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School Violence and Bullying Among Sexual Minority High School Students, 2009–2011


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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: School-based victimization has short- and long-term implications for the health and academic lives of sexual minority students. This analysis assessed the prevalence and relative risk of school violence and bullying among sexual minority and heterosexual high school students.

Methods: Youth Risk Behavior Survey data from 10 states and 10 large urban school districts that assessed sexual identity and had weighted data in the 2009 and/or 2011 cycle were combined to create two large population-based data sets, one containing state data and one containing district data. Prevalence of physical fighting, being threatened or injured with a weapon, weapon carrying, and being bullied on school property and not going to school because of safety concerns was calculated. Associations between these behaviors and sexual identity were identified.

Results: In the state data, sexual minority male students were at greater risk for being threatened or injured with a weapon, not going to school because of safety concerns and being bullied than heterosexual male students. Sexual minority female students were at greater risk than heterosexual female students for all five behaviors. In the district data, with one exception, sexual minority male and female students were at greater risk for all five behaviors than heterosexual students.

Conclusions: Sexual minority students still routinely experience more school victimization than their heterosexual counterparts. The implementation of comprehensive, evidence-based programs and policies has the ability to reduce school violence and bullying, especially among sexual minority students.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

Two large population-based data sets based on Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data demonstrate that sexual minority students are at greater risk for school violence and bullying than heterosexual students. Comprehensive, evidence-based programs and policies to reduce violence and bullying on school property may decrease victimization and its associated negative consequences.

Schools are a place of learning and growth for most youth. However, they may also be a place for victimization from school violence and bullying. The 2012 Indicators of School Crime and Safety survey of high school students found that 7% reported being threatened with a gun or knife, 9% were targets of

hate-related words, and 28% reported bullying victimization [1]. Victimization that occurs on school grounds can create an atmosphere where students feel unsafe. Multiple studies have found that victims of school violence and bullying are more likely to feel unsafe at school [2], feel less connected to school [3], perform poorly academically [4], and drop out of school [5].

Research also indicates that specific subgroups of students including sexual minority (i.e., gay, lesbian, or bisexual) students are at increased risk for school violence and bullying. A 2011 study of a convenience sample of sexual minority students found that 82% were verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and more than 18% were physically assaulted [6].

Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Sexual minority youth may experience short- and long-term health problems because of school violence and bullying, including increased risk for suicide and other mental health problems [7–9], cigarette smoking, alcohol and other drug use, and unsafe sexual behaviors [10,11].

The research on sexual minority youth and their experiences at school is emerging, but only a limited amount of the research uses population-based data [12,13]. Previous studies have had small sample sizes [8,14], have been based on convenience samples [6], were not inclusive of racial/ethnic minority students, or were conducted more than a decade ago [10,15]. Thus, an important next step is to better understand school violence and bullying among sexual minority students using large, racially/ethnically diverse, contemporary, population-based data sets. YRBSs conducted by some states and large urban school districts (i.e., districts) monitor priority health-risk behaviors among high school students, including school violence and bullying, and assess sexual identity. The purposes of this study are to establish the prevalence of school violence and bullying by sexual identity and quantify the increased prevalence of school violence and bullying among sexual minority students compared with heterosexual students using geographically and racially/ethnically diverse, recent, population-based data.

Methods

Sample and measures

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supports state and local education and health agencies to conduct YRBSs. This study was based on two data sets: one created by combining YRBS data from 10 states (Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin) and the other created by combining data from 10 districts (Boston, Chicago, District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York City, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle). Each of these states and districts included a question on sexual identity in their YRBS questionnaire and had weighted data in the 2009 and/or 2011 cycle. The creation of these two data sets was done out of an abundance of caution to avoid potential overlap in populations (e.g., Chicago and Illinois). Additionally, the district samples include only urban students, while the state samples include both urban and rural students, so a single combined data set may have biased results towards the urban students. All surveys were conducted during the spring of 2009 and/or 2011 except in Chicago (fall of 2010), the District of Columbia (fall of 2010), and Seattle (fall of 2008 and 2010).

Each site used independent, cross-sectional, two-stage cluster samples designed to generate data representative of public school students in grades 9–12 in their jurisdiction. Students completed a site-specific, self-administered questionnaire. Participation in the surveys was anonymous and voluntary, and local parental consent procedures were followed. State and local health and education agencies followed local Institutional Review Board policies and procedures. Data from all sites were edited, cleaned, and weighted using a standardized process; this included editing and cleaning for logical inconsistencies and out-of-range responses [16]. Sampling weights were assigned to account for nonresponse and to weight the sampled population to the population size of the jurisdiction. Detailed information about the methodology of the state and district YRBSs, including all editing, cleaning, and weighting procedures, can be found elsewhere [16].

Most sites assessed sexual identity using the question “Which of the following best describes you?” with the response options “heterosexual (straight),” “gay or lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “not sure.” Some sites slightly varied the punctuation of the response options (e.g., “heterosexual, straight” instead of “heterosexual [straight]”). Washington, D.C., in 2009, assessed sexual identity using the same question, but with the response options “Heterosexual (straight),” “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “not sure.” In this case, “gay” and “lesbian” were combined for consistency with the other sites. For all sites and all years, students who responded “not sure” were excluded from analysis, as were students who did not answer this question.

Five items were used to measure school violence (i.e., physical fighting on school property, being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, weapon carrying on school property, and not going to school because of safety concerns) and bullying on school property. Physical fighting on school property and being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property were assessed with the questions “During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight on school property?” and “During the past 12 months, how many times has someone threatened or injured you with a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club on school property?” respectively. The response options for both questions were “0 times,” “1 time,” “2 or 3 times,” “4 or 5 times,” “6 or 7 times,” “8 or 9 times,” “10 or 11 times,” or “12 or more times.” For this analysis, responses to each of these two questions were collapsed into dichotomous responses as “0 times” or “1 or more times.”

Carrying a weapon on school property and not going to school because of safety concerns were assessed by asking “During the past 30 days, on how many days did you carry a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club on school property?” and “During the past 30 days, on how many days did you not go to school because you felt you would be unsafe at school or on your way to or from school?” respectively. The response options for each question were “0 days,” “1 day,” “2 or 3 days,” “4 or 5 days,” and “6 or more days.” For this analysis, responses to each of these two questions were collapsed into dichotomous responses as “0 days” or “1 or more days.” Being bullied on school property was assessed with one item, “During the past 12 months, have you ever been bullied on school property?” with the response options “yes” or “no.”

The standard YRBS questionnaire uses two questions to assess race and ethnicity [17]. This analysis uses a three-level race/ethnicity classification: white, non-Hispanic (referred to as “white”); black, non-Hispanic (referred to as “black”); Hispanic or Latino (referred to as “Hispanic”). The numbers of students from other racial/ethnic groups were too small for meaningful analysis; these students are included in the analyses, but their results are not shown separately.

Statistical analysis

Because male and female adolescents may experience school violence and bullying differently [18], all analyses were stratified by sex. Statistical interaction testing did not indicate a need to stratify by race/ethnicity. Chi-squared tests were used to assess significant bivariate differences in school violence and bullying by sexual identity. Multiple logistic regression was used to separately model each school violence and bullying outcome variable on categorical race/ethnicity, grade, and sexual identity variables. Results from the multivariable analyses are reported as adjusted prevalence ratios (APRs) with 95% confidence intervals.

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