In many jurisdictions, legislation requires that employees report incidents of violence they have experienced or witnessed. However, despite this statutory obligation to report, 1 in 15 participants (6%) indicated that they experienced some form of reprisal from their administrator or supervisor after they (formally or informally) reported an incident of workplace violence.

Interestingly, 8% of respondents indicated that they preferred not to answer this question, despite the survey being designed to be entirely anonymous (i.e., no personal identifying information was collected). It is noteworthy that no other question in the entire survey had such a high rate of prefer-not-to-answer responses.

> *"I filled out a Critical Incident Report after I was severely injured by a student on my upper thigh. It broke my skin and left a very large bruise. Our Division Principal called my school principal within an hour, and my principal was in the classroom reprimanding me for reporting. My administrator said that 'I should not have filled out the form because of the student's diagnosis.' This despite having been injured and being told to report any incidents that result in injury."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Risks of reprisals are not equal

Existing research has demonstrated that the risk of reprisals in the workplace is influenced by identity characteristics, such as gender, race, and ethnicity (Kurdo & Rothbard, 2023; Santor, Mallory & Bruckert, 2025; Tung & Padin, 2020). Our analyses found much the same.

Our research found rates of reprisals to be considerably higher for workers who identified as having a diagnosed mental health disability. Specifically, 12% of respondents who reported a diagnosed mental health disability indicated experiencing a reprisal for reporting workplace violence and/or harassment, compared to 6% of those without a diagnosed mental health disability — a rate of reprisal double that of those without mental health difficulties.

Similar findings were observed among workers who identified as belonging to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Specifically, 12% of education sector workers who identified as belonging to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community experienced a reprisal for reporting workplace violence and/or harassment, compared to 7% of workers who did not so identify.

> *I was being beat up daily by a student, multiple reports were completed but nothing was being done. I finally went to the union for support. The principal pulled me into the office for a meeting and tried to make it sound like the incidents were my fault, changed my schedule, and gave me duties that were extremely difficult for me to undertake with my physical limitations. They also changed my work hours so that I could no longer get to my physiotherapist appointment in time) which I have been doing for over a year). I feel these actions were deliberately attacks on me for reporting."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

The impact of reprisals and responsibilization

Results of the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey* showed that, compared to workers who did not experience any reprisals, workers who experienced a reprisal for reporting an instance of violence or harassment also reported poorer mental health (4.21 vs. 5.72), poorer physical health (4.79 vs. 5.95) and less job satisfaction (5.42 vs. 7.08). This pattern of results was not different when comparing individuals who 'prefer not to answer.'

As demonstrated above, 31% of respondents reported being blamed by their administrator or supervisor following an incident of student-initiated violence or harassment. Subsequent analyses indicated that workers who were blamed by their administrator or supervisor also reported poorer mental health (4.45 vs. 5.65), poorer physical health (4.97 vs. 5.87) and less job satisfaction (5.79 vs. 7.07) compared to workers who did not experience any blame. These findings suggest that administrators and/or supervisors' tendencies to blame or responsibilize workers not only compound the harms of workplace violence but also undermine workers' overall wellbeing and job satisfaction.

> *"My admin denied everything and made it seem as though I was incompetent and difficult. I started to believe it until a coworker pointed out to me that I had never had issues with any admin or staff until I had reported the unsafe working conditions in our school caused by violence and harassment. I realized then that as a 'whistleblower' I was being targeted. I was nervous every day going to work, and felt uneasy all year."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Section 5: Conclusion

Analysis of the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey* found that 84% of education sector workers had experienced at least one act, attempt, or threat of physical force during the 2022-2023 school year and that some 95% had experienced at least one instance of harassment that same year. Moreover, education sector workers across Canada can expect to experience an average of 25 instances of violence and 30 instances of harassment during a single school year. Our analyses also revealed that certain workers are at elevated risk for violence and harassment from different sources. The alarmingly high rates and frequencies of both violence and harassment, coupled with the widespread normalization of such incidents (Mallory et al., 2024), highlight the urgent need to address this issue in Canadian schools.

This report provides a snapshot of the troubling realities that education sector workers are experiencing in schools across Canada. Our findings demonstrate that most, if not all, workers will experience violence and harassment on a near-weekly basis throughout the school year, and consequently, across most of their careers. The frequency and intensity of such incidents are staggering. The long-term effects of workplace violence and harassment have not been fully explored, but the survey makes clear the enduring costs for education sector workers, including negative impacts on their health, their job commitment and satisfaction, and their families.

Canadian schools are hazardous workplaces

Given these high rates of violence and harassment, combined with the wide-ranging impacts on the physical health, mental health, and job performance of workers, schools can and should be viewed as hazardous workplaces. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) (2025) states that hazards in the workplace can come from a wide range of sources, including "any substance, material, process, practice, etc. that has the ability to cause harm or adverse health effect to a person or property." These factors make schools not only challenging but genuinely hazardous workplaces for those who work within them.

Typically, hazards are distinguished from harms. For example, improperly managed materials on a construction site represent a hazard, while the physical injuries that workers sustain are considered harm. The CCOHS (2025) provides a broad definition of hazards that has been adopted by most provincial regulatory agencies. According to this definition, a hazard can include not only physical dangers, such as the improper storage of toxic materials, but also organizational factors, such as a lack of oversight. In a school setting, workplace hazards take different forms.

It is our position that exposure to violence and harassment should be considered one of several workplace hazards, as we have demonstrated that they negatively affect workers' physical health, mental health, and job commitment. Similarly, insufficient oversight, the failure to implement policies that protect workers from reprisals for reporting, and a lack of meaningful action to address longstanding exposure to harassment and violence also constitute significant hazards in the education sector.

> *I am passionate about what I do. It means everything to me. I will not walk away voluntarily. That being said, every day I walk into work wondering if this is the day I end up hospitalized or permanently injured. "*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Undoubtedly, the way violence and harassment is managed in schools can either mitigate or exacerbate the risks and harms experienced by education sector workers. A workplace in which violence and harassment are not systematically reported, safety and behavioural management plans are not routinely implemented, or where workers face reprisals for reporting violence and harassment, is dangerous. The manner in which violence and harassment are currently being managed (if at all) in school settings constitutes an additional and frequently overlooked hazard to education sector workers.

Education sector workers are on the frontline of Canadian schools

Historically, the work of education sector workers has not been viewed as hazardous in nature, unlike the work of first responders, such as firefighters and police. However, like firefighters and police, education sector workers are frontline workers and their exposure to violence and harassment is significant, often resulting in levels of post-traumatic symptoms sufficiently severe to designate a person with PTSD. Our study used a similar methodology to estimate rates as was used in other studies that examined first responders. Our findings suggest that the number of education sector workers that could be designated with PTSD is comparable to rates reported by first responders (Benedek, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2007; Carleton, Afifi, Turner et al., 2012). However, unlike other studies, we examined the impact of a single 'worst' instance of violence and harassment during a one year period. Results of the study showed that approximately 1 in 4 education sector workers reported PTSD-like symptoms after their 'worst' instance of violence and harassment during the past year.

> *When education staff have to wear protective helmets, Kevlar, and padded vests to do their jobs, and we have to take punches to the face and head every day, things have gotten out of control. Human beings cannot handle this kind of violence every day. We are normalizing violence, and that is not okay. We need PTSD to be recognized in education so that we can actually get the help we desperately need. It is documented that our job has one of the highest rates of physical violence, yet we have not been included under the PTSD guidelines so that we can have the mental health supports so many of us need."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Recommendations

Findings from the 2022-2023 *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey* provide clear evidence to demonstrate that Canadian schools should be viewed as hazardous workplaces. Education sector workers across Canada are experiencing extremely high levels of violence and harassment in their workplaces, yet institutional efforts to prevent and address this crisis have thus far fallen short. Recognizing schools as hazardous workplaces, as many education sector workers already do, is a critical first step toward meaningful change. Framing schools in this way underscores the need for targeted strategies to identify, manage, and mitigate workplace hazards and harms. To this end, we outline five key recommendations aimed at improving the management and reduction of workplace violence and harassment in Canadian schools.

> *The education system is a disaster right now. The amount of violence within the school is unacceptable and needs to be addressed immediately. It is not a healthy place to work, nor is it a healthy place to learn. "*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

1. Inspecting schools as a hazardous workplace

If schools were a construction site, there would be regular monitoring of the worksite, given the risks associated with the work.

In Ontario, for example, the Workplace Safety and Prevention Services (WSPS) requires that a representative or a designated worker member of the Joint Health and Safety Committee of the workplace "inspect the workplace once a month." If a sitewide inspection of the workplace is not practical once a month, then one part of the workplace must be inspected once a month, and the entire workplace must be inspected once a year. Similar obligations regarding workplace inspections are also delineated under Part II of the *Canada Labour Code*. Designating schools as a hazardous workplace would establish minimum safety standards subject to regular third-party monitoring. In addition, schools would undergo routine inspections to ensure compliance and reassess the need for tailored safety measures to mitigate and manage workplace violence and harassment.

2. Refusing unsafe work

If schools were a construction site, workers would be made aware of and supported when they exercised their right to refuse unsafe work.

In most jurisdictions, workers across most sectors are permitted to refuse work that is deemed to be unsafe. For example, Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act* states, "[a]ny worker who thinks that a piece of equipment or an activity is unsafe to himself/herself or another worker may refuse to use that equipment or do that activity. Simply stating that something is unsafe is enough to start the work refusal process." While the frequency of work refusals remains unknown, given the high rates of workplace violence identified in our survey, education sector workers across Canada should be made aware of their right to refuse work on the grounds that workplace violence is likely to endanger them (OHSA, b.1).

Exercising the right to refuse unsafe work could be a helpful step in addressing workplace hazards because the supervisor or employer must investigate the unsafe conditions immediately, in the presence of the worker and along with another representative of the worker. If the worker continues a work refusal after the completion of the employer's investigation (i.e., if the working conditions remain unsafe), the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development inspector will be notified and is required to investigate the refusal in consultation with the worker and the employer (or a representative of the employer). The inspector must decide whether the circumstances that led to the work refusal are likely to endanger the worker (or another person). The inspector's decision must be given, in writing, to the worker, the employer, and the worker representative, if there is one.

According to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (R.S.O., 1990, s. 6), when work is refused because the work is unsafe, the employer is not permitted to (a) dismiss or threaten to dismiss a worker; (b) discipline or suspend or threaten to discipline or suspend a worker; (c) impose any penalty upon a worker; or (d) intimidate or coerce a worker." Nevertheless, given that 1 in 4 workers surveyed had experienced a reprisal for reporting violence or harassment, workers may rightly be worried about their employer taking disciplinary action against them following a work refusal. Workers may also feel unable to exercise this right because it poses a risk to their reputation or job security, or because doing so may risk the safety of other co-workers. These concerns highlight why individual work refusals, while legally protected, are difficult to undertake in practice. Empowering workers and supporting union efforts to collectively assert their health and safety rights remains imperative to ensuring protections against workplace violence.

3. Receiving immediate assistance

If the work of education sector workers were viewed as hazardous, there would be an expectation of immediate assistance from an administrator or supervisor when a violent incident occurs.

Most first responders can expect immediate assistance when their lives are at risk. Police units are organized ito ensure an officer can request and expect timely backup in situations in which they are at risk of physical harm. Secondary police units are frequently dispatched in as many as 50% of initial calls in some jurisdictions (Taylor et al., 2014). In law enforcement, receiving immediate assistance is not merely an expectation, but an obligation. Further, more than a decade ago, the RCMP implemented a policy that restricts officers from responding to violent or potentially violent situations on their own. These measures are intended to safeguard workers from potential violence arising in the context of their work.

In Ontario, the *OHSA* obliges employers to establish workplace violence and harassment programs. The *OHSA* states that a workplace violence program must include "measures and procedures for summoning immediate assistance when workplace violence occurs or is likely to occur" (Ministry of Labour, 2023, p. 10). Currently, as violent incidents occur routinely and concurrently throughout a school, workers are often left without additional support to de-escalate a violent incident while ensuring the safety of other students and themselves. One educational assistant (CUPE) explained: "*In my school, if you call for help during a violent incident, help is not sent or is slow to arrive. My principal won't respond; instead, we are told EAs should work as a team to support one another, but we are chronically short-staffed and dealing with multiple issues, so there are never additional EAs who could respond*."

An example of how this *OHSA* obligation could be met would be through additional funding to ensure that each school employs at least one supplemental staff person (i.e., a worker not directly assigned to students) tasked with responding to incidents and providing immediate assistance to workers who are at risk for violence. Depending upon the specific size or type of school, more than one additional staff member may be required.

4. Implementing the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

In January 2013, the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (CSA Group, 2013) was introduced in Canada, in part, to address the increasing social and economic costs of mental health difficulties in the workplace. The National Standard sought to define, for the first time, the characteristics of a healthy workplace and the types of workplace hazards that could be expected to undermine the mental health of employees. The National Standard defines a "psychologically healthy and safe workplace" as a workplace that "actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless or intentional ways, and promotes psychological well-being" (CSA Group, 2013). This National Standard is intended to guide employers and unions on how to identify, assess, eliminate, and control psychological hazards, and how to foster and promote psychological health and safety in the workplace (CSA Group, 2013). Implementing a National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in schools is a step forward in protecting education sector workers from the harmful effects of workplace violence and harassment. By providing a structured framework to identify, prevent, and address these risks, schools can strive to maintain safer working conditions, thereby reducing workplace harms and improving retention.

5. Providing health benefits that are commesurate with the risks and harms in the workplace

In certain occupational contexts, PTSD is formally recognized as an inherent risk of the work itself. For first responders, a diagnosis of PTSD is generally presumed to have arisen out of and in the course of employment, given the nature of their duties (Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, 2016; Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, 2023). As WSIB policy states, "If a first responder or other designated worker is diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and meets specific employment and diagnostic criteria, the first responder or other designated worker's PTSD is presumed to have arisen out of and in the course of their employment, unless the contrary is shown" (WSIB, 2023). This presumption applies to a wide range of workers, including police officers, paramedics, firefighters, nurses providing direct patient care, and dispatchers.

Education sector workers, however, are excluded from this presumption despite experiencing comparable rates of PTSD and sustained exposure to workplace violence. Instead, these workers are required to prove that their PTSD was directly caused by their job. This requirement persists even though educational assistances reported more instances of physical violence resulting in time off work due to injury to WSIB between 2014 and 2018 than any other group of Public Service Health and Safety Association employees, including police officers, firefighters, and correctional workers (Public Service Health and Safety Association, 2021). Extending a presumption of work-related PTSD to education workers is therefore critical, as it acknowledges the structural nature of workplace violence in education and removes the burden of proof from individual workers.

Recognizing PTSD as an occupational risk also has direct implications for access to health benefits. For example, police officers in Ottawa have been entitled to unlimited psychological services since 2017 (Pfeffer, 2017). In contrast, education sector workers have limited access to employment-based health benefits, and are more likely to occupy precarious positions that have fewer contractual protections (Schofield et al., 2017). These disparities restrict workers' ability to access timely and adequate healthcare services following incidents of workplace violence. Ensuring that PTSD is recognized as an occupational hazard in education, and that health insurance coverage is commensurate with that risk, is therefore essential to address inequities in access to workplace protections.

> *"WSIB denied my claim of PTSD from violence in the workplace. They said that because the student was only in kindergarten, it was not possible that they could cause PTSD. This incident was 'the straw that broke the camel's back' for me. I have YEARS of WSIB claims from violent students. They think it's no big deal if a little kid physically acts out."*
>
> – Educational Assistant, CUPE

Final remarks

Education systems across Canada are in crisis. This is a crisis that has been long in the making, arising from a number of interrelated factors, including chronic underfunding of the education system, understaffing in schools, and poor working conditions. This report has highlighted unprecedented levels of violence and harassment against education sector workers and the widespread failure on the part of institutions to manage or mitigate workplace hazards and harms. Addressing workplace violence and harassment in schools relies on the willingness of employers, government agents, and stakeholders to address and improve the working conditions for all employees. Over one hundred years ago, thousands of workers across Winnipeg rallied to demand better working conditions when employers failed to maintain safe workplaces. We are all better because of their efforts.

Works Cited

Austin, S. (2025, May 14). *Violence, harassment and burnout: Ontario's education workers are in crisis, study finds*. Toronto Star. https://www.thestar.com/news/ontario/violence-harassment-and-burnout-ontarios-education-workers-are-in-crisis-study-finds/article_ac79b129-d6e0-4d93-a2fc-9bac94912c58.html.

Brewin, C. R., Andrews, B., & Gotlib, I. H. (1993). Psychopathology and Early Experience: A Reappraisal of Retrospective Reports. *Psychological Bulletin, 113*(1), 82–98. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.113.1.82.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2013). Workplace violence against government employees, 1994–2011 (Special Report No. NCJ 241349) [PDF]. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved from https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/wvage9411.pdf.

Buyse, K., Goorts, K., Peeters, D., Dhondt, E., & Portzky, G. (2023). Sexual harassment at work within Belgian Defence: a prevalence study. *BMJ Military Health, 169*(5), 397–402.

Chatziioannidis I, Bascialla FG, Chatzivalsama P, et al. (2017). Prevalence, causes and mental health impact of workplace bullying in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit environment. *BMJ Open*. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-018766.

Chen, C., Smith, P. M., & Mustard, C. (2019). Gender differences in injuries attributed to workplace violence in Ontario 2002–2015. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 76*(1), 3-9. https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2018-105152.

Cousineau, A., Zhang, G., & Brinkmeyer, C. (2024). *2023 Workplace Violence Survey*. Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation. Toronto, ON.

CSA Group (2013). Psychological health and safety in the workplace: Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation. National Standard of Canada.

Dzuka, J., & Dalbert, C. (2007). Student Violence Against Teachers: Teachers' Well-Being and the Belief in a Just World. *European Psychologist, 12*(4), 253–260. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040.12.4.253.

El Ghaziri, M., Simons, S., Lipscomb, J., Storr, C. L., McPhaul, K., London, M., Trinkoff, A. M., & Johnson, J. V. (2020). Understanding the impact of bullying in a unionized U.S. public sector workforce. *Workplace Health & Safety, 68*(3), 139–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/2165079919883286.

Fox, S., & Stallworth, L. (2010). The battered apple: An application of stressor-emotion-control/support theory to teachers' experience of violence and bullying. *Human Relations, 63*(7), 927–954. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709349518.

Galarneau, J. M., Durand-Moreau, Q., & Cherry, N. (2024). Reported harassment and mental ill-health in a Canadian prospective cohort of women and men in welding and electrical trades. *Annals of Work Exposures and Health, 68*(3), 231–242. https://doi.org/10.1093/annweh/wxad083.

Gale, S. T., Nabe-Nielsen, K., & Burr, H. (2019). The impact of workplace harassment on health in a working cohort. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*(1181). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01181.

Gates, D. M., Gillespie, G. L., & Succop, P. (2011). Violence against nurses and its impact on stress and productivity. *Nurs Econ, 29*(2), 59-66.

Gerberich, G., Nachreiner, M., Ryan, D., Church, R., Mcgovern, M., Geisser, S., & Pinder, D. (2011). Violence Against Educators: A Population-Based Study. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 53*(3), 294–302. https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0b013e31820c3fa1.

Gregory, A., Cornell, D., & Fan, X. (2012). Teacher Safety and Authoritative School Climate in High Schools. *American Journal of Education, 118*(4), 401–425. https://doi.org/10.1086/666362.

Hendrikx, L. J., Williamson, V., & Murphy, D. (2023). Adversity during military service: the impact of military sexual trauma, emotional bullying and physical assault on the mental health and well-being of women veterans. *BMJ Military Health, 169*(5), 419–424. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjmilitary-2021-001948.

Liang H. L. (2021). Does workplace bullying produce employee voice and physical health issues? Testing the mediating role of emotional exhaustion. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 610944.

Longobardi, C., Badenes-Ribera, L., Fabris, M., Martinez, A., & McMahon, S. (2019). Prevalence of Student Violence Against Teachers: A Meta-Analysis. *Psychology of Violence, 9*(6), 596–610.

Macintosh, M. (2025, July 20). *Violent incidents surging in schools, with educational assistants bearing brunt of student-on-staff attacks*. Winnipeg Free Press. https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/featured/2025/07/18/reading-writing-punching-kicking.

Mallory, D., Bruckert, C., Ismail, H., and Santor, D. (2025). *Running on Fumes: Violence, Austerity, and Institutional Neglect in Ontario Schools*. Ottawa, ON (Report).

McGinn, D. (2025, May 11). *Study warns violence in Ontario schools is at 'crisis levels' for teachers and education workers*. The Globe and Mail. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-school-violence-teachers-workplace-ontario/.

McMahon, S., Martinez, A., Espelage, D., Rose, C., Reddy, L., Lane, K., & Brown, V. (2014). Violence Directed Against Teachers: Results from A National Survey. *Psychology in the Schools, 51*(7), 753-766.

Morris, S. (2024, September 10). *Ontario education workers, NDP call on government to stop violence in schools*. CTVNews. https://www.ctvnews.ca/toronto/article/ontario-education-workers-ndp-call-on-government-to-stop-violence-in-schools/.

Ontario Public School Boards' Association. (2024, May 2). *Ontario's education funding gap continues to grow*. OPSBA. https://www.opsba.org/opsba_news/ontarios-education-funding-gap-continues-to-grow/.

Ontario School Board Council of Unions. (2025, May 26). *Shine a light on violence* [Press release]. Canadian Union of Public Employees – Ontario.

People for Education. (2024, March 24). Staff shortages a daily issue for many Ontario schools. https://peopleforeducation.ca/our-work/staff-shortages-a-daily-issue-for-many-ontario-schools/.

Phillips, J. P. (2016). Workplace violence against health care workers in the United States. *New England Journal of Medicine, 374*(17), 1661–1669. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMra1501998.

Pompeii, L. A., Schoenfisch, A. L., Lipscomb, H. J., Dement, J. M., Smith, C. D., & Upadhyaya, M. (2015). Physical assault, physical threat, and verbal abuse perpetrated against hospital workers by patients or visitors in six U.S. hospitals. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine, 58*(11), 1194–1204. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.22489.

Rabichuk, S. B., Williamson, L., & Frankel, S. (2025). Stress experiences of women in policing: A scoping review. *International Journal of Police Science & Management, 27*(1), 63-77. https://doi.org/10.1177/14613557241269477.

Reddy, L., Espelage, D. L., Anderman, E. M., Kanrich, J. B., & McMahon, S. D. (2018). Addressing violence against educators through measurement and research. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 42*, 9-28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2018.06.006.

Reddy, L., Espelage, D., Mcmahon, S., Anderman, E., Lane, K., Brown, V., Kanrich, J. (2013). Violence Against Teachers: Case Studies from the APA Task Force. *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology, 1*(4), 231–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2013.837019.

Rivers, I., Poteat, V. P., Noret, N., Ashurst, N. (2009). Observing Bullying at School: The Mental Health Implications of Witness Status. *School Psychology Quarterly, 24*(4), 211–223.

Ross, V., Mathieu, S. L., Wardhani, R., Gullestrup, J., & Kõlves, K. (2021). Factors associated with workplace bullying and the mental health of construction industry apprentices: A mixed methods study. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.629262.

Santor, D., Bruckert, C., & McBride, K. (2019). Prevalence and Impact of Harassment and Violence against Educators in Canada. *Journal of School Violence, 20*(3), 261–273.

Schofield KE, Ryan AD, & Stroinski C. (2017). Student-inflicted injuries to staff in schools: Comparing risk between educators and non-educators. *Injury Prevention, 25*, 116-122

Stratcom. (2023). *ETFO all-member violence survey results*. https://www.etfo.ca/getmedia/0f2d1b35-1e1f-40de-9be9-4baa38ffdc4d/230512-Violence-Survey-Results_summary-report_May-2023.pdf.

Taylor, B. G., Maitra, P., Mumford, E., & Liu, W. (2022). Sexual harassment of law enforcement officers: Findings from a nationally representative survey. *Journal of interpersonal violence, 37*(11-12), NP8454–NP8478. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520978180.

Tranjan, R. (2024). *Ontario's Core Education Funding has dropped by $1,500 per student since 2018*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/ontarios-core-education-funding-has-dropped-by-1500-per-student-since-2018/.

Ulrichsen, H. (2025, September 9). *"Scratched, kicked, bit, spit on": Sudbury School Violence Stats spiked post-COVID*. Sudbury.com. https://www.sudbury.com/local-news/scratched-kicked-bit-spit-on-sudbury-school-violence-stats-spiked-post-covid-11187704.

Wilson, C., Douglas, K., & Lyon, D. (2011). Violence Against Teachers: Prevalence and Consequences. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 26*(12), 2353–2371. *https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260510383027*

Legislation Cited

Saskatchewan Employment Act, SS 2013, c S-15.1

Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, 2020, S-15.1 Reg 10

Occupational Health and Safety Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. O.1