

Sex offences at schools increasing

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Education reporter

The number of sexual offences on NSW school grounds has doubled over the past decade, with more than 600 incidents reported to police last year.

Sexual violence experts say the upward trend is likely due in part to young people's increased readiness to speak up, and called on schools to engage students in robust discussions about sex and sexuality.

The most recent NSW crime statistics show there were more than 646 sexual offences on school grounds in the year to March. Over the same period 10 years ago, 318 offences were reported, with an increase of about 7 per cent each year since 2013. It outpaced the rise in sexual offences recorded anywhere in NSW, which grew 2 per cent per year in the last decade.

Figures from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) show the number of offences reported to police that occurred on public and private school grounds across NSW. The incidents did not necessarily take place during school hours or result in charges.

Professor Daryl Higgins, director of the Australian Catholic University's Institute of Child Protection Studies, said increased readiness to speak up and changes to how organisations such as the police and schools respond had likely contributed to higher reporting.

"That's not to say there aren't actual changes in the prevalence of harm that's occurring across schools in NSW," he said. "While it is very distressing ... it's pleasing to see the recommendations of the royal commission appear to be flowing through to what you'd expect - that the number of reports is closer to reflecting reality."

Former Kambala student Chanel Contos last year led an outpouring from former Sydney schoolgirls de-

tailing sexual assaults at the hands of their male peers.

According to the latest BOCSAR statistics, of the 646 sexual offences on NSW school grounds in the past year, 158 were sexual assaults.

The latest statistics also show assaults on school grounds, including allegations of physical violence, as well as drug offences, were stable in the same 10-year period.

There were more than 800 instances of intimidation, stalking and harassment on school grounds in the year to March 2022, up on 516 offences at the same time a decade ago.

The latest NSW Education Department incident reports showed 107 allegations of sexual assault recorded by NSW government schools in 2021. They included students disclosing allegations of assault on school grounds by other students, sexting and inappropriate sexual behaviour.

"A student was suspected of filming other students ... with a mobile device," a report from a school in Wollondilly read. "The inappropriate footage was shown to another student. It is unknown if the footage was circulated."

The incident reports also included physical fights between students being filmed and put online.

Dr Rachael Burgin, Swinburne University lecturer and executive director of Rape and Sexual Assault Research and Advocacy, said survivors of sexual violence were becoming more aware of what constituted a crime.

"Often survivors do recognise that they have experienced victimisation, but they may not realise that that is a crime."

The NSW Education Department has been contacted for comment.

Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line:
1800 737 732