

# Harassment and Discrimination on the Basis of Gender and Race/Ethnicity in the FEMA Workforce



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COREEN FARRIS, CARRA S. SIMS, TERRY L. SCHELL, MIRIAM MATTHEWS, SIERRA SMUCKER, SAMANTHA COHEN, OWEN HALL

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Researchers assessed the prevalence and characteristics of sexual harassment, gender discrimination, racial/ethnic harassment, and racial/ethnic discrimination at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). They surveyed FEMA employees about these civil rights violations and about workplace climate. This report documents the survey results.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How prevalent are harassment and discrimination at FEMA?
- What form do they take?

## KEY FINDINGS

### Sexual harassment was less common than other types of incidents

- Among violations that were sex- or gender-related, most victims were targeted with gender-based or sexist behavior—either those behaviors alone or sexist behavior in combination with harassment that was sexual in nature.
- An estimated one in five employees experienced racial/ethnic harassment or discrimination in the preceding year. Women experienced higher rates of gender-based/sexual civil rights violations than men did, and racial/ethnic violations were most commonly experienced by employees who identified as two or more races or as African American.

### Rates of civil rights violations varied across offices

### **Perceptions about direct supervisors were consistently more positive than those about senior-level FEMA leadership for climate for both sexual and racial/ethnic harassment**

- A majority of FEMA employees said leaders would respond appropriately to negative gender-related or racial/ethnic climates, but a fairly substantial proportion perceived leadership behaviors as neutral, if not actively harmful.

### **Employees are not confident that reports filed will be handled properly**

- About one-third to one-half of employees who experienced harassment or discrimination in the preceding year indicated that they had told a supervisor or manager or officially reported it to FEMA through another channel.

### **Most people who told a supervisor or manager about or officially reported discrimination were either neutral or dissatisfied with FEMA's response**

- Retaliation was also frequently reported.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Ensure that prevention efforts address all problematic behaviors, not just the ones making headlines.
- Explore differences in culture and climate between offices with low rates of civil rights violations and those with higher rates. Doing so could aid in development of best practices that could be used across FEMA.
- Explore interventions with leadership at all levels to ensure that all understand how best to handle harassment and understand their responsibility to address it. A more visibly united front at all levels of leadership would send a clearer signal to employees about what types of behavior are appropriate and ensure that incidents are managed as required—at all levels.
- Reduce barriers to reporting. Ensure that leadership at all levels knows what to do with a report and has the tools at hand to take action. Hold supervisors accountable for dealing with concerns associated with retaliation. If it is not already part of the performance review process, include an evaluation of how supervisors handle these issues.
- Increase accountability and transparency in dealing with harassment and discrimination reports at all levels of leadership. Increase accountability and transparency at all levels of leadership so employees have some sense that action was taken to protect them from further negative workplace experiences. Accountability and transparency can also ensure that FEMA employees who report do not experience retaliation.
- Continue monitoring harassment and discrimination in the workforce. Fielding a repeating survey every two or four years would allow FEMA leadership to track the prevalence of civil rights violations in the workforce over time and would provide an objective measure of the effectiveness of any policy changes and prevention efforts that are enacted.