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## Teen jobs beset by unwanted advances

**Youngsters are more likely to be harassed and less likely to know what to do. But feds are filing lawsuits and educating workers.**

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Article Last Updated:04/30/2007 12:18:24 AM MDT

As millions of American teenagers venture into the workplace for the summer, an increasing number are facing sexual harassment on the job - ranging from lewd comments to sexual assaults - by co-workers, managers and even customers.

Teen workers - partly because of their youth, inexperience and low workplace status - experience higher levels of sexual harassment than adults, say federal investigators, lawyers and experts. And teen victims often are reluctant to report harassment.

Responding to a wave of complaints, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission - the federal agency charged with fighting workplace discrimination - has filed at least 131 lawsuits around the country in recent years.

Before 2002, the EEOC filed only a handful of suits each year in cases of workplace harassment of teens, agency records show. Since then, 20 to 30 lawsuits have been filed each year.

The EEOC's Rocky Mountain district, which includes Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, leads all of the EEOC's 15 districts in pursuing teenage workers' sex-harassment allegations. The local district filed 17 cases between 1999 and last October.

In September, the EEOC sued the operators of a McDonald's franchise in Durango. The lawsuit alleges that male employees at the restaurant lifted up the young women's shirts, bit them and spied on them while they changed.

Jobec Inc. of Durango, the franchise operator, has declined comment but said in a statement that, "as members of this community for the past 28 years, nothing is more important to us than the safety and well-being of our employees and customers."

### **Co-workers often harass**

On average, there are as many as 7 million U.S. teen workers, government estimates show.

Susan Fineran, a University of Southern Maine professor who studies sexual harassment and discrimination, said that in a recent sample of 260 U.S. high school

students, 43 percent of those who worked part time had experienced sexual harassment.

Co-workers were the harassers in about half the cases, she said. The other half were roughly equally split between supervisors and "vendors/customers."

The problem may be even worse than it appears, say EEOC officials, because teen victims often don't know what to do.

"Their husband, boyfriend or father will say, 'What did you do to invite this?'" said Joan Ehrlich, EEOC district director in San Francisco.

So, one facet of EEOC's "**Youth@Work Initiative**," launched in 2004, is to educate young people about their rights.

"Teenagers who are employed need to know that they should report any inappropriate behavior to their employers, to their parents and the EEOC, if necessary," said one young victim in an Arizona harassment case - now a junior at Northern Arizona University.

The EEOC's civil lawsuits generally target employers who operate the workplaces where harassment occurs. Lisa Schnall, an adviser to agency chairwoman Naomi Earp, said the EEOC informs local police if there is a crime.

Last fall, a federal jury awarded \$585,000 in an EEOC lawsuit on behalf of 13 young women who had worked for Everdry of Rochester, N.Y., a basement waterproofing company.

Trial testimony showed that male managers at the company smacked the girls' buttocks, attempted to grab their breasts and pressured them for sex.

An EEOC lawsuit that was settled last month for \$550,000 alleged that a male assistant manager at a McDonald's in Cordes Junction, Ariz., touched and made lewd comments to eight young female workers. The federal suit said the supervisor had previously harassed workers at a different McDonald's. Both eateries were operated by franchisee GLC Restaurants Inc. of Flagstaff, Ariz. The EEOC alleged that GLC knew of the supervisor's conduct but failed to prevent it.

As is the case in many settlements of EEOC suits, GLC agreed to provide anti-harassment employee training and to improve its policies.

"I am happy that our complaints and our actions against GLC for the last 4 1/2 years will finally lead to changes," one of the victims in the GLC case said in an EEOC-released statement.

While same-sex worker harassment isn't the norm, EEOC officials say, in 2005 Carmike Cinemas settled a case for \$765,000 in which the EEOC alleged that 14 young men working in Raleigh, N.C., were sexually harassed and asked for sex by their male supervisor, who was a convicted sex offender.

Even when harassment of teens is reported, supervisors and parents often don't want to believe it's happening, said Linda Li of the EEOC's San Francisco office. "It's easier not to believe the young person," Li said. "It's such an ugly problem they don't want to acknowledge it happened."

Yet often it is an observant parent, after noticing dramatic changes in a teen's behavior, who comes to the EEOC.

One mother found out from her daughter that she had been sexually harassed by a store manager and a co-worker. At one point a rebuffed co-worker put his hands around her neck and said, "What would your boyfriend do if I snapped your neck?" When the case was settled, her daughter was awarded \$111,250.

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### **Defending teens' workplace rights**

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission encourages teen workers to report harassment. Here's how:

Getting information: Go to EEOC's **Youth@Work** website, [www.youth.eeoc.gov](http://www.youth.eeoc.gov). The U.S. Department of Labor's "Youth Rules" website, at [www.youthrules.dol.gov](http://www.youthrules.dol.gov), has information about laws and work rules for young employees.

Who can file a complaint: The EEOC will accept your complaint if you believe you've been harassed or treated unfairly at work because of your sex, race, color, national origin or religion, or if you've been punished for complaining about harassment.

You can be a full- or part-time worker, a temporary worker or even a job applicant.

Some complaints must be filed within 180 days of the harassment, so file as soon as possible.

How to file a complaint: Call the EEOC at 800-669-4000, or visit or mail a complaint to any EEOC field office (including the Denver office at 303 E. 17th Ave., Suite 510, Denver CO 80203). The **Youth@Work** website explains what information to include.

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