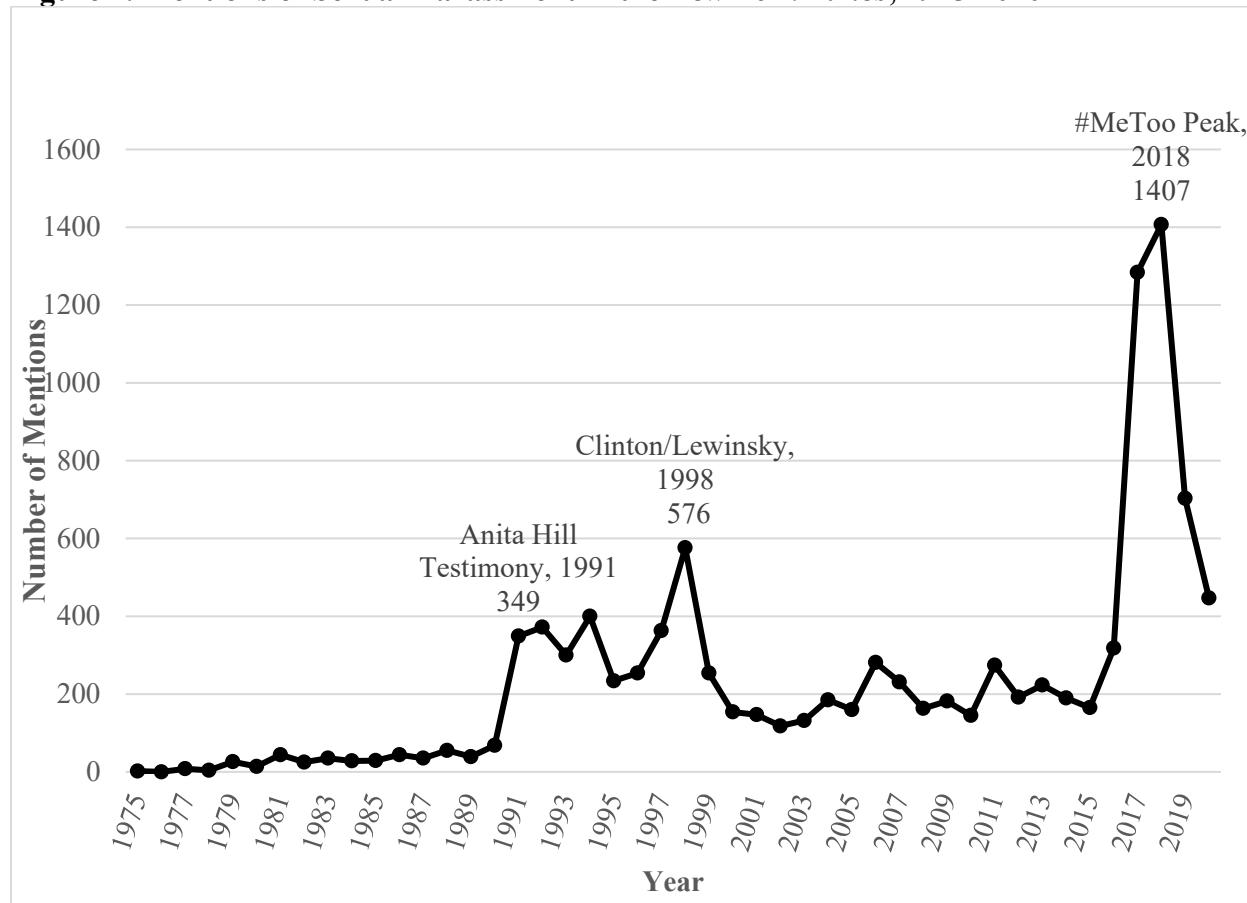


## Sexual Harassment in the #MeToo Era

Heather McLaughlin, *Oklahoma State University*  
Christopher Uggen, *University of Minnesota*

The #MeToo Movement to end sexual violence has fostered solidarity among survivors and allies around the globe. Although organizers like #MeToo founder Tarana Burke have been organizing for over a decade, bombshell allegations against Roger Ailes, Harvey Weinstein, and other powerful men sparked the contemporary major social media-based movement in late 2017. As Figure 1 shows, the *New York Times* used the phrase “sexual harassment” more often during this #MeToo period than during any previous historical moment. For the moment, at least, #MeToo has focused public and scientific attention on this serious workplace problem, with social scientists addressing questions about its antecedents and consequences. Here, we report findings from survey research on the prevalence and effects of workplace sexual harassment, and raise new questions about whether and how the #MeToo Movement will produce lasting change.

**Figure 1. Mentions of Sexual Harassment in the *New York Times*, 1975-2020**



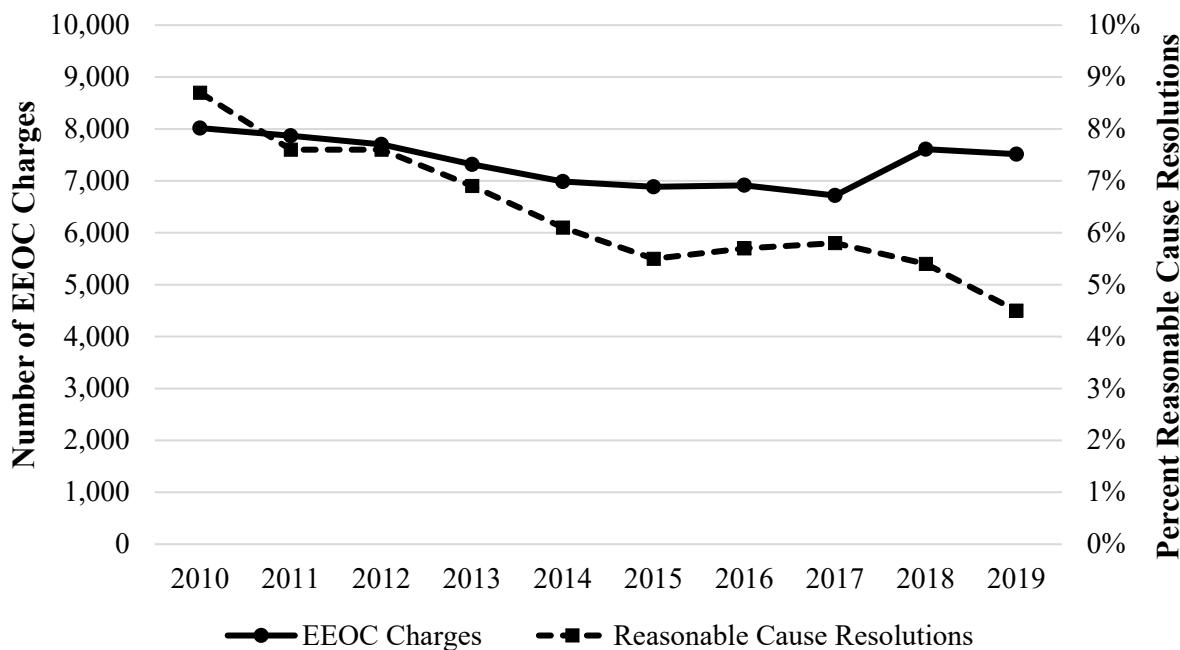
In 2018, at the height of the #MeToo Movement, nationally representative data from the General Social Survey (GSS) found that 4.2% of females and 2.3% of males reported workplace sexual harassment at some point in the last 12 months (Smith et al. 2018). This represented a 17 percent increase for females and a 64 percent increase for males relative to 2014, when 3.6% of females and 1.4% of males reported sexual harassment on the job. These increases are likely the result of greater consciousness of sexual harassment, rather than increases in the underlying rate of harassing behaviors.

The number of workers who have experienced sexual harassment grows much larger when we look beyond a single year. In our longitudinal analysis of data from the Youth Development Study (YDS), roughly one-third of females and 14% of males reported workplace sexual harassment by their mid-twenties (Uggen and Blackstone 2004). The higher prevalence in the YDS is due, in part, to the younger age of the sample, but it is also significant that the GSS only asked this question of individuals who are employed. This restriction is consequential because workers who are sexually harassed often quit their jobs in response. In the YDS, 80% of women who experienced unwanted touching or multiple other harassing behaviors changed jobs within two years (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2017).

Quitting is not the only response to sexual harassment. For example, some workers try to avoid or deter their harassers on their own or file an internal grievance with their employer (Blackstone, Uggen, and McLaughlin 2009). Yet reporting harassment is risky. Through a series of survey experiments, Chloe Hart (2019) found that participants viewed a fictitious woman employee who self-reported sexual harassment as less social, moral, and warm, which in turn affected her likelihood of promotion. This Catch-22 is part of the reason that sexual harassment is rarely reported. Despite being classified as an illegal form of sex discrimination under Title VII, very few workers file government complaints.

The #MeToo Movement may be inspiring more workers to come forward with formal complaints. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the number of new charges filed with the federal agency increased by 12% in 2018 after declining each year for the decade prior (see Figure 2). However, the likelihood of a “reasonable cause” resolution continued to decline during the #MeToo era, following a decade-long trend. Whereas 8.7% of new charges filed with the EEOC in 2010 resulted in a determination that discrimination did occur, that percentage had dropped to 4.5% by 2019. Sharing experiences of harassment may be cathartic, but if they do not lead to action then the spike in EEOC charges is unlikely to continue in the future.

**Figure 2. Number of Annual EEOC Charges, 1997-2019**



In short, the #MeToo Movement has provided an opening, but has not yet led to systemic, legal, and social change. Furthermore, the #MeToo moment is in danger of coming and going very quickly. At its peak in 2018, there were 1,407 mentions of sexual harassment in the *New York Times*, as Figure 1 shows. By 2020, there were 447. Concerns about social problems ebb and flow, even when the underlying problems remain. So it is doubly important to capitalize on the research this movement has produced and to implement the lessons learned – before history repeats itself with a long period of inaction punctuated by another short-lived spike of scandal and outrage.

## References

- Hart, Chloe Grace. 2019. “The Penalties for Self-Reporting Sexual Harassment.” *Gender & Society* 33(4): 534-559.
- Blackstone, Amy, Christopher Uggen, and Heather McLaughlin. 2009. “Legal Consciousness and Responses to Sexual Harassment.” *Law & Society Review* 43: 631-668.
- McLaughlin, Heather, Christopher Uggen, and Amy Blackstone. 2017. “The Economic and Career Effects of Sexual Harassment on Working Women.” *Gender & Society* 31(3): 333-358.
- Uggen, Christopher, and Amy Blackstone. 2004. “Sexual Harassment as a Gendered Expression of Power.” *American Sociological Review* 69(1): 64–92.

Smith, Tom W., Davern, Michael, Freese, Jeremy, and Morgan, Stephen, General Social Surveys, 1972-2018 [machine-readable data file] /Principal Investigator, Smith, Tom W.; Co-Principal Investigators, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, and Stephen Morgan; Sponsored by National Science Foundation. --NORC ed.-- Chicago: NORC, 2018: NORC at the University of Chicago [producer and distributor]. Data accessed from the GSS Data Explorer website at [gssdataexplorer.norc.org](http://gssdataexplorer.norc.org).