

Sage Reference

The Sage Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ STUDIES

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Bullying, Rates and Effects of

This entry describes findings from research on the bullying of LGBTQ+ youths. It offers an overview of those studies that have identified bullying as a significant factor in the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals, and provides a summary of the findings from larger, more recent, population-based surveys. The entry then discusses the prevalence of LGBTQ+ bullying, including the bullying of those who are *perceived* to be LGBTQ+, before turning to a discussion of the long-term implications of those experiences for victims. Finally, this entry offers an insight into the experiences of LGBTQ+ youths during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rates of Bullying

Bullying perpetrated against LGBTQ+ youths remains a significant education and public health issue. Over the last 40 years, LGBTQ+ support groups and researchers have conducted studies that seek to understand its nature, prevalence, and long-term effects. While those individuals and organizations that have raised the profile of and offered support to LGBTQ+ youths in school have encountered hostility from local and national politicians and leaders of faith communities, it is fair to say that, in many countries, support for LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools has been increasing.

The very first study to provide data on what we now call homophobic bullying was conducted in the United Kingdom on behalf of the Inner London Education Authority in 1984. A total of 416 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youths were asked about the pressures they faced in school and the ways in which they were discriminated against in the classroom. Overall, 39% of youths had experienced “problems at school,” which included feeling isolated (25%), being called names or verbally abused (21%), being teased (13%), being physically assaulted (12%), being ostracized by peers (7%), or feeling pressured to change their behavior (7%). In a comparable study conducted in the United States in 1988 with 461 gay men and 260 lesbians, it was found that 50% of the men surveyed and 12% of women reported having experienced victimization in junior high school, rising to 59% and 21%, respectively, in high school. Subsequently, an analysis of the data gathered from various studies conducted by LGB task forces and coalitions across the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s suggested that, nationally, reports of school-based victimization ranged anywhere from 33% to 49%. By the mid-1990s, community-based studies using samples of LGB youths were beginning to be published. One study of 194 youths attending community groups across the United States suggested that as many as 30% of young men and 25% of young women experienced harassment or abuse in school. In the United Kingdom, a survey of hate crimes perpetrated against British LGBs indicated that around 40% of those under the age of 18 had been attacked at school. By the late 1990s, it was estimated that approximately 1

in 3 LGB youths experienced victimization at school because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Since 2000, large-scale surveys sponsored by one UK charity, Stonewall, have demonstrated a shift in the experiences of young LGBs in secondary/high schools and colleges. Data collected in 2017 (from 3,700 LGBT youths) show that reports of bullying decreased from 65% (in 2007) to 45% (in 2017), although for trans youth the number who reported being bullied at school was 64%. Over half of the LGBT youths surveyed (52%) had heard homophobic language regularly at school, with 36% hearing epithets relating to bisexuality and 46% reported hearing transphobic language. Eighty-six percent of LGBT youth said they had heard phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “you’re so gay” at school. Finally, 9% of trans students said they had received death threats at school. In the United States, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) biannual surveys of bullying and victimization, which began in 1999, illustrate how reports of victimization have changed over time. While there has been a gradual decline in reported incidents of physical and verbal harassment, for those who are bullied on the grounds of gender expression the rate of decline has been less pronounced. In its 2019 survey of 16,713 students (ages 13 to 21), GLSEN found that 59.1% said that they felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 42.5% because of their gender expression. Of LGBTQ students, 68.7% said they had been called names or threatened because of their sexual orientation, and 56.9% because of their gender expression. Additionally, 25.7% reported having been physically harassed (pushed or shoved) and 11.0% said they had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation. Among those bullied because of their gender expression, 21.8% said that they had been physically harassed, with 9.5% reporting having been physically assaulted; 44.9% had also been the victims of cyberbullying. Although a great deal of data exist on the experiences of LGBTQ+ people when they were at school, these data have tended to be retrospective, and questions have been raised about the ability of adults—even young adults—to remember incidents in detail or provide accurate estimates of the frequency of their bullying. While there is encouraging evidence that bullying has diminished over time, it remains a concern that many LGBTQ+ youths continue to feel unsafe at school.

Prevalence

Many studies focusing on the bullying of LGBTQ+ students have relied on self-selecting samples of youths and young adults who were “out” and attending community groups or who were drawn to the projects because of subject matter and their own experiences of violence and harassment. It has therefore been very difficult to establish prevalence rates for LGBTQ+ bullying in schools. In the United Kingdom, two surveys run by a national charity have asked young people in schools and colleges about all forms of bullying. The first survey, published in 2013, included 1,843 young people attending colleges across the United Kingdom. Among

those youths who had experienced bullying before their 18th birthday, 11.1% said that the bullying they experienced related to “attitudes toward sexuality,” with 3.4% reporting that it was the result of “attitudes toward gender identity.” In the second survey, published in 2014, which included responses from 3,616 young people, approximately 7% had experienced what was described as “homophobic bullying” at school and 2% had experienced “transphobic bullying.”

Between 2001 and 2002, the California Safe School Coalition, together with researchers from the University of California, Davis, surveyed 237,544 students attending schools statewide (Grades 7 to 11; ages 12 to 17 years) who were asked about their experiences of bullying, including incidents of homophobic bullying. Overall, 7.5% of students said that they had been victims of homophobic bullying, with two thirds of those students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans reporting that they were victimized because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Additionally, those students who were bullied because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation were more likely to report receiving lower grades for academic work (grade “C” or below) when compared with nonbullied peers (24% vs. 17%). They were also more likely to report having missed school in the past month because they felt it was not safe (27% vs. 7%). They were twice as likely to report engaging in health-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, driving under the influence of alcohol, or being a passenger in a car where the driver had consumed alcohol. They were significantly more likely to report being threatened or hurt by someone carrying a weapon (28% vs. 5%), and much more likely to report carrying a weapon to school (19% vs. 5%). Data drawn from the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) have shown that, of those youths who identified as LGB, 10% had been threatened or injured with a weapon while they were on school property, with 34% saying they had been deliberately bullied at school. Additionally, 28% had been bullied electronically (cyberbullying).

Effects of Bullying

The issue of whether bullying is a significant contributor to the mental health issues found among sexual-minority groups has been the subject of much debate. Some researchers and activists argue that there are methodological flaws in the design of many of the early studies examining LGB mental health, where the focus is on negative rather than positive experiences growing up. Those early studies rarely included participants who were trans or queer/questioning. Some scholars and activists argue that researchers continue to perpetuate a myth of ongoing discrimination and poor mental health among LGBTQ+ people when homophobia is in fact in decline. However, there is now an emerging body of cross-sectional and longitudinal research that suggests that there are indeed long-term and debilitating effects arising from bullying at school, not just

for LGBTQ+ youths but also for those youths who are bullied for other reasons. The long-term correlates of homophobic bullying range from reports of depression, anxiety, and non-expressed aggression through to multiple suicide attempts. In one study conducted in the United Kingdom, it was found that 53% of LGB participants who had experienced bullying at school because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation had contemplated suicide. Forty percent of those who had experienced bullying had made at least one attempt and three quarters of those had made two or more attempts.

In the United States, among a community sample of 194 LGB youths, 42% reported having attempted suicide. Whereas researchers have been careful not to link suicide to experiences of peer, family, and community intolerance, increasingly there is evidence that suggests good mental health is intrinsically linked to self-acceptance, which is itself linked to societal acceptance. This finding is corroborated by large-scale population-based studies, which show that external environmental factors, such as the political and social acceptance of sexual minorities, play a significant role in the general well-being and survival rates of LGBTQ+ people. For example, data from the 2015 (YRBS suggested that LGB students are 140% more likely to report not having gone to school within the last 30 days when compared with their heterosexual peers (12% vs. 5%). Additionally, the YRBS has shown that LGB youth are at greater risk of depressive symptoms, substance use, suicide, and engaging in unsafe sexual behaviors that increase HIV and STD transmission. In GLSEN's 2019 survey, high rates of depression and low self-esteem were found among those who reported being victimized at school. Additionally, data collected in California from 237,544 students suggest that 55% of those bullied because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation had experienced depression for at least 2 weeks in the last 12 months (compared with 23% among non-harassed students). Furthermore, 45% had seriously considered suicide (compared with 14% among non-harassed students) and 35% had made a suicide plan (compared with 9% among non-harassed students). However, one UK study found that there is very little difference in scores for depression, anxiety, and non-expressed anger for those who were bullied because of their sexual orientation at school when compared with those who were bullied for other reasons. Overall, both groups were found to have poorer mental health when their scores were compared with those of heterosexual and LGB participants who had not been bullied at school.

Finally, data taken from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England suggest that, while victimization declined with age, among those who identified as LGB at age 16, young LGB people, particularly young men, are nearly 4 times more likely to experience some form of harassment or victimization after they leave school when compared with young heterosexuals. Depression, anxiety, non-expressed anger, and self-loathing have all been identified as issues common among LGBTQ+ youths and adults who experienced bullying at school. Rates of suicide ideation have been found to be particularly high among this group; however, some re-

searchers argue that the suicide “script” associated with bullying is so well known among LGBTQ+ youths that taking one’s own life may be seen as the only solution when bullying occurs. If this is the case, it becomes imperative that alternative scripts encouraging help-seeking behaviors are promoted among those who support LGBTQ+ youths.

COVID-19 and Bullying

In 2020, a national charity in Scotland surveyed 1,015 young people aged 12 to 24 years. Overall, 47% of those surveyed said that they had seen or experienced online bullying during lockdown, with more than half suggesting that this was more than usual. When comparing heterosexual and LGBTQI+ young people ($N = 352$), before lockdown, 3% of LGBTQI+ young people said that they had experienced bullying “every day,” with 16% saying it happened “most days.” Among heterosexual young people only 1% said they had been bullied “every day” and 4% “most days at school, college, or university.” However, once lockdown began, 30% of LGBTQI+ young people said they had “seen” online bullying, 19% had “seen and experienced” it, and 11% had “experienced” it. For heterosexual young people, 27% said they had “seen” it, 7% had “seen and experienced” it, and 4% had “experienced” it. In summary, 76% of LGBTQI+ young people said there had been more online bullying during lockdown, compared with 49% of heterosexual young people.

See **also** [Bullying, School-Based Interventions for](#); [Community Climate](#); [Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network \(GLSEN\)](#); [Homophobia](#); [Homophobic Language in the Peer Group](#); [School Climate](#); [Suicide, Risk Factors for and Prevention of](#); [Transphobia](#)

Further Readings

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