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Homophobic Bullying

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Synonyms

[Antigay bullying](#); [Homophobic victimization](#); [LGB victimization](#); [Negative school climate](#)

Definition

Experiences of harassment or discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual minority status.

Introduction

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth show a number of health disparities relative to heterosexual youth, including greater psychological distress, suicidality, sexual risk behaviors, and substance use (Kann et al. 2016; Saewyc 2011). Similar patterns have been identified for transgender youth, although less is known about this population due to the lack of items to identify transgender respondents in population-level surveys (Reisner et al. 2016). A substantial body of research has linked these disparities with

experiences of homophobic bullying and victimization (e.g., Collier et al. 2013; Kosciw et al. 2014). Homophobic bullying can take a variety of forms (e.g., verbal harassment, physical assault) and is experienced differentially by subgroups of LGBT youth. School climate also plays an important role in shaping LGBT youths' experiences of homophobic bullying, and supportive resources can promote resilience among LGBT youth.

Prevalence of Homophobic Bullying

Homophobic bullying can take a variety of forms. A nationwide survey of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2013 examined some of the most common forms, including hearing biased language (e.g., "That's so gay") and anti-LGB remarks (experienced by 71% of LGBT youth in the past year), verbal harassment (e.g., name-calling or verbal threats, experienced by 74% of LGBT youth in the past year), physical harassment (e.g., pushing or shoving, experienced by 36% of LGBT youth in the past year), physical assault (e.g., being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon, experienced by 17% of LGBT youth in the past year), and cyberbullying (e.g., verbally harassing or anti-LGB text messages or social media posts, experienced by 49% of LGBT youth in the past year). A more recent population-

level survey found similar patterns: LGB youth reported higher prevalence rates of bullying on school property, electronic bullying, feeling unsafe at school, and a number of other violence indicators relative to heterosexual youth (Kann et al. 2016). Although peers were the most common perpetrators of homophobic bullying, 51% of LGBT youth reported hearing teachers or school staff making homophobic remarks (Kosciw et al. 2014). Encouragingly, the GLSEN survey also found that experiences of homophobic victimization are declining over time as social attitudes about sexual minorities change (Kosciw et al. 2014). This may reflect the links scholars have drawn between homophobic bullying, societal attitudes, and broader relationships to structures of power (Payne and Smith 2013).

Demographic Differences in Homophobic Bullying

Although LGBT youth experience higher levels of homophobic bullying than heterosexual youth, research also documents variation between subgroups of LGBT youth. Youth who are questioning their sexual orientation experienced higher homophobic teasing and peer victimization than LGB or heterosexual youth (Birkett et al. 2009). Bisexual youth and youth who report both male and female sex partners, particularly boys, reported more fighting, skipping school due to feeling unsafe, property theft, or damaged than lesbian, gay, or heterosexual youth (Russell et al. 2014). LGBT youth of color experienced greater victimization than white LGBT youth. Also, middle school students experienced greater victimization than LGBT high school students (Kosciw et al. 2014). Middle school appears to be a period of elevated developmental risk, as LGBT middle school students reported lower access to supportive resources, lower school belongingness, and higher truancy than high school students (Kosciw et al. 2014; Robinson and Espelage 2011). There is also evidence that although more overt forms of homophobic bullying decline across development, more indirect forms persist into adolescence (Russell et al. 2014). Homophobic bullying may also be experienced by children of LGBT parents (Clarke

et al. 2004; Kosciw and Diaz 2008), and additional research is needed to understand the experiences of these students.

Students in different educational contexts also reported different prevalence rates of homophobic bullying. LGBT students in public schools reported higher victimization than students in private or religious schools (Kosciw et al. 2014). LGBT students in rural or small town schools reported higher victimization and fewer supportive resources than students in urban schools (Kosciw et al. 2014). Across the United States, LGBT students in the South and Midwest reported higher levels of homophobic victimization than LGBT students in the Northeast and South; LGBT students in the South also reported fewer supportive resources than students in other regions (Kosciw et al. 2014).

In addition to experiences of victimization on the basis of sexual orientation, youth may experience bullying on the basis of actual or perceived gender minority status. Transgender youth experience a range of forms of bullying on the basis of gender expression (Kosciw et al. 2014). Additionally, violation of gender norms may drive many instances of bullying for both sexual and gender minority students (Payne and Smith 2013). Research is needed to better understand the experiences of transgender students and to examine how homophobic bullying and bullying on the basis of gender identity and expression may intersect and overlap.

Impact of Homophobic Bullying

Homophobic bullying has been linked with a number of adverse outcomes for LGBT youth, including psychological well-being, attendance and academic achievement, and educational aspirations and future plans. In terms of psychological well-being, it has been associated with greater depression, traumatic stress, alcohol and substance use, and suicidality as well as lower self-esteem (Collier et al. 2013; Kosciw et al. 2014). In terms of school attendance and academic achievement, LGBT youth who experienced high levels of past-year victimization had lower grade point averages (GPAs) and were three times more likely to miss school in the past month than youth with

low levels of past-year victimization (Kosciw et al. 2014). Other research has found that homophobic bullying is associated with higher truancy and lower school belonging (Collier et al. 2013) and that feeling unsafe in school mediated the relationship between identifying as a sexual minority and experiencing higher truancy and lower grades (Birkett et al. 2014). In terms of educational aspirations and future plans, LGBT youth who experienced high levels of past-year victimization were twice as likely to report not planning to pursue post-secondary education than LGBT youth with lower levels of past-year victimization (Kosciw et al. 2014). As homophobic bullying impacts both short-term (e.g., attendance and achievement) and long-term (e.g., educational aspirations and future plans) academic outcomes, it likely leads to disruptions in LGBT youth's educational trajectories (Collier et al. 2013).

Although it is important to understand how experiences of homophobic bullying lead to negative outcomes for LGBT youth, it is also important to highlight that many LGBT youth demonstrate resilience despite these experiences. In fact, most sexual minority youth thrive and achieve health and well-being similar to heterosexual youth, despite greater experiences of adversity and risk factors (Saewyc 2011). To understand these processes of resilience, research is needed that attends to contextual factors, particularly protective factors. Research on school climate has provided important contributions in this area.

Homophobic Bullying and School Climate

School climate is important to understanding homophobic bullying, as school climate has been found to moderate the relationship between homophobic bullying and negative psychological outcomes (with students in more positive school climates experiencing fewer negative outcomes; Espelage and Swearer 2008; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2014). Similarly, school-based supportive resources are associated with lower victimization and better academic outcomes for LGBT students (Kosciw et al. 2013). Incorporating a focus on school climate is consistent with a social-

ecological approach, which underscores the role that risk and protective factors play on multiple levels (e.g., families, schools, communities, societies) in shaping the impact of bullying on LGBT youth (Hong and Garbarino 2012; Hong and Espelage 2012).

In addition to moderating the impact of homophobic bullying on psychological and academic outcomes, school climate may play an important role in shaping responses to homophobic bullying. Most LGBT students (57%) who experienced harassment or assault in school did not report this experience, primarily because they doubted this would result in effective intervention. This perception appears to be founded, as most LGBT students who did report the experience (61%) said that school staff did nothing in response (Kosciw et al. 2014). More effective school responses to homophobic bullying are an important area of future growth to foster more positive school climates and more positive outcomes for LGBT youth.

Similar to demographic differences in experiences of homophobic bullying, demographic differences in perceptions of school climate have been found. Transgender youth report the most hostile school climates of all sexual and gender minority groups (Kosciw et al. 2014). In terms of sexual orientation, questioning students report a less positive school climate than LGB or heterosexual youth. Both school climate and homophobic teasing moderated the relationship between sexual orientation and depression, substance use, and truancy, with questioning youth who reported more negative school climates or higher levels of homophobic teasing most likely to report negative outcomes (Birkett et al. 2009).

Several kinds of resources that contribute to a more positive school climate for LGBT students have been identified, including anti-bullying policies, gay-straight alliances (GSAs), and other LGBT-related student organizations, inclusive curricula, and supportive school personnel (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2014; Kosciw et al. 2014). The most recent GLSEN School Climate Survey found that LGBT youth have reported an increase in all of these forms of support over time (Kosciw et al. 2014). In terms of anti-bullying policies,

most LGBT students (82%) reported their school had an anti-bullying policy; however, only a small minority (10%) reported the presence of a comprehensive policy that included sexual orientation and gender identity (Kosciw et al. 2014). In terms of GSAs and student organizations, half of LGBT students reported the presence of a GSA or similar organization in their school. Those students who reported the presence of such a student organization reported higher levels of school connectedness and lower levels of homophobic bullying (Kosciw et al. 2014). Other research has found that students in these schools also reported improved mental health and lower harassment (Saewyc 2011). In terms of inclusive curricula, a minority of students reported being taught positive representations of LGBT people or history (19%), and almost as many (15%) reported being taught negative representations (Kosciw et al. 2014). Additionally, curricula that do address LGBT people or issues may do so only in superficial, limited, or problematic ways, such as through onetime events or representations that reinforce pathological representations of LGBT people (Payne and Smith 2013). Finally, in terms of supportive school personnel, almost all LGBT youth (96%) could identify at least one supportive school staff member; however, less than two-thirds (61%) could identify at least six (Kosciw et al. 2014). Supportive school personnel are an especially important resource, as support networks are important buffers of the impact of homophobic bullying on LGBT youth (Espelage and Swearer 2008).

Conclusion

LGBT youth report a range of forms of homophobic bullying, including antigay remarks, verbal and physical harassment, and cyberbullying. Some subgroups are especially at risk for homophobic bullying, including LGBT youth of color, questioning and transgender youth, and middle school students. School climate plays an important moderating role, with students in more positive school climates reporting more positive health outcomes. A number of factors contribute

to more positive school climate, including anti-bullying policies, LGBT-related student organizations, inclusive curricula, and supportive school personnel.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Bullying](#)
- ▶ [Cyberbullying](#)
- ▶ [Homophobia](#)
- ▶ [Outcomes of Homophobic Abuse](#)
- ▶ [Procedures for Dealing with \(Bullying\)](#)

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