

MULTIPLE FORMS OF BIAS-RELATED HARASSMENT AT SCHOOL

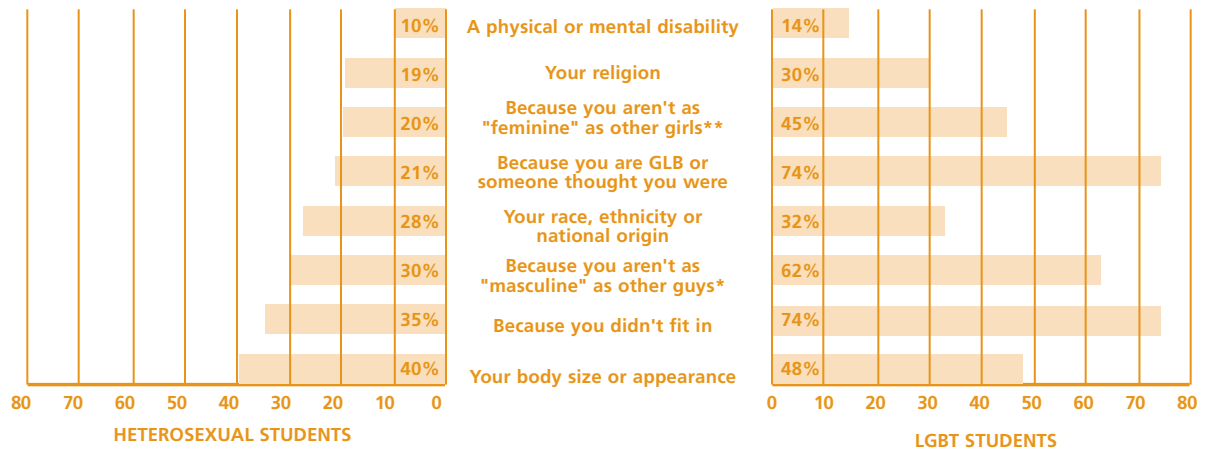
Students in California are diverse: they represent multiple racial or ethnic groups and religions, and have diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. Our study shows that students report bias-based harassment and bullying for many reasons. We use data from the "Preventing School Harassment" Survey and show that students experience multiple forms of bullying or harassment. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students report more bullying compared to heterosexual students. There are not strong differences based on race and ethnicity, but there are strong differences in bias-based bullying from middle school into high school.

Background

A national study of high school students from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found significant levels of harassment or assault among LGBT students; much of the reported harassment was because of students' race or ethnicity, religion, or having a physical disability. Specifically, more than 61% of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third (38%) reported feeling unsafe in school because of how they express their gender. The same report showed that nearly a fifth of students felt unsafe because of their religion, and nearly 10% felt unsafe because of their actual or perceived race or ethnicity.

Using data from the "Preventing School Harassment" Survey, we explore multiple forms of harassment for California students, with a focus on students who report that they feel unsafe at school. We include harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender non-conformity, race, ethnicity or national origin, religion, body size or appearance, and disability. We examine differences for LGBT and heterosexual students, and differences based on race and ethnicity and grade in school.

Figure 1
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO FEEL UNSAFE WHO HAD EXPERIENCED EACH FORM OF BULLYING



Finding 1: Many students reported bias-based bullying, and bias-based bullying is strongly linked with feelings of safety at school. LGBT students reported more of every type of bias-based bullying.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of students who felt unsafe at school (those that disagree or strongly disagree that they feel safe) who had also been bullied based on personal characteristics.

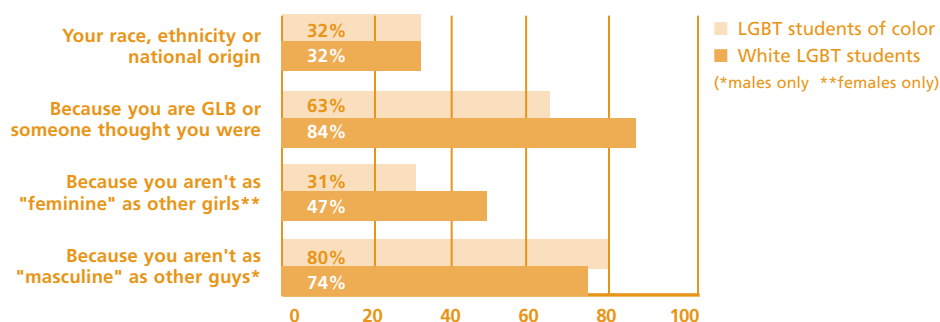
Among heterosexual or straight students who felt unsafe at school (the left side of the figure), 10% had been bullied due to a physical or mental disability and one-fifth (19%) due to religion. Another fifth (21%) of the straight students were bullied because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB), and 28% were bullied based on race, ethnicity, or national origin. The greatest percentages of bullying among heterosexual students who felt unsafe were those who were bullied for not fitting in (35%) and body size or appearance (40%).

For LGBT students, the results were similar for bullying based on race or body size or appearance, even though LGBT students reported somewhat more bullying.

Nevertheless, across all forms of harassment, LGBT students were more likely to be bullied than straight students – in some cases, dramatically more. For example, nearly three times as many LGBT students were bullied based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation (74%) compared to straight students (21%). Also, among LGBT students who felt unsafe at school, the proportions who had been bullied based on gender nonconformity were twice as high as for the heterosexual students: 45% of lesbian or bisexual females had been bullied because they were not “as feminine as other girls” compared to 20% of heterosexual girls, and 62% of gay or bisexual males had been bullied because they were not “as masculine as other guys” compared to 30% of heterosexual males.

Finally, even though “not fitting in” was one of the highest percentages of bullying among heterosexual students (35%), more than twice as many LGBT students (74%) reported being bullied for this reason.

Figure 2
PERCENTAGE OF LGBT STUDENTS WHO FEEL UNSAFE AT SCHOOL WHO ALSO REPORT BIAS-BASED HARASSMENT



Finding 2: Among LGBT students there were not strong differences based on race or ethnicity in the link between bias-based bullying and safety.

With a focus on LGBT students who felt unsafe at school, we examined racial or ethnic group differences in all of the forms of harassment. There were few statistically important differences. Figure 2 shows that among LGBT students who felt unsafe at school, equal proportions (32%) of white students and students of color reported bullying based on race, ethnicity, or national origin.

However, there were small differences for gender nonconformity bullying: femininity may be more important for white lesbian or bisexual girls, while masculinity may be more important for gay or bisexual males of color. Specifically, white female LGBT (lesbian and bisexual) students who felt unsafe at school were somewhat more likely to report being bullied for not being “as ‘feminine’ as other girls” (47% compared to 31% of female LGBT students of color). Among male LGBT students, however, male students of color were slightly more likely to report being bullied for not being “as ‘masculine’ as other guys” (80% compared to 74% of white male LGBT students).

The only statistically strong difference was for bullying based on actual or perceived sexual orientation: white LGBT students were more likely than students of color to report sexual orientation-based bullying (84% compared to 63%).

Finding 3: Among LGBT students who felt unsafe at school, there were important differences in the percentages of bias-based harassment from middle school into the high school years.

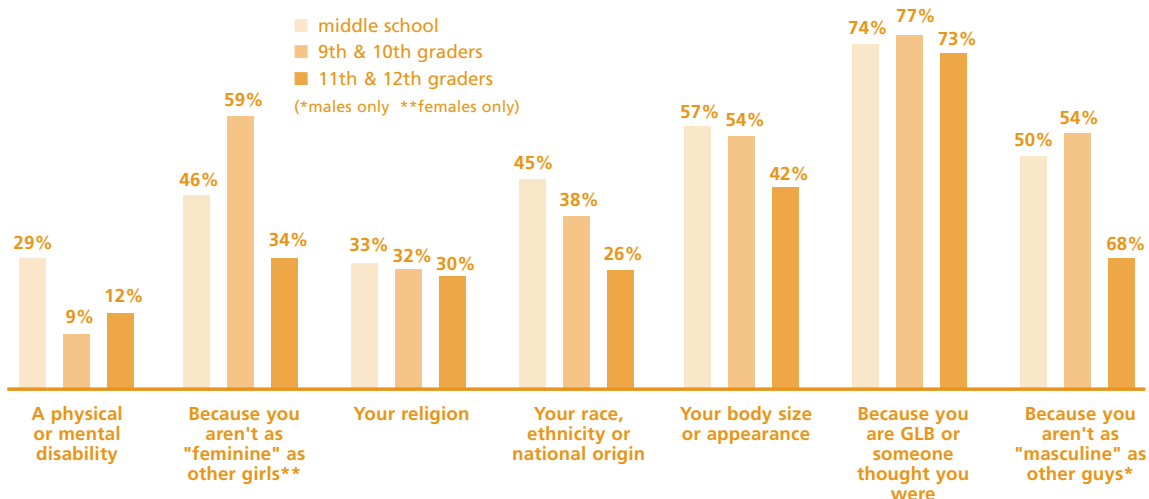
Prior research has shown that bullying is more common in middle school, and that it decreases in frequency and intensity as students get older and advance through the high school years. Among LGBT students who feel unsafe at school, we find this pattern in some of the forms of bias-based bullying. In particular, bullying based on race or ethnicity and body size or appearance decline notably from middle school through high school. In addition, middle school LGBT students who feel unsafe are much more likely to report bullying based on a physical or mental disability.

It is also notable that there are some forms of bullying that do not decline across the school years: for these students, bullying based on religion (on average 32%) and based on sexual orientation (on average 75%) are consistent from middle school through the end of high school.

Finally, bullying because of gender nonconformity showed unique patterns among LGBT students who felt unsafe at school. For females, bullying because of not being “as ‘feminine’ as other girls” was highest in the early years of high school (59% in 9th and 10th grades), and lower in middle school (46%) and the last years of high school (34%). However, for LGBT males who feel unsafe, there is a striking pattern that is opposite to the typical findings: bullying because of not being “as ‘masculine’ as other guys” increased from middle school (50%) through the first years of high school (54%), and appears to be worst at the end of the high school years (64%).

Figure 3

PERCENTAGE OF LGBT STUDENTS WHO FEEL UNSAFE WHO ALSO REPORT BIAS-BASED HARASSMENT



Recommendations for teachers and administrators

- Discuss the link between school safety, student academic achievement, and overall school academic performance with students, parents, and colleagues.
- Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, and ask to help publicize school policies on multiple forms of harassment.
- Set the climate in your classrooms early and as often as necessary, letting students know that bias-related harassment and slurs are not acceptable.
- Treat all forms of bias-related harassment and slurs as serious and preventable.
- Find out about community resources and information related to gender identity and expression.
- Address issues of harassment and bullying during middle school grades to lay the foundation for safe transitions into high school.
- Recognize that middle school is not too early to address issues of safety for LGBT students.
- Be sure that your school and school district are implementing the well-documented safe schools strategies:
 1. publicize and enforce anti-harassment policies,
 2. provide resources, information, and support to students,
 3. train teachers and other staff about the multiple forms of bullying and how to intervene in harassment,
 4. measure and monitor bias-related harassment in the school and school district, and
 5. include people of color and LGBT people and information about race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity in the curriculum.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data are from the 2003, 2004 and 2005 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey. The survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school and middle school students in California, and the steps schools can take to make schools safer. The PSH survey was developed by the California Safe Schools Coalition, and administered by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network. Data from over 2,400 students were collected in schools and on the internet. Students were asked about their experiences of safety at school, and about the steps schools can take to make schools safer.

References:

Kosciw, J. G., Diaz, E. M., & Greytak, E. A. (2008). 2007 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools. New York: GLSEN.

Suggested Citation:

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