

#MeToo sparked surge in awareness about sexual harassment: study

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(HealthDay)—Hundreds of thousands of women have used the #MeToo

hashtag to speak out about sexual harassment and assault during the past year.

Now there's evidence that the #MeToo movement sparked more than mere conversation about [sexual abuse](#) in the United States.

Google searches for information about sexual harassment and assault—as well as reporting or preventing such behavior—spiked in the months after actress Alyssa Milano brought the #MeToo movement fresh attention in October 2017, a study published online Dec. 21 in *JAMA Internal Medicine* found.

"Our study reveals that even months after the beginning of #MeToo, millions more than otherwise expected are seeking out help for [sexual violence](#) online," said senior researcher John Ayers, an associate adjunct professor with the University of California, San Diego. "Revealing this record-setting and sustained engagement is a call to action for the nation."

Searches related to sexual harassment and assault were 51 percent higher than expected between Oct. 15, 2017 and June 15, 2018, Ayers and his colleagues found.

On the afternoon of Oct. 15, 2017, Milano responded to public accusations of sexual harassment and assault against film producer Harvey Weinstein with a tweet sent to her followers: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet."

Searches related to reporting sexual assault and preventive training on sexual harassment were 30 percent higher during that same period, researchers found.

"#MeToo is not the first movement to empower victims of sexual

violence, but what is unique compared to past movements is #MeToo's staying power," Ayers said. "Eight months since the initiation of #MeToo, millions more than expected are seeking out help for sexual violence online. #MeToo's sustainability, and our study alerting leaders to this, could yield major wins for the nation's public health."

These findings verify that #MeToo made a real difference in terms of raising awareness and prompting action, said Karestan Koenen, a professor of psychiatric epidemiology with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston.

"Anecdotally, we've known it's made a difference," Koenen said. "I feel like this is some of the first real data we have that these aren't just anecdotes, that this movement is making a huge difference."

Sharyn Tejani, director of the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, has been on the receiving end of those Google searches.

The National Women's Law Center created the defense fund in January 2018, in the wake of #MeToo.

"Since then, over 3,800 people have reached out to us seeking assistance for workplace sexual harassment," Tejani said. "People send us requests for assistance online, and so it does seem like people are using online tools. We've received many more requests for assistance than we ever thought we would receive."

Koenen found the searches related to reporting or preventing [sexual harassment](#) to be most promising.

"As a trauma psychologist, I know sharing one's sexual assault experiences can be very validating and healing for people, but beyond that, what we want to see is change," she said. "That's the most exciting

finding to me, because it's going beyond all of us sharing this experience. Maybe people are taking action that will really result in change."

The response to the #MeToo movement has revealed a huge public health problem in the United States that must be addressed, Ayers said.

"Survivors face serious health consequences, including physical injury, PTSD symptoms and emotional trauma," Ayers said. "Yet public investments in preventing and responding to sexual violence is disproportionately small compared with other health issues. With millions more than ever voicing their needs, our nation's leaders should respond by investing in enhanced prevention training and improving resources for survivors."

More information: Theodore L. Caputi et al. Internet Searches for Sexual Harassment and Assault, Reporting, and Training Since the #MeToo Movement, *JAMA Internal Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1001/jamainternmed.2018.5094](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2018.5094)

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