



Original article

Multiple Types of Harassment: Associations With Emotional Well-Being and Unhealthy Behaviors in Adolescents

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To explore relationships between harassment (i.e., race-, weight-, socioeconomic-status (SES)-based, and sexual) and health-related outcomes, including self-esteem, depressive symptoms, body satisfaction, substance use, and self-harm behavior, among diverse adolescents.

Method: Cross-sectional analysis using data from a population-based study of adolescents participating in Eating and Activity in Teens 2010 (EAT 2010) (n = 2,793; mean age = 14.4 years). Sample was socioeconomically and racially/ethnically diverse (81% racial/ethnic minority; 54% low or low-middle income).

Results: Having experienced any type of harassment was significantly associated with poor self-esteem, depressive symptoms, low body satisfaction, substance use, and self-harm behaviors. After mutually adjusting for other types of harassment, weight-based harassment was consistently associated with lower self-esteem and lower body satisfaction in both genders (standardized β s ranged in magnitude from .39 to .48); sexual harassment was significantly associated with self-harm and substance use in both genders (ORs: 1.64 to 2.92); and both weight-based and sexual harassment were significantly associated with depressive symptoms among girls (standardized β s = .34 and .37). Increases in the number of different harassment types reported by adolescents were associated with elevated risk for alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use, and self-harm (ORs: 1.22 to 1.42) as well as emotional well-being (standardized β s: .13 to .26).

Conclusions: Having had any harassment experience was significantly associated with a variety of negative health and well-being outcomes among adolescents, and risk for these outcomes increases with the number of harassment types an adolescent experiences. Early detection and intervention to decrease harassment experiences may be particularly important in mitigating psychological and behavioral harm among adolescents.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

This study examines diverse adolescents' harassment experiences and their associated health risks. Harassment experiences among adolescents are highly prevalent and are associated with poor self-esteem, depressive symptoms, body dissatisfaction, substance use, and self-harm behavior. Moreover, risk for these outcomes increases with the number of harassment types that an adolescent experiences.

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Teasing, bullying, and harassment are prevalent among youth and are of public health concern [1–11]. Past research has emphasized that youth who are bullied in general are at increased risk of developing psychosocial and psychosomatic problems [2,8] and also has examined risks associated with individual types of

harassment. For instance, results of cross-sectional and prospective studies highlight strong associations between weight-related teasing and emotional problems (e.g., low self-esteem, depressive symptoms) and unhealthy weight control behaviors (e.g., fasting, skipping meals) among adolescents [3–7]. In addition, there is evidence that sexual harassment is associated with poor mental and physical health in middle and high school students [11]. Furthermore, sexual and race/ethnicity-based harassment each have been associated with negative health outcomes, although this work has focused primarily on adult populations (see, for example, [9]). Thus, a gap exists in our understanding of these forms of mistreatment—and their associated risks—among adolescents.

Important questions remain regarding the role of harassment experiences in the emotional and behavioral health of adolescents. For example, although the links between weight-related teasing and harmful outcomes are well-documented [3–10] less is known about the risks associated with other forms of harassment. It remains unclear how various harassment types may be associated with emotional well-being and harmful behaviors in adolescents. This is especially important to explore, given the high prevalences of weight-, race-, socioeconomic status (SES)-based, and sexual harassment previously found in the same large data set being used in the current study [1], as well as evidence that harassment, without intervention, tends to escalate over time [12]. In addition, although past studies have examined the influence of isolated forms of harassment, we are not aware of any studies that have assessed associations with various forms of harassment together in a sample of adolescents. It is important to determine whether particular types of harassment may be worse than others in terms of adolescents' risk for certain negative health outcomes; this information can be used to tailor interventions, inform policy decisions, and guide providers' discussions with youth and their families. Finally, despite evidence that some youth are at significantly elevated risk for multiple types of harassment [1], the relationship between the cumulative experience of different types of harassment an adolescent experiences and poor emotional and behavioral health has not yet been investigated. Investigating whether those adolescents who experience the greatest variety of harassment types also are at greatest risk for health problems is a critical step toward preventing harm among adolescents.

Building upon previous work documenting the high prevalence of harassment experiences among diverse youth in this sample [1], the aims of this study are threefold. First, this study will investigate the cross-sectional relationships between harassment (race-, weight-, SES-based, and sexual) and an array of girls' and boys' health-related variables previously shown to be associated with individual types of harassment [2–9], including self-esteem, depressive symptoms, body satisfaction, substance use, and self-harm behavior. Given gender differences in the prevalence patterns of these harassment types observed in previous work with this sample [1], separate analyses will be run for girls and boys. Second, this study will identify those types of harassment that are most strongly associated with emotional well-being and unhealthy behaviors among adolescents. Finally, this study will test associations between cumulative experience of different harassment types and risk for psychological and behavioral harm. Drawing from a large, sociodemographically diverse sample of middle- and high-school girls and boys, this study represents the most comprehensive examination to date of harassment

experiences and their associations with emotional well-being and unhealthy behaviors among adolescents.

Method

Sample and study design

Data for this analysis were drawn from EAT 2010 (Eating and Activity in Teens), a large population-based study on 2,793 adolescents from diverse ethnic/racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. The EAT 2010 survey is a 235-item self-report instrument assessing a range of factors of potential relevance to weight status and weight-related behaviors among adolescents. The survey development process is described elsewhere [13]. Surveys and anthropometric measures were completed by adolescents from 20 public middle and high schools in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota, during the 2009–2010 academic year. The mean age was 14.4 years ($SD = 2.0$); 46.1% were in middle school (sixth through eighth grades) and 53.9% were in high school (ninth through twelfth grades). Adolescents were approximately equally divided by gender (46.8% boys, 53.2% girls). The racial/ethnic backgrounds of the participants were as follows: 18.9% white, 29.0% African-American or black, 19.9% Asian-American, 16.9% Hispanic, 3.7% Native American, and 11.6% mixed or other race. The SES of participants included 29.4% low SES, 24.3% low-middle SES, 33.3% middle SES, 6.4% upper-middle SES, and 2.8% high SES. Approximately one third of participants were overweight (≥ 85 th percentile, as defined below); the rest were nonoverweight. All study procedures were approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board human subjects committee.

Measures

Harassment. Perceived harassment was measured using a series of items developed for EAT 2010. Four types of perceived harassment were assessed with the questions: "How often do any of the following things happen?" (1) "You are teased or harassed about your race"; (2) "You are teased or harassed about your weight"; (3) "You are teased or harassed about your family's financial situation"; or (4) "You are teased or harassed in a sexual way (e.g., grabbing/pinching, sexual comments, unwanted touching)" Participants responded to each item using a 5-point scale, ranging from "never" to "at least once a week." The four items have demonstrated acceptable test-retest reliability (Pearson correlations ranging from .69 to .73). For the present study, due to restricted range of responses (i.e., more than half of the sample provided responses of "never" to each harassment type), responses were dichotomized to a score of "never" or "ever."

Substance use. Substance use was assessed with the question, "How often have you used the following during the past year (12 months): Cigarettes, liquor (beer, wine, hard liquor), or marijuana?" Participants responded with "never," "a few times," "monthly," "weekly," or "daily." Test–retest correlations for these three substance-use items have ranged from .77 to .81 in prior testing. For the present study, responses were dichotomized to a score of "never" or "ever."

Self-harm behavior. Self-harm behavior was measured using the following item, which was adapted from previously tested items [14,15]. "Have you ever deliberately hurt yourself, such as by

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