

Zero Tolerance in Schools

Research findings on addressing sexual harm in schools (Lloyd & Bradbury 2022)

KEY FINDINGS

- For schools, zero tolerance often meant sanctions and punitive approaches.
- Sexual harm **was** tolerated by students and staff in all schools.
- Zero tolerance (when interpreted as punitive) did not create safer environments.
- One school took a strong zero tolerance approach. This school reported the most frequent rates of sexual harm (compared with other schools).
- The findings suggest that zero tolerance approaches are ineffective in environments where sexual harm **is** tolerated by students and staff.

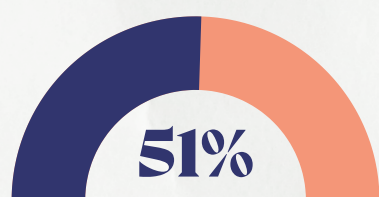
We did the research in high schools in England. For the full research article please contact us (see below)

WHAT IS ZERO TOLERANCE?

- Zero tolerance refers to '**policies that punish offenses severely, no matter how minor**' (Skiba & Peterson 1999: 373).
- While it can be well intended zero tolerance is often focussed on punishment.
- Adoption from the US to the UK in the late 80s and early 90s led to a rapid increase in student expulsions (Welch & Payne 2018).
- There is limited guidance on what is meant by a zero tolerance approach.
- Limited evidence of its effectiveness for sexual harm (Stein 2001).
- To be effective, zero tolerance policies needs to tackle attitudes and be informed by those affected by the harm (see Women's Aid).
- Research shows that zero tolerance in schools disproportionately & adversely impacts students of colour (Giroux 2003), students with educational needs and disabilities (Losen et al. 2014), and those with social care involvement (Skiba & Nesting 2002).
- Zero tolerance approaches can exacerbate existing inequalities.
- Zero tolerance applies the idea that adult criminal justice is appropriate for adolescence.

Zero tolerance applies a blanket approach to the complex nature of sexual harm

FINDINGS



of students in the 'zero tolerance' school said they would not tell a teacher if sexual harm was happening.

Compared to 29% and 33% in the two other schools.

Zero tolerance placed decision-making on victims; choosing between the possible 'justice' of disclosing or possible social punishment. Students reported that the use of sanctions dissuaded them reporting.

"It's about the way the school go about it, cos I feel like it's just about punishment and that's why it sort of scares you [to tell] because he'll get punished" (student)

Even though you know it's not right and they shouldn't be doing that, you know the school is going to take it so much more serious than it should be. We've had people get permanently excluded and no one is going to say, "Ah, the boy did something wrong," the girl's going to be known as a snitch and exaggerator (student)

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

- 1 Before zero tolerance schools need to tackle tolerance that staff and students show to sexual harm.
- 2 Responses need to be proportionate, trauma-informed and tackle the systemic causes of harm
- 3 Schools should ask themselves, is it safe for all young people to speak up? Are there barriers which stop some groups speaking?
- 4 Restorative approaches mean asking who was harmed? How can we facilitate healing? How can we prevent further harm in the future? (O'Brien 2017)

Find out more

For the full paper [here](#) or contact jenny.alloyd@durham.ac.uk

Jenny Lloyd & Vanessa Bradbury (2022) Zero tolerance to sexual harm in schools – from broken rules to broken systems, Journal of Sexual Aggression, DOI: 10.1080/13552600.2022.2057605