

SPECIAL REPORT

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault in the Climbing Community

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SAFE 
OUTSIDE

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The content of this report is adapted from excerpts from *Alpinist Magazine* articles titled:
“Safety Means More Than a Good Belay” by Phil Powers and Deanne Buck
“Out from the Shadows: Sexual Harassment and Assault in the Climbing Community” by Callie Marie Rennison and Charlie Lieu

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FOREWARD

Safety Means More Than a Good Belay

Climbing can be a wonderful gift to one's life. Vertical pursuits give us lasting friendships, push our physical and mental limits, and deepen our connection to wild landscapes. As more and more people find joy, challenge, friendship and passion at the gym and crag, we have a special opportunity to share what we know about managing risk—such as tying in and belaying correctly—and about protecting the places we climb and cherish—such as advocating for the conservation of public lands or avoiding climbing on fragile sandstone after the rain. But there is another type of safety that doesn't get mentioned much: the right to feel physically and emotionally safe from the discrimination, harassment and assault. When the Sexual Harassment and Assault in Climbing survey first went online, we saw a variety of social media comments, many in support of the need to conduct this research. But we were troubled by a chorus of voices of people who seemed to assume—because they hadn't experienced the problem firsthand—that these issues did not or could not exist in the climbing world.

Even before the survey was launched, we knew that our community has work to do to make climbing more welcoming. When we learned that 47% of women and 16% of men had experienced some form of behavior classified as sexual harassment or assault while in a climbing setting, we were reminded that this is a real, measurable and serious issue.

As the data analysts who conducted the survey—explain, “Climbing looks a lot like society.” To ignore this reality—to mislead ourselves that climbing is somehow immune from the problems of the ordinary world or that our camaraderie somehow precludes bad behavior—is irresponsible.

The human element in climbing can be a source for all manner of risk. In addition, climbing takes us to less-populated locations, where if harassment or assault occurred, it might go unchecked. Climbing offers a wonderful and healthy lifestyle to many of us. But this appearance of a pursuit that's welcome to all is a façade if we don't carry out the open conversations and direct actions necessary to create the safest and most inclusive possible environment for all climbers. It is incumbent on each of us to ensure that assaults of any kind are not tolerated—as well as any discrimination or harassment based on race, culture, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, physical abilities or sexual orientation.

As the CEO and Board Chair of America's climbing organization, we recognize our responsibility to align the organization's actions and behaviors with our intention. We believe the way forward starts internally and that it must be part of an ongoing conversation and a call to action.

In the spirit of transparency, below are a few steps the AAC is taking to ensure that all climbers feel welcome, supported and safe (and a few places where we failed initially and responded):

- **In partnership with Alpinist and other climbing magazines and organizations, we promoted the Sexual Harassment and Assault in Climbing survey to our membership and are collectively working to treat this topic.**
- **We are auditing our internal processes, policies, and procedures to understand where gender, race or other biases may influence an equitable outcome from the candidates we attract for a position. We are also examining our interviewing procedures and our methods for recruiting board members.**
- **We have taken action when employees or volunteers have violated policies.**
- **We continue to check our marketing and communications to do our best to present examples of the variety of people who enjoy climbing.**
- **We have made cultural missteps around a few of our events in the past year that left members of our community feeling marginalized. We learned from those missteps, and strive to create the safest and most inclusive environment possible for all climbers.**
- **We know that there are simply not enough role models yet for the diversity of people who imagine climbing as something that might give their lives direction, meaning and deep satisfaction. We will continue to work to ensure all aspects of the organization reflect the identities of those who share a love for the craft of climbing.**

Whether in the mountains, at the crags or gyms—or anywhere for that matter—whenever we chose to welcome, share and lift each other up, we strengthen the rope that connects us.

– **Deanne Buck**, AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB PRESIDENT

– **Phil Powers**, AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB CEO

INTRODUCTION TO SAFE OUTSIDE

WHAT IS #SAFEOUTSIDE?

Sexual harassment and sexual assault (SHSA) are so pervasive that the National Institute of Health considers these problems to be a public health crisis. While the topic has garnered much public attention in the wake of #MeToo, climbing communities—and the outdoor industry as a whole—are only beginning to understand the prevalence of SHSA in our environments.

In May 2018, members of climbing communities activated around the issue, and a grassroots task force formed around a criminology researcher (Callie Marie Rennison), a data scientist (Charlie Lieu), and a climbing magazine editor (Katie Ives) to understand the issue better, to engage partners and to seek solutions through a public initiative called #SafeOutside.

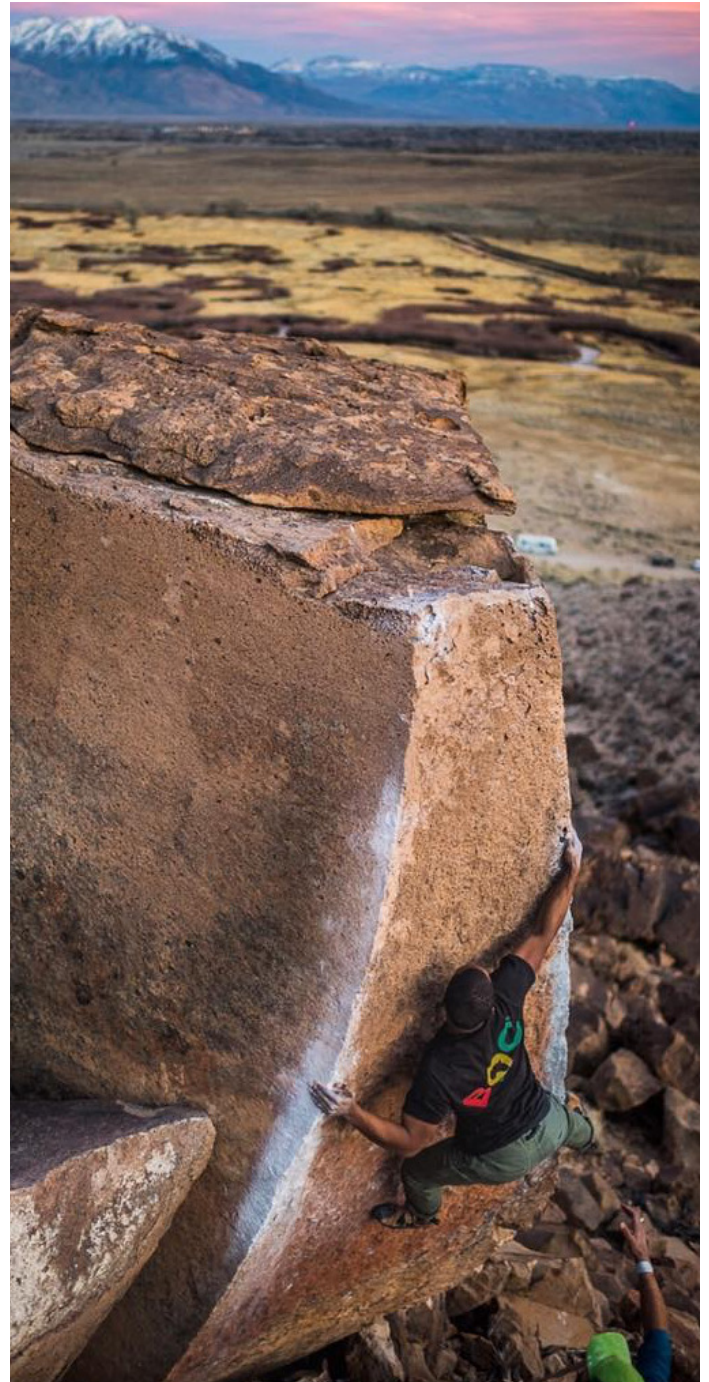
The initiative intends to accomplish four primary goals within the climbing communities:

- 1. Collect data**
- 2. Create safe space for, and inspire conversation**
- 3. Motivate organizational and individual action**
- 4. Drive deep policy work and education programs**

To this end, the initiative has consisted of four distinct workstreams¹ that started with the Sexual Harassment and Assault in Climbing survey, followed by policy development or refinement by participating organizations and culminating by a day of action and a toolkit release on August 27, 2018. This work will continue through educational development and policy research, pending funding and support.

Ed Note. While the American Alpine Club has provided financial support and responsive leadership on this issue, neither the #SafeOutside movement nor the Sexual Harassment and Assault in Climbing survey and report were developed or conducted by the AAC.

¹ For a summary of each of the four phases of #SafeOutside, see *Appendix A* for details.



Ken Etzel (courtesy AAC)

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

SURVEY CREATION AND DISTRIBUTION

A single survey was deployed in two languages and three geographies. The team was guided by several goals in the design of the survey. First, to assess the extent to which SHSA is a problem in the climbing world. Second, to estimate—as best as possible—the size of the problem and to understand the nature of these experiences. Finally, to collect data to inform, develop or refine policies to reduce incidents, to increase understanding and to provide better support systems for all climbers.

For the best preservation of the mental health of survivors, the survey was designed to be short, focused and non-graphic. As with all ethical social-science research, participation was voluntary. The survey asked respondents to answer 3 basic questions, with 9 additional questions listed as optional. Prior to launch, the survey was reviewed by victims, victim advocacy groups and lawyers, and it was tested by a team of sociology researchers.

The data collected were anonymous, although respondents could choose to volunteer their names and contact information. Climbers were strongly encouraged to respond to our survey whether or not they had experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault.

Terminologies in the SHSA space are not standardized. In addition to “sexual harassment” or “sexual assault,” actions can be individually or collectively referred to as “sexual misconduct” or “sexual violence.” For the purpose of our survey, we use the following definitions:

- **Sexual Harassment** - unwelcome sexual advances, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature (including catcalls).
- **Sexual Assault** - non-consensual physical contact or penetration (including groping and rape).

The survey link was shared via e-blasts, webpages, and social media by 40 climbing-related organizations with which we had directly communicated. In addition, many more organizations and individuals from all six non-frozen continents shared and re-shared the survey on social media. The survey distributors included all

major US climbing magazines, a dozen outdoor magazines in US, Australia and Mexico, as well as mainstream media publications. The survey was also disseminated through climbing gyms, outdoor manufacturers, outdoor trade associations and grassroots climbing organizations and clubs. The survey was administered using Google Forms and remained available for 6 weeks.

The survey approach, based on non-probability convenience sampling, is a common method employed when the population of interest (such as all climbers) lacks a “population sampling frame.” No population sampling frame simply means there is no master list of all current and former climbers available from which we could draw a probability sample¹

¹ For a summary of each of the four phases of Safe Outside, see *Appendix A* for details.

SURVEY RESULTS

WHO RESPONDED

5,311

Final Survey Sample Size.

Total survey response was 5,339. However, after removing bad data [repeated, absurd, or obscene responses], final sample size consisted of 5,311 responses.

10 yrs

Length of time the average respondent had been climbing regularly.

Average for men was 10.7 years, and average for women was 8.2 years.

83%

Percent of survey respondents who identified as gym climbers.

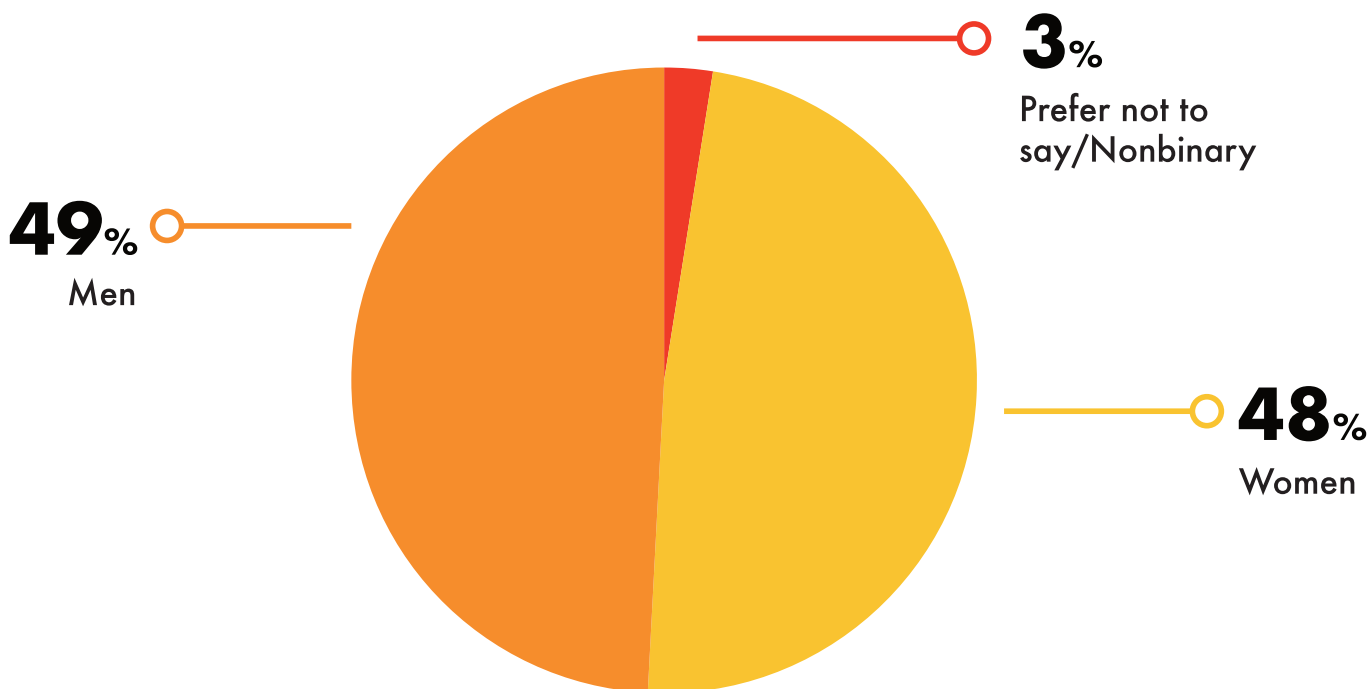
n.b. respondents could select more than one type of climbing.

55%

Percent of survey respondents who identified as trad climbers

n.b. respondents could select more than one type of climbing.

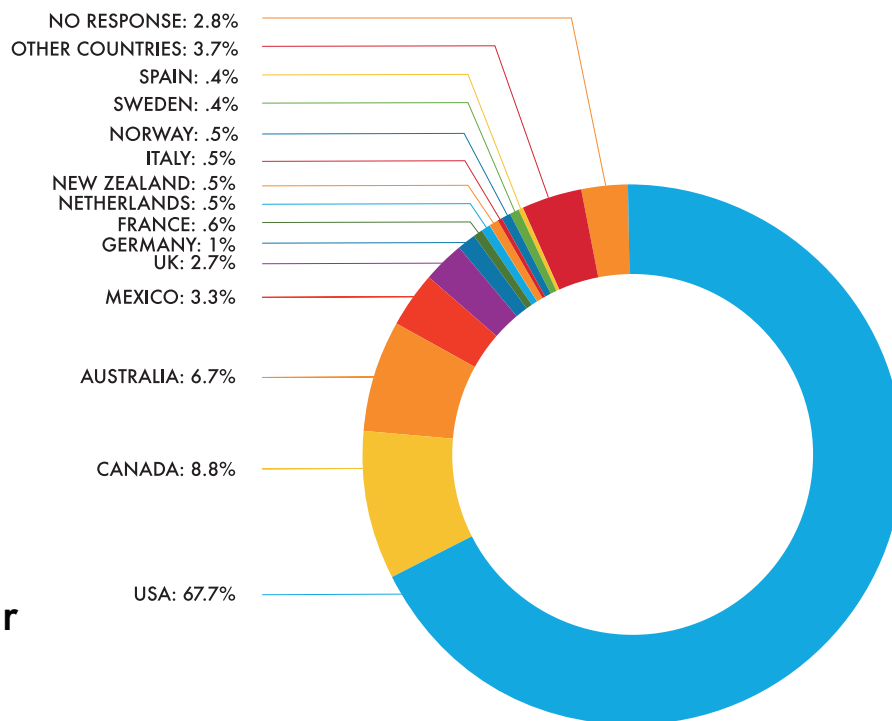
Gender Breakdown



SURVEY RESULTS

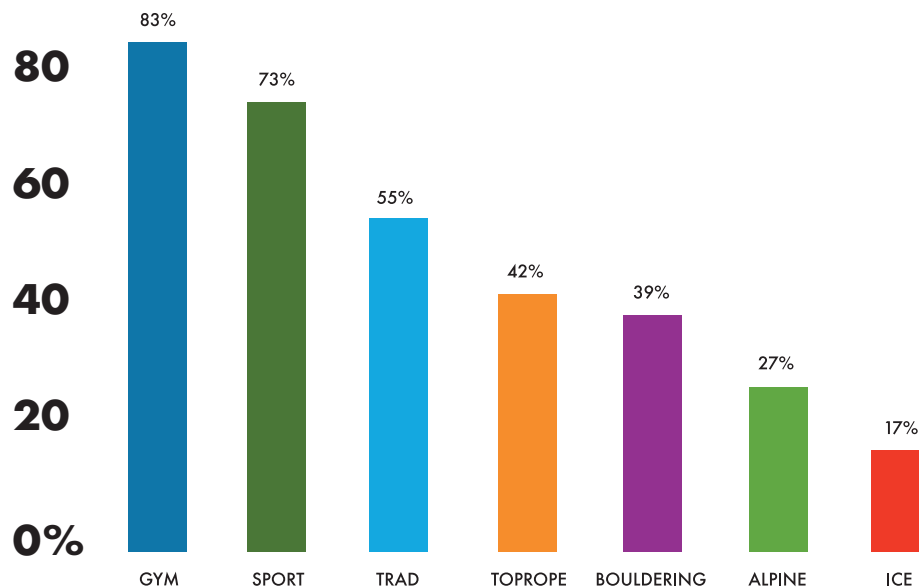
WHO RESPONDED

Country Breakdown



Type of Climber

100



NOTE: Respondents could select more than one type of climbing.

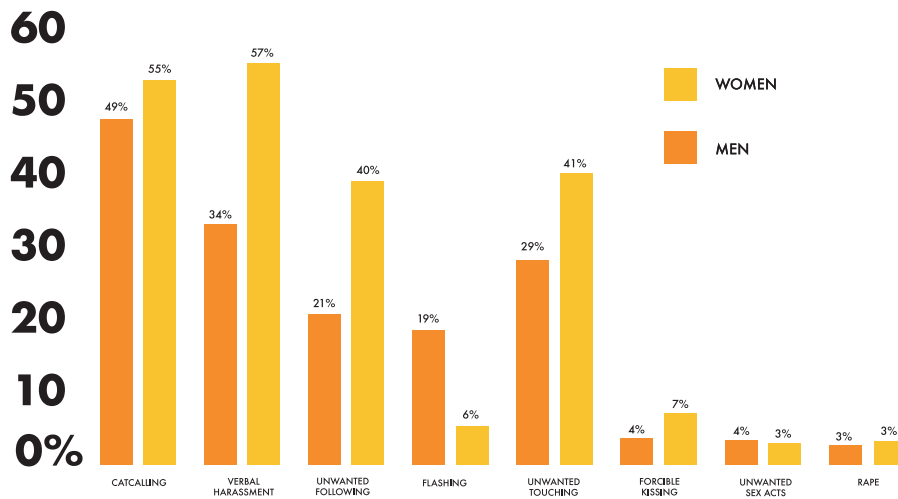
SURVEY RESULTS

SHSA SURVEY OUTPUT: GENDER BREAKDOWN

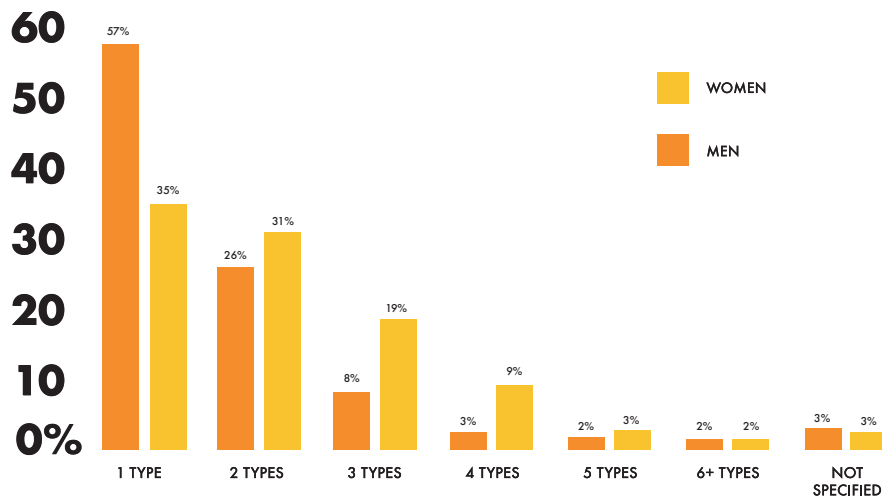
Experienced SHSA Defined Behaviors During Climbing Activities



Experienced Specific SHSA Types



Experienced Multiple Types of SHSA



SURVEY RESULTS

SHSA SURVEY OUTPUT

47%

Percentage of women that responded to having experienced at least one incidence of SHSA classified behavior while engaged in a climbing activity.

16%

Percentage of men that responded to having experienced at least one incidence of SHSA classified behavior while engaged in a climbing activity.

54

Number of respondents that shared that they had been raped while engaged in a climbing activity.

(defined as non-consensual penetration)

Men

Among men who reported SHSA, catcalling and unwanted touching were most frequently experienced.

Women

Among women who reported SHSA, verbal harassment, catcalling, unwanted touching, and unwanted following were most frequently experienced.

Women are more likely to experience multiple types of SHSA victimization than men.

SHSA Changes How We Climb

The findings show that experiencing SHSA while engaged in a climbing activity changes the way people engaged with the sport, especially women.

More than half of the women (58%), and one in five men (21%) who reported experiencing SHSA also reported changes in how they engaged with the climbing community after the experience.

OPEN RESPONSE SURVEY COMMENTS

Out of 5,311 recorded responses, 945 respondents provided additional personal information as free-form comments. A number of respondents described being raped while on expeditions and organized climbing trips. Several noted that others tried to enter their tent uninvited during climbing trips. Some assaults occurred while in their own home or overnight at the home of climbing friends, and some respondents reported being assaulted after declining the advances of other climbers. These assaults included non-sexual physical attacks, sexual assaults, rape and attempted rape. Many spoke of being followed and stalked. Some working in the climbing industry shared experiences of being asked inappropriate and vulgar questions by customers about how detailed sex acts, as well as unwanted kissing and unwelcome physical contact.

Perpetrators of SHSA included famous and/or sponsored climbers, friends, acquaintances, climbing partners, customers of gyms/expeditions, coworkers, and complete strangers.

Respondents reported that after experiencing SHSA, they changed how they engage with climbing in three primary ways:

- 1. Disengagement from the climbing community**
- 2. Reduction or elimination of travel for climbing purposes**
- 3. Limiting climbing activities to specific groups of people**

Many who experienced SHSA made changes in terms of the kinds of people they would climb with. Often, women would only climb with other women and stopped altogether climbing with men. Some respondents noted that this decision came from SHSA experiences while being tied in with a partner in vulnerable outdoor climbing situations. By climbing only with a particular type of partner (e.g. women only or a small trusted circle of friends) some respondents noted greater feelings of safety. Some also reported a belief that those partners could assist in keeping known troublemakers away. However, this strategy limits the number of available partners or mentors.



 *Luke Humphrey (courtesy AAC)*

KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The survey is populationally representative (as best as we can tell)

Our overall sample resembles the demographics of respondents to a 2015 online outdoor recreation survey conducted by the Outdoor Foundation. In their Individual Activity Reports, the Outdoor Foundation found that 51 percent of the people who chose to fill out their survey were women and 49 percent were men (of these Outdoor Foundation survey respondents, 38.3 percent of those who reported participating in traditional climbing and 46.9 percent of those who reported taking part in sport climbing were women). About half of the overall respondents to our own survey were men (49 percent) and half were women (48 percent), with a small proportion not sharing their gender. Among the US respondents who completed the survey, 48 percent were men, and 50 percent were women.

SHSA is a problem in the climbing community, just as it is in the rest of society: nearly half of all women, 1 in 6 men reported having experienced some form of behavior classified as SHSA. And 3% of all respondents reported having experienced rape or attempted rape. The data illustrate that the problem is clearly real, and substantial. According to information provided by the CDC, sexual harassment and violence in the climbing world appears no worse than the rest of society. Still, the degree of the problem demands attention.

Sexism is pervasive

While the survey did not ask about sexism, many respondents reported it as a major problem in the climbing community. Many described unwanted comments about their weight, their clothing, and their bodies. Others commented on sexist assumptions including ones that women would be slow on routes, have poor climbing ability, or not be able to provide beta about climbs. A common statement (that does include SHSA) was that men would frequently provide spotting that involved unwanted touching when it was not needed or requested. Climbing social media sites were called out as places rife with sexism. Respondents described the effects of all these experiences as limiting women's access to climbing free of fear, anxiety or discomfort.

SHSA experiences negatively impact engagement in the climbing community

Many climbers changed the way they engage in climbing (from disengaging with the activity to quitting altogether), statements

that underline the impact of SHSA on people's sense of safety and show how this problem hinders the involvement of individuals and the expansion of the sport.

People often don't recognize SHSA when it happens

About 40 percent of women and 9 percent of men answered "yes" to the question "Have you experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault while engaged in a climbing activity?" The survey also asked about more specific behaviors: have respondents experienced specific types of SHSA (e.g., unwanted touching, forced kissing, etc.). These more detailed questions revealed that 47 percent of women and 16 percent of men have experienced interactions that could be classified as SHSA while engaged in a climbing activity, even if they do not report it as such.

SHSA among climbing communities is not homogenous

While some people experience extensive SHSA, others find that the climbing offers a respite from the SHSA frequently experienced in the "real" world. Some individuals noted that climbing is an activity during which they feel they can get away from a society with SHSA. A number of people reported that members of climbing and the outdoors communities in general are friendlier, and less threatening than members of the general public are.

Climbers are willing to engage on the topic of SHSA

In this survey, measurements of openness to discussing the topic were exceptional: 926 (17%) of the respondents provided contact information (23% of women, and 13% of men); 998 respondents, or nearly 1 in 5, provided open-ended comments. In previously known surveys on this topic, generally fewer than 5% of respondents provided open-ended comments. In addition, members of all genders sent many positive emails, expressing thanks for tackling this important topic—a stark contrast to general experiences of researchers who typically receive negative emails. This type and level of engagement is unusual, and it points to the climbing community's willingness to engage on this difficult topic.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

In the past, many climbers have held strong beliefs that our community is better than the rest of society. After realizing that SHSA is an issue in the climbing community, our experience shows, most people will choose to address it. Indeed, it is up to the climbing communities as a whole to come together and improve the environment for everyone.

Addressing SHSA is fraught with pitfalls and discomfort for most people, so here are some guidelines to help navigate the complexities.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Bystander Intervention

As an individual, when you see someone being harassed or assaulted, you should intervene *if it is safe for you to do so*. Taking action may feel uncomfortable, but it is important.

Below are the 4Ds of bystander intervention based on the research of Drs. Victoria L. Banyard, Elizabeth G. Plante, and Mary M. Moynihan (2005) and A. Berkowitz (2002), and Ann L. Coker, Patricia Cook-Craig, Corrine Williams, Bonnie S. Fisher, Emily Clear, Lisandra Garcia, and Lea Hegge:

Direct: If it's safe to do so, step in directly to intervene whether by speaking out or by giving social cues (e.g. if you see someone harassing another person, saying "that is not cool" or giving a disapproving look is better than silence).

Distract: Distract the perpetrator and remove victim from area.

Delegate: See something sketchy? Talk to someone who has more social or functional power than you do and ask them step in.

Delay: Check in with the victim of the incident after it has occurred to see if you can do anything to help them. Such as "Hey, are you OK? Can I do anything?"

After intervening, report to officials or authorities, if appropriate. Don't assume victims will do so.

Guidelines for Responding to Victims

In the event that someone shares with you that they have experienced SHSA, your response can dramatically shape how (s)he deals with the SHSA experience. Listen, believe, and withhold judgement. Supportive responses might include:

I believe you, I know it took a lot of courage to share this.

This is not your fault.

You did not deserve for this to happen to you.

Thank you for sharing this with me / trusting me with this information.

Don't point out all the things that a victim could have done or should do. Don't blame them for experiencing SHSA, or minimize the experience.

Some examples of what not to say include: "He/she was just kidding" or "I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding" or "You're [pretty/young/single/well-endowed], what did you expect?" Keep in mind that it is not easy to relive trauma and to share an SHSA experience. Your response can mean the difference between a victim closing off, blaming themselves, feeling isolated, and never mentioning it again OR feeling supported and cared for. Your response may also bolster their willingness to pursue justice.

Organizational Best Practices

As organizations, ideally you should prevent SHSA before it starts, but this objective is challenging. One simple and effective start is to eliminate discriminatory and harassing materials including jokes, posters, emails, and photos from the environment. It is critical for organizations is to acknowledge that SHSA is an issue, and to ensure that people know the organization will not tolerate it. Issuing a statement of intent that clearly communicates the organization's view can serve this purpose.

It is important that organizations have a written policy on SHSA and/or a code of conduct with a specific section on SHSA. These documents define what it is, why it's inappropriate and how to deal with it. They also clarify that it won't be tolerated. It is imperative that these policies result in the development of clear processes for reporting allegations, conducting investigations, and carrying out expected disciplinary actions.

No one can be exempt: even famous climbers, large donors, long-time members, or leaders. If anything, the behavior of these individuals should serve as models for others. Organizations must also ensure that they support those who have experienced SHSA and protect them from retaliation or shunning. It is helpful to create a team of advocate leaders or allies who are empowered, capable and willing to respond swiftly and effectively to SHSA.

SHSA is a societal issue. It is no surprise to see it affects climbers as well. As the survey noted, many view climbing as a place to avoid much of the SHSA that permeates the "real" world. Unfortunately, the survey also showed that SHSA is still a problem for many climbers, one that limits the ways they can engage in climbing and in climbing communities. While it's unlikely that we will ever fully stamp out sexual harassment and assault, continuing this conversation is an important first step in the right direction. The toughest work is still ahead.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

#SafeOutside Toolkit

Along with this report, the #SafeOutside team has provided v.1 of a toolkit to help members of any community wishing to address sexual harassment and assault. The toolkit will be available as soon as possible at: <https://americanalpineclub.org/safeoutside>

The toolkit will include the following components:

1. **Sexual harassment and assault survey template—we recommend staying with the same questions if you wish to incorporate your data into our public domain database.**
2. **Guidelines for organizing a sexual harassment and assault initiative**
3. **Code of conduct template**
4. **Summary of policy best practices**
5. **One pagers for education:**
 - a. **What is sexual harassment and sexual assault?**
 - b. **Understanding consent**
 - c. **Bystander intervention - 4Ds**
 - d. **Bystander intervention - using your voice**

This is a living and evolving toolkit, and it will be updated in subsequent versions as we deepen our research into policy and prevention, and develop more tools to address issues related to sexual harassment and assault.

Additional Resources

There are many resources available if you have experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault, or simply want to learn more about it.

- **VIDEO:** Clear legal definitions of SHSA for individuals and workplaces.
LINK: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0pbH0liQu0>
- **Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN):** an organization that offers broad information and statistics on sexual violence, safety and prevention, and the latest public policy efforts.
LINK: <https://rainn.org/>
- **National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC):** an organization that provides survivor assistance, toolkits, and statistics on sexual violence—including harassment and assault.
LINK: <https://www.nsvrc.org/>
- **Start by Believing:** a global campaign transforming the way we respond to sexual assault.
LINK: <http://www.startbybelieving.org/>
- **Feminist.org:** offers sexual harassment resources and hotlines. Includes many other resource links as well.
LINK: <http://www.feminist.org/911/harass.html>

APPENDIX A

Workstream 1: Understanding the Problem

This workstream consists of a series of surveys conducted in North America and Australia to collect data to better understand the issue of SHSA within the climbing communities. The result of which is the focus of this report.

Workstream 2: Confronting the Problem

This workstream focuses on creating unified community support for the victims. Participating organizations initiated policy development or refinement efforts informed by the survey results. On August 27, participating organizations from North America's largest climbing organizations will launch a SAME DAY public policy or support statement acknowledging the issue and affirming their commitment to addressing sexual harassment and assault. In parallel, a press coalition of 8 participating media outlets will launch a coordinated set of editorial and feature articles that address this topic.

Workstream 3: Change the World

This workstream focuses on capturing our learnings and packaging them into a "play book," which includes this report, and a toolkit that can be downloaded and used by partners, as well as by individuals or organizations in other geographies, sports or industries.

Workstream 4: Solidifying Impact

This workstream is about long-term implementation and impact measurement. If funding exists, we will develop a long-term education plan, and conduct in-depth policy research to establish best practices for addressing SHSA. Data show that existing "HR sexual harassment training" doesn't work well, and we would like to develop methods, training and education that are effective against SHSA.

APPENDIX B

Survey Limitations

All research is imperfect, and as researchers, we must point out the limitations of our work. The primary limitations of this survey are described below:

- **Using a non-probability sample means results cannot be fully generalized to the broader climbing population. This method can, however, still deeply inform readers about the state and nature of SHSA in the climbing communities. You can read more about this issue in Dr. Larry Hamilton’s “Note on Methods” in the sidebar of this article.**
- **The questions used to gather data in this survey were not “behaviorally specific.” Lack of specificity means that this survey will underestimate SHSA. (See link below to Dr. Ronet Bachman’s research presented to the National Academy of Sciences, for additional information about behaviorally specific and other approaches to question wording**
LINK: https://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse_080063.pdf
- **While Internet access is increasingly broad, it is not universal. The ability to take the survey required access to the Internet. This requirement may have left out some of the most vulnerable populations within the climbing community, and thus further contributed to underestimation.**

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS



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