



ResearchLink

How School Bullying Impacts Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Young Adults



Two new studies shed light on the long-term effect of school bullying. The first study explored the impact of bullying of LGBT teens and found bullying to be related to health and adjustment differences in adulthood. The second study found that LGBT teen gender nonconformity is linked to more bullying; however, only bullying, and not teen gender nonconformity, was found to be related to well-being in adulthood. These findings highlight the long term impact bullying has on LGBT individuals

Who is Being Bullied, Why, and What are the Effects?

Given the recent string of teen suicides around the country, a lot of attention has been given to school bullying. Reports indicate that up to a third of students are bullied during high school. Many schools have started programs to educate parents and students about bullying and to help students who are being bullied. One group often targeted and bullied are LGBT and gender nonconforming teens.

Although we know about immediate effects of bullying, long-term effects are still mostly unknown. A study in Finland found that having been bullied by age 8 was linked to anxiety 10-15 years later¹. Two studies from the United Kingdom also found negative effects of bullying for LGB adults. The first found that LGB adults who reported bullying showed higher depressive symptoms². The second found that LGB adults who reported homophobic bullying for longer periods of time at school had more stress symptoms³. Of the research that has been done in

the United States, none has looked at long term effects for men and women for a range of outcomes.



Text Box 1: Common Terms Defined

Lesbian • A self-label for a woman whose sexual and emotional attractions are for other women.

Gay • A self-label for a person whose sexual and emotional attractions are for the same sex, typically in reference to men.

Bisexual • A term used to refer to a person whose sexual orientation or behavior includes both the same and other sex. This term is also a sexual identity claimed by people who are sexually and emotionally attracted to persons of both genders.

Transgender • An umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their birth sex.

Gender Nonconforming • A person who is or is perceived to have gender characteristics and/or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations. Gender non-conforming people may or may not identify as LGBT.

Many gender nonconforming students are LGBT, but not all are. Heterosexual gender nonconforming teens are likely to be bullied because others assume that they are LGBT. A growing body of research has shown that much of the bullying that takes place at school is motivated by prejudice. Bullying based on prejudice has strong links with



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negative health outcomes than bullying for other reasons⁴. Boys who are bullied by being called “gay” have greater psychological distress⁴. Poor grades, substance use, and depression have also been linked to bullying on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation⁴. Research had not, until now, explored the links between LGBT bullying, gender nonconformity, and young adult well-being.



Text Box 2: Bullying of LGBT and Gender Nonconforming Teens

Bullying of LGBT Teens^{5,6}

- 90% report hearing the word “gay” used in an offensive way
- 85% report being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation
- 44% report being physically harassed because of their sexual orientation

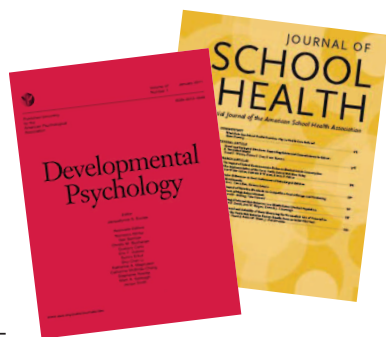
Bullying of Gender Nonconforming Teens⁷

- 66% report verbal harassment at school
- 33% report physical harassment at school

About the Studies

Using data from the Family Acceptance Project, Drs. Stephen T. Russell, Caitlin Ryan and colleagues were able to look at the long-term effects of LGBT teen bullying on mental and behavioral health outcomes in young adulthood. Further, they were able to explore the links between LGBT teen bullying, gender nonconformity, and young adult well-being.

The Family Acceptance Project is a community research, intervention, education, and policy program associated with San Francisco State University.



Study 1: LGBT School Bullying and the Impact on Young Adult Health and Adjustment

A total 245 LGBT young adults between the ages of 21 and 25 were surveyed. These adults answered questions about their experiences of school bullying based on their LGBT identity when they were between the ages of 13 and 19. Links between bullying, depression, suicidal ideation, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and social integration in young adulthood were then examined.

Findings show:

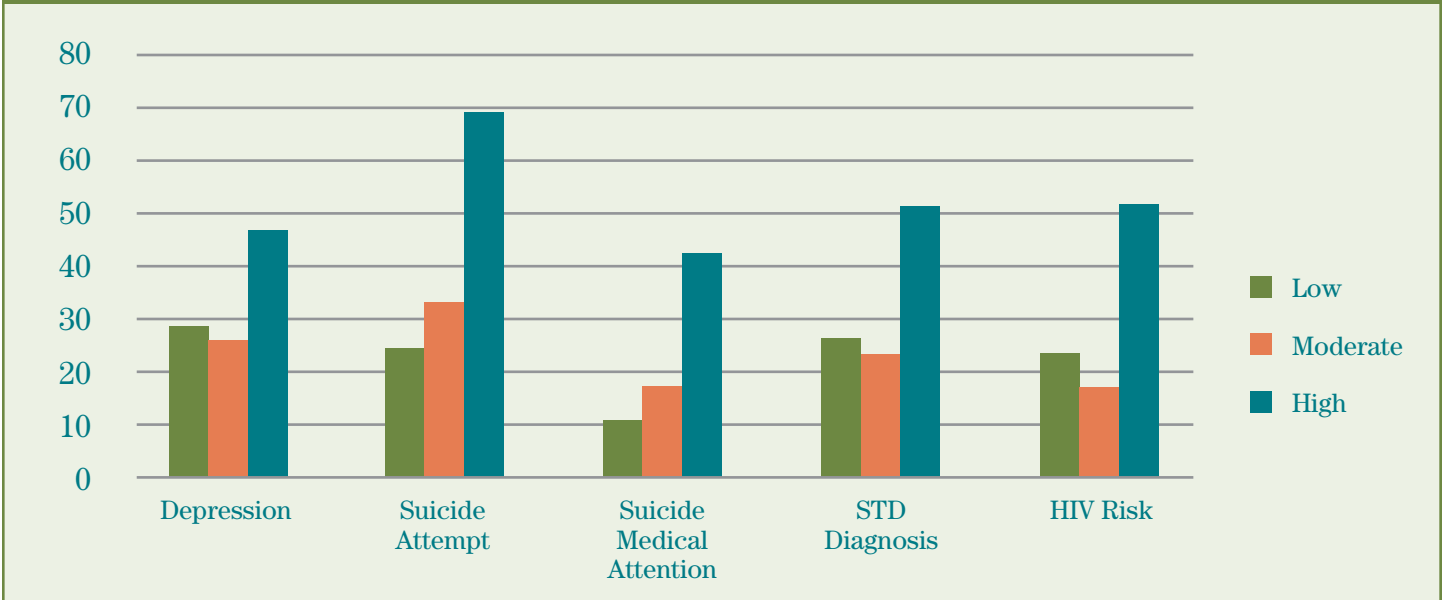
- Compared to lesbians and bisexual young women, gay and bisexual young men and transgender young adults reported higher levels of LGBT school victimization.
- Compared to peers who reported low levels of school victimization, LGBT young adults who reported high levels of school victimization during adolescence were (also see Figure 1):
 - 2.6 times more likely to report clinical levels of depression
 - 5.6 times more likely to report having attempted suicide
 - 5.6 times more likely to report a suicide attempt that required medical care
 - 2 times more likely to have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease and to report risk for HIV infection
- Compared to peers who reported higher levels of school victimization during adolescence, LGBT young adults who reported lower levels of school victimization reported higher levels of:
 - self-esteem (e.g. feeling good about themselves)
 - life satisfaction (e.g. feeling good about their lives)
 - social integration (e.g. feeling connected to those around them)

Study 2: Bullying, Gender Nonconformity, and Well-Being in Young Adulthood

Prior studies have shown that gender nonconforming teens are more likely to be bullied, and they are also more likely to have compromised health. Until now researchers have studied these issues separately. This study examined whether the compromised health of gender nonconforming teens could be explained by histories of bullying.

Young adults from the Family Acceptance Project were asked: “On a scale from 1-9, where 1 is extremely feminine and 9 is extremely masculine, how would you describe yourself when you were a teenager?” They were asked a

Figure 1. Percentage of Health Risks by Level of LGBT-Related School Victimization



similar question about how gender nonconforming they are now, as well as a question about how their gender conformity compares to others (from “much more feminine” to “much more masculine” on a 5-point scale). They also answered questions about their experiences of school bullying based on their actual or perceived LGBT identity when they were between the ages of 13 and 19.

Findings show:

- Although higher levels of self-reported adolescent gender nonconformity were related to more LGBT school bullying, it is school bullying, and not gender nonconformity, that most strongly predicts negative well-being in young adulthood.

Implications of the Studies

- The effects of LGBT teen bullying are serious and long lasting. The effects of bullying, as seen in these studies, can last a decade or longer. Educators need to ensure, when teaching parents and students about bullying, that they stress the impact bullying has on the lives of those being bullied.
- There are serious health disparities for LGBT adults. Decreasing LGBT bullying would likely result in significant long-term health gains and reduce health disparities for LGBT adults. Policy makers should make it a priority to ensure that all schools have anti-

discrimination policies in place that protect LGBT and gender nonconforming students. Further, educators should ensure all parents and students are made aware of such policies.

- Mental health practitioners need to be aware and recognize the increased likelihood that their LGBT and gender nonconforming clients may have been bullied as teens and may still be suffering effects from that bullying. Having such an understanding from the onset can help speed-up recovery time.

“We now have evidence of the lasting personal and social cost of failing to make our schools safe for all students,” says Dr. Stephen T. Russell, Distinguished Professor in Family Studies and Human Development at the University of Arizona.



Text Box 3: Online Resources about Bullying

There are resources available to help if you or someone you know is being bullied.

- National Bullying Prevention Center – www.pacer.org/bullying/
- Pacer Center's Teens Against Bullying – www.pacerteensagainstabullying.org/#/home
- Pacer Center's Kids Against Bullying – www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – www.nctsn.org/resources/public-awareness/bullying-prevention-awareness-month
- Stop Bullying – www.stopbullying.gov
- Anti-Bullying Network – <http://www.antibullying.net/resourceswwwlinks.htm>
- Bullying.org – <http://www.bullying.org/>
- Bullying No Way – <http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/>
- The Trevor Project – www.thetrevorproject.org
- Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network – www.glsen.org
- Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – www.pflag.org

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This *ResearchLink* summarizes two studies:

(1) Russell, S. T., Ryan, C., Toomey, R. B., Diaz, R. M., & Sanchez, J. (2011). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescent school victimization: Implications for young adult health and adjustment. *Journal of School Health*, 81, 223-230.

(2) Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., Card, N. A., & Russell, S. T. (2010). Gender-nonconforming lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: School victimization and young adult psychosocial adjustment. *Developmental Psychology*, 46, 1580-1589.

Suggested citation for this *ResearchLink*:

Muraco, J. A. & Russell, S.T. (2011). How School Bullying Impacts Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Young Adults. (Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families *ResearchLink*, Vol. 4, No. 1). Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona.