

## **Young people's experience of unwanted sex: complexities and change over time in the Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health Survey**

### **Authors:**

Power J<sup>1</sup>, Kauer, S and Bourne, A

<sup>1</sup> Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University

### **Background:**

Young people are more likely to experience sexual violence than older populations, yet limited research exists on school-aged youth. This gap reflects political sensitivities around sexuality-related research with minors, ethical concerns about participant distress, and challenges in defining unwanted sex. This paper examines how the Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health (SSASH) survey has addressed these challenges, creating more nuanced and meaningful insight into unwanted sex through survey adaptations between 1992 to 2024.

### **Methods:**

SSASH is a periodic cross-sectional survey of Australian students aged 14 to 18, conducted eight times since 1992. SSASH has consistently included questions about confidence in refusing sex and experiences of unwanted sex, although the wording and scope have developed to reflect evolving understandings of consent and coercion.

### **Results:**

From 1992 to 2002, the survey focused on confidence in refusing unwanted sex, with young women (> 80%) more likely to report high confidence than young men (~75%). Early surveys addressed unwanted sex mainly in relation to alcohol or drug use, with 8% reporting such experiences in 1992 and 1997. By 2018, the scope broadened to include unwanted sex resulting from pressure, fear, and force. In 2021 and 2024, the survey added contexts like social expectations and fear of rejection, alongside detailed items on sexual and intimate partner violence. Reported unwanted sex rose from 9.2% in 2002 to 14% in 2018, 24% in 2021, and 19% in 2024.

### **Conclusion:**

Survey design must reflect evolving public discourse. While reported sexual violence has increased over time among SSASH participants, this likely reflects greater awareness and improved survey detail. Still, the high prevalence of unwanted sex among school-aged youth highlights an urgent need for continued research and prevention efforts.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

This work was supported by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.