UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL SAFETY AND THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, ETHNICITY, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Harassment at school based on a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation or a person's racial or ethnic identity is too common. Previous studies have found that such harassment is strongly linked to negative health outcomes and lower academic achievement. However, there are very few studies that examine the intersections of harassment based on race and sexual orientation. In this report we use data from the *Preventing School Harassment* (PSH) Survey to understand bias-motivated harassment and school safety for students of color and students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). The results show that harassment and bullying of both kinds are often experienced by students of color and by LGBT students; those who experience both kinds of harassment are particularly at risk.

Background

A national study of high school students from the *Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network* (GLSEN) found that there are significant differences in reports of harassment at school for students from different racial groups (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). Multiracial students reported the highest levels of victimization at school related to their racial identity, while white students reported the lowest levels. In addition, African-American or Black students reported lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation than other students.

We used data from the PSH Survey to study the link between school safety and harassment based on racial identity and harassment based on sexual orientation for students in California. We examined differences based on racial identity and sexual orientation, and examined the intersections of race and LGBT identity.

First, to provide background about the racial and LGBT make-up of the study, Figure 1 shows the racial and ethnic make-up of the students who participated in the PSH survey – for LGBT students, and for heterosexual or "straight" students. Overall, the PSH survey included students from racial / ethnic groups roughly in proportion to their representation in the state of California, with the exception that Latino students were under-represented in the survey (the survey was only available in English, which may partially account for the relatively low rate of participation among Latino students). Among participants in the study, there were similar proportions of LGBT and straight students among White, Black, Latino, Multiracial students, and students who declined to state their race. However, there were comparatively lower percentages of LGBT students among Asians (7% of LGBT students were Asian, where as 19% of straight students were Asian).

Figure 1

RACIAL / ETHNIC IDENTITIES AMONG PSH SURVEY PARTICIPANTS
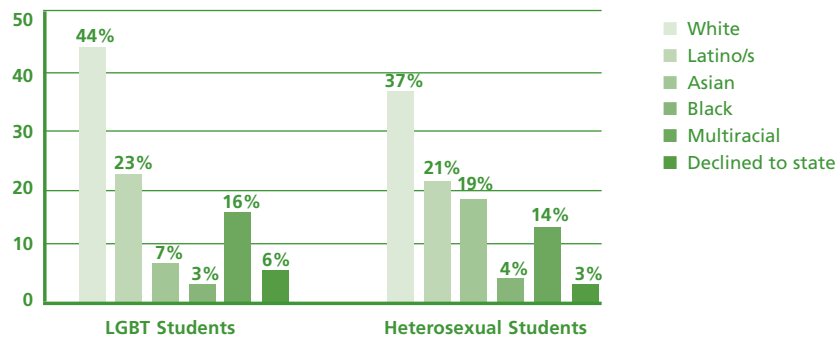
The racial composition of the PSH participants shows that Whites and Latinos comprise the majority (over 50%) of the sample among both LGBT and straight students. Multiracial, Asian, and Black students make up about one quarter of the LGBT participants and slightly over one-third of the straight students.

Finding 1: There are strong racial and ethnic group differences in reports of bias-motivated harassment at school for all students.

Participants in the survey reported frequent bias-motivated bullying or harassment. Students were asked if they experienced bullying that was "because of your race, ethnicity, or national origin." Nearly one quarter (24%) of Asian students experienced racial harassment (the highest among racial groups), while 22% of Latino and 22% of multiracial students reported harassment due to racial identity. Sixteen percent of White and 13% of Black students reported harassment based on race.

The most frequent bias-motivated harassment in the PSH survey was "…because you are gay, lesbian, or bisexual or someone thought you were." One-third of White students reported sexual orientation-based bullying (the highest among racial groups) followed by Latinos (30%), multiracial (28%), Black (21%), and Asian (14%) students. It is noteworthy that sexual orientation-based harassment was reported more often than race-based harassment for all groups – except Asians, who reported the most racial harassment, and the least sexual orientation-related harassment.

Figure 2

RACIAL / ETHNIC GROUP DIFFERENCES IN BIAS-MOTIVATED HARASSMENT
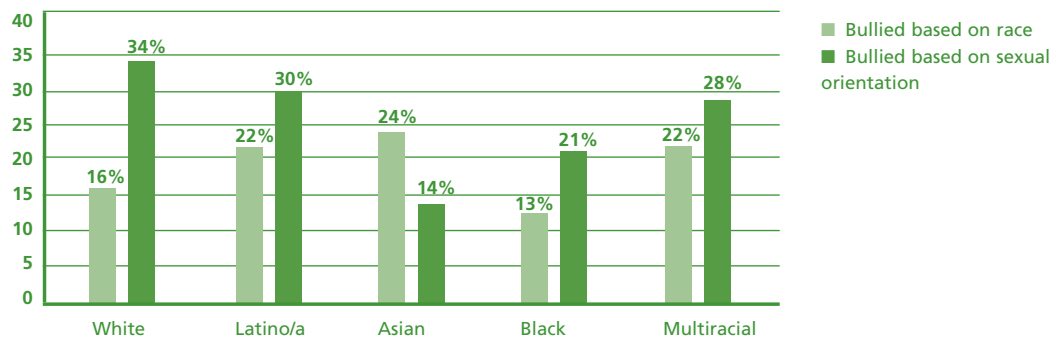
Finding 2: LGBT students experience bullying due to their sexual orientation the most, but they also experience other forms of bias-motivated harassment.

We focused next on those students who identified as LGBT. Among LGBT students, nearly one quarter (24%) of those who were Black or Latino reported harassment based on race; 31% of Asian LGBT students reported harassment based on race, while 20% of Multiracial and 18% of White LGBT students reported race-based harassment.

The majority of LGBT youth report bullying based on their sexual orientation. In fact, two-thirds (66%) of White LGBT students reported bullying due to LGBT identity; 60% of Latino, 55% of Black, 56% of Multiracial, and 40% of Asian LGBT students reported sexual orientation-based bullying. Although racial bullying was lower compared to LGBT bullying among LGBT students, rates were similar to racial bullying for the full sample: overall, 1 in 5 LGBT students reporting being bullied due to race, ethnicity, or national origin.

Figure 3
RACIAL / ETHNIC GROUP DIFFERENCES IN BIAS-MOTIVATED HARASSMENT AMONG LGBT STUDENTS
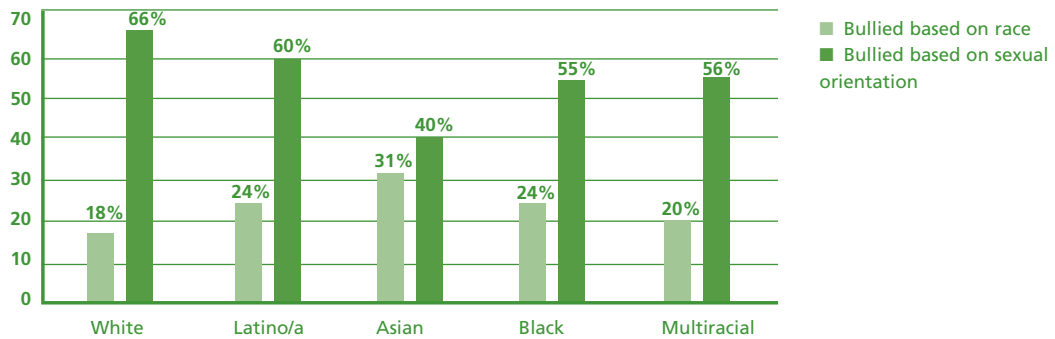
Finding 3: There is significant overlap in race-based and sexual orientation-based harassment. Among students who were bullied, nearly one-third experience both types of harassment; this group reported the lowest feelings of safety at school.

Over one-third (38%) of the students who participated in the survey reported some form of bias-motivated harassment or bullying. Figure 4 shows that among those who were harassed, 19% reported harassment based on sexual orientation only, 10% reported race-based harassment only, and 9% reported that they were bullied because of both race and sexual orientation.

Figure 4
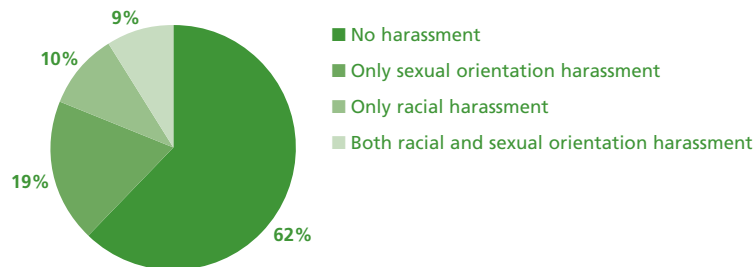PERCENT OF STUDENTS HARASSED BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND RACE

Figure 5 shows that students who are bullied because of both race and sexual orientation were more likely to feel unsafe than students who are bullied because of only race or only sexual orientation. Among the students who were harassed for both race and sexual orientation, 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt safe, compared to 20% of those who were harassed just for racial identity, and 23% who were harassed just for sexual orientation. Only 6% of students who were not harassed at all reported feeling unsafe at school.

Figure 5
PERCENT OF STUDENTS WHO FELT UNSAFE AT SCHOOL BY HARASSMENT EXPERIENCE

Recommendations for teachers and administrators

- Discuss the intersections of racism and homophobia with students, parents, and colleagues.

- Intervene if you hear bias-related comments and slurs of any kind. Use each comment as an opportunity to provide education and reaffirm school policy.

- Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, including bias-motivated harassment due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender nonconformity.

- Ask to help publicize school policies on harassment.

- Set the climate in your classrooms early and as often as necessary; let 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 sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

- Integrate representations of people of color, LGBT people, and LGBT people of color into existing curricula.

Recommendations for students

- Speak out when you hear slurs or negative comments related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and gender nonconformity.

- Find out if your school harassment policy specifically prohibits harassment based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression and advocate for changing the policy if it doesn't.

- Find out how to make a complaint when bias-motivated harassment occurs. You can make a complaint about harassment even if you aren't the target of it.

- Speak out in support of actions school districts and schools can take:

    1. publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies,

    2. providing resources, information, and support to students

    3. training teachers and other staff about the multiple forms of bullying and how to intervene in harassment,

    4. measuring and monitoring bias-related harassment in their local school district, and

    5. including 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 PSH survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students and their straight allies, 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.

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.

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