

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-564](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

While many workers in the United States experience workplace sexual harassment—resulting in substantial costs to them and their employers—the extent of sexual harassment and the magnitude of its effects are not fully understood.

GAO was asked to examine the extent to which reliable information is available on workplace sexual harassment's prevalence and costs. This report examines (1) what is known about the prevalence and costs of U.S. workplace sexual harassment, including the federal workforce, (2) the extent to which EEOC collects sexual harassment data, and (3) data collection approaches experts recommend to improve available information. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed EEOC data and survey data from other federal agencies, interviewed officials and reviewed documentation from multiple federal agencies, and interviewed experts on sexual harassment. GAO also convened a 2-day roundtable of experts, with assistance from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, and conducted a literature review.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EEOC assess the feasibility of systematically analyzing its data on retaliation charges and the associated protected activities, including those related to sexual harassment. EEOC did not state whether or not it concurred with GAO's recommendation. GAO continues to believe this recommendation is appropriate, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-20-564](#). For more information, contact Cindy S. Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or [brownbarnesc@gao.gov](mailto:brownbarnesc@gao.gov).

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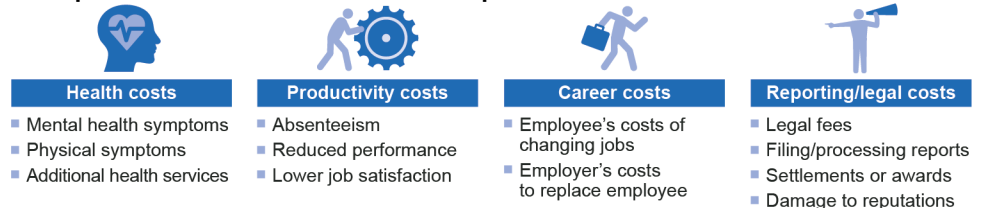
# WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

## Experts Suggest Expanding Data Collection to Improve Understanding of Prevalence and Costs

### What GAO Found

Limited nationwide data hinder a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and costs of workplace sexual harassment. According to GAO's analysis of available federal data and literature review, the few reliable nationwide estimates of sexual harassment's prevalence vary substantially due to differences in methodology, including the question structure and time period the survey used. Moreover, the likelihood of experiencing workplace sexual harassment can vary based on an individual's demographic characteristics—such as gender, race, and age—and whether the workplace is male- or female-dominated. For example, women, younger workers, and women in male-dominated workplaces were more likely to say they experienced harassment. GAO did not find any recent cost estimates of workplace sexual harassment, but identified four broad categories of costs: health, productivity, career, and reporting and legal costs (see figure).

### Examples of Costs Associated with Workplace Sexual Harassment



Source: GAO analysis of relevant literature. | GAO-20-564

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), as part of its mission to prevent and remedy unlawful employment discrimination, maintains data on sexual harassment and retaliation charges filed against employers, but cannot systematically analyze the relationship between the two for all charges filed nationwide. After filing sexual harassment charges or engaging in other protected activity, employees may experience retaliation, such as firing or demotion, and EEOC data show that retaliation charges constitute a growing portion of its workload. EEOC's planning documents highlight its intention to address retaliation and use charge data to inform its outreach to employers. However, while EEOC can review electronic copies of individual charges for details, such as whether a previously filed sexual harassment charge led to a retaliation charge, its data system cannot aggregate this information across all charges. Without the capacity to fully analyze trends in the relationship between sexual harassment and retaliation charges, EEOC may miss opportunities to refine its work with employers to prevent and address retaliation.

Experts at GAO's roundtable said nationally representative surveys would help to improve available information on workplace sexual harassment. Expert recommendations focused on three main areas: (1) survey administration and resources, including advantages and disadvantages to various federal roles; (2) methods to collect data, such as using stand-alone surveys or adding questions to existing surveys; and (3) content of data to be collected, including employee and employer characteristics and specific costs.