In the spring of 2018, 266 political staff of Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers, and Senators took part in an anonymous survey about their perception and experiences of sexual harassment and assault in their workplace. The survey was initiated and reported on by Canadian Press journalist Joanna Smith. The Samara Centre for Democracy provided feedback on the survey's design and agreed to be a public repository for the anonymized, aggregated data.

The responses reveal that Parliament is an unsafe workplace for many. Twenty nine percent of respondents said they personally had been sexually harassed at least once while working in Parliament. Nine percent had been sexually assaulted. The majority of these incidents were not reported.

**DEFINITIONS**

**Sexual harassment:** for the purposes of the survey, it was defined as insistent, unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, which could make someone feel intimidated, objectified, and/or humiliated.

**Sexual assault:** for the purposes of the survey, it was defined as unwanted kissing, groping, touching of a sexual nature, including but not limited to oral and/or penetrative sexual intercourse, without prior, ongoing, and enthusiastic consent.
Political staffers are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault because they are usually young, beginning their careers, have less social capital, and are precariously employed (doing contract work, switching between MP offices without much notice, and being hired directly by MPs offices instead of a central hiring body). Their workplace is also characterized by the unique dynamic of partisanship—strong loyalty to elected representatives and the political parties they are a part of.

These conditions likely apply to other political staff, including those in local constituency offices, pages, interns, House of Commons employees, employees in provincial/territorial and local/municipal politics, and campaign workers and volunteers. The number of people that could be affected is immense.

**There is a problem of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace at the very centre of our democracy—the very place which sets the standards and policies for the rest of the country and is usually seen as a beacon of good governance.**

As of the end of this parliamentary session (June 22, 2018), Bill-65, a bill which aims to tackle harassment and sexual violence in federal workplaces, has passed the third reading stage in the Senate. It will likely receive Royal Assent once the House resumes this fall. The bill will require employers to prevent and act on harassment and violence, including sexual harassment and violence, and will require employers to investigate and report on any incidents they have been made aware of. All federal employers will also need to put in place a sexual harassment policy and report incidents of its use to Parliament. Parliamentary and political staff will be included under these new guidelines.

The House of Commons has also made it mandatory for MPs to receive anti-harassment training, and for employees, other House staff, interns, and volunteers to be briefed on the House of Commons policy against harassment as soon as they start their job.

Whether these actions will be enough to change the culture and conditions that make political staffers vulnerable in Parliament will require time and further research. Ultimately, Canada’s democratic health will be hurt if talented, committed, and ambitious people (especially women) continue to exit or avoid the halls of Parliament because of a work culture that is not safe and productive.
Key Findings

Twenty nine percent of respondents indicated that they had personally experienced sexual harassment while performing their job.

Notably, 78% of those who experienced harassment did not report it (shown in the figure above in blue).

When asked why they had not, about half of them said they thought that it would negatively affect their career, that they did not think the harassment was serious enough to merit a complaint, or that reporting it would not make a difference.
Most respondents who had been sexually harassed indicated they had experienced more than one form of harassment or that they had been harassed multiple times. Recalling the incident that had impacted them the most, political staffers identified the perpetrators as: another MP (32.4%); a colleague who works elsewhere on the Hill (14.9%); the MP they work for (8.1%); a lobbyist, constituent, or other stakeholder who they know through work (5.4%), and; a non-politician colleague in their office who is in a supervisory role (4.1%). Some identified people in other roles. A sizeable portion of respondents declined to answer.
Of the 266 who answered the survey, 9% had been sexually assaulted on the job. The numbers around whether these individuals reported the assault and who assaulted them were fairly similar to those regarding incidents of harassment. However, a different reason was more likely to be given to explain why they chose not to report the assault: they did not think it would make any difference.
The Data

To download the survey data, go to samaracanada.com/elephant-on-the-hill. Research that employs this data must acknowledge the Canadian Press as a source.

If you have any questions regarding the documentation or data, please email the Samara Centre’s Research Director, Mike Morden, at mike.morden@samaracanada.com.

Methodology

- The anonymous online survey was open for approximately three weeks (Feb. 20 to Mar. 12, 2018).
- Initial invitations were sent to Member of Parliaments’ general, A1, A2, and A3 email accounts, to Senate staff (as identified on the Senate website), and to key political staffers in each ministerial office (chiefs of staff, directors of communication, and press secretaries). Several email reminders were also sent.
- This represented approximately 1,500 people, but due to some bounced emails and out-of-office replies, it is impossible to say with certainty how many people received the original invitation directly.
- Staffers were asked to share the survey with other employees then working in the offices of MPs, senators, and cabinet ministers on Parliament Hill, using a version of the snowball method. Therefore, it is not possible to determine how many people in total had access to the survey.
- The response rate of 266 surpasses comparable surveys of political staffers done recently in the U.K. and the U.S.
- The survey was in English and French and had a completion rate of 78 percent. Respondents typically spent 8 minutes with the survey.

More information on who completed the survey can be found in the figures below:
For statistical purposes, please specify whether you identify as:
(N = 218)

- Male: 41%
- Female: 56%
- Decline to answer: 3%

For statistical purposes, please specify whether you are a:
(N = 218)

- Staffer in an MP’s office: 65%
- Staffer in a Senator’s office: 20%
- Staffer in a minister’s office: 8%
- Decline to answer: 7%