



## Original article

## Weightism, Racism, Classism, and Sexism: Shared Forms of Harassment in Adolescents

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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** To document the prevalence of harassment on the basis of weight, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, as well as sexual harassment, among a diverse population of adolescents. Specifically, this study examined rates of each type of harassment reported across groups within the corresponding sociodemographic category (e.g., racial/ethnic category differences in prevalence of racial harassment), and also explored patterns of “cross-harassment” (i.e., differences in prevalence of each harassment type across all other sociodemographic characteristics).

**Methods:** We used data from Project Eating and Activity in Teens 2010 for the study. The sample was composed of 2,793 adolescents (53% female; 81% nonwhite). We conducted regression analyses to yield prevalence estimates of each type of harassment in each demographic and body mass index category.

**Results:** Weight- and race-based harassment (35.3% and 35.2%, respectively) was most prevalent, followed by sexual harassment (25.0%) and socioeconomic status-based harassment (16.1%). Overweight and obese adolescents reported disproportionately higher rates of all forms of harassment than did normal-weight and underweight adolescents. In addition, Asian and mixed-/other race adolescents were more vulnerable to harassment overall compared with those from other racial/ethnic groups.

**Conclusions:** Harassment experiences are prevalent among adolescent boys and girls. Differential rates of each type of harassment are reported across groups within the corresponding sociodemographic category, but a pattern of cross-harassment also is evident, such that differences in prevalence of each type of harassment emerge across a variety of sociodemographic characteristics. Adolescents from various intersecting sociodemographic and weight-status groups are particularly vulnerable to certain types of harassment.

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IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION

This study represents an overview of diverse adolescents' harassment experiences. Harassment experiences are not only highly prevalent, but also are interwoven with sociodemographic factors, such that members of certain groups—such as overweight and obese youth—are particularly vulnerable to various forms of mistreatment.

Harassment among children and adolescents—widely recognized as a societal problem, with serious negative consequences for health and wellbeing—has gathered increasing scholarly, social, and political attention [1]. Of particular interest to researchers has been discrimination on the basis of group

membership [1]. Indeed, researchers have noted that the prevailing social tensions and inequities that characterize society at large are evident in youths' treatment of each other [2]. In recognition of this reality, Scherr and Larson [3] issued in their review of the school bullying literature a call for further research to establish the prevalence of harassment among children and adolescents.

Studies suggest that racial/ethnic minority students are at a significantly greater risk for physical harassment than are white students [4], and that lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the

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school population further elevates this risk [5]. In addition, research suggests that harassment on the basis of race or ethnicity is progressive in nature, often escalating over time from teasing to physical violence [6]. Furthermore, because one's racial/ethnic identity often is highly visible, this dimension provides ample opportunity for targeting and harassment by others.

Also highly visible to others are an individual's body size and shape. Weight- or size-based stigmatization and harassment (most commonly manifested as verbal teasing, physical bullying, and relational victimization such as social exclusion or rejection [7]) have emerged as an area of focus in recent years [7]. Research suggests that stigmatization based on weight or size in young people not only poses significant risks for poor emotional and physical functioning [8,9], but also is prevalent and on the rise [7]. Not surprisingly, the risk of victimization based on weight or size is associated with weight status, with overweight and obese children and adolescents significantly more vulnerable to weight-based mistreatment than their non-overweight counterparts [10–13]. As the prevalence of overweight and obesity among young people has increased over the past several decades [14], a considerable proportion of youth have become at risk for weight- and size-based harassment. Whether overweight youth also are at an elevated risk for other kinds of harassment (e.g., race/ethnicity-based teasing) is unknown.

Additional questions remain concerning factors that may influence harassment experiences among youth. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that the socioeconomic status of a student's family is inversely associated with level of perceived sexual harassment at school [15]. As another example, examinations of sexual mistreatment have yielded inconsistent results, with a majority of females and males reporting at least one experience of sexual harassment by a peer in one study [16,17], and significantly lower prevalence estimates in another study [18]. In addition, studies have focused primarily on sexual harassment among high school students [19,20]; less is known about the sexual harassment experiences of younger adolescents.

Research has been composed primarily of studies examining harassment within one specific domain at a time. Although this focus on individual domains of harassment presents some difficulty to those seeking to draw comparisons regarding the prevalence of harassment across various domains, these studies have yielded important findings that provide a solid foundation for future work in this area. An important complement to such work would be the exploration of potential "cross-harassment," in which rates of each type of harassment are explored across a variety of sociodemographic characteristics.

Studies that have examined the prevalence of weight stigmatization across racial and ethnic groups have been limited in numbers and scope, and have yielded inconsistent findings. For instance, some researchers have found no significant differences between white and African American students' [21,22] or white and Latino/Latina students' [23] reported perceptions of weight teasing, whereas one study has suggested a lower incidence of weight teasing among African American women compared with white women [24]. In the most comprehensive examination to date of racial and ethnic differences in perceived weight teasing among adolescents, using the same dataset as that used in the present study, van den Berg and colleagues [25] found that

adolescents of various racial/ethnic groups reported similar levels of overall weight teasing. Too little work has been conducted in this area to provide a clear picture; thus, further research is needed to uncover racial/ethnic differences in weight stigmatization.

Given evidence suggesting that individual members of intersecting minority groups are vulnerable to heightened stress of multiple types [26–29], a critical focus for future research is on the experience of mistreatment among young people. The present study used data from Project Eating and Activity in Teens 2010 (EAT 2010), a cross-sectional survey of a large, racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse sample of adolescents in middle school and high school, and provides an essential next step toward understanding the nature of cumulative harassment among young people.

We hypothesized that differential rates of each type of harassment would be reported by members of certain groups within the corresponding sociodemographic or weight-status category. Specifically, overweight/obese adolescents were expected to report significantly higher rates of weight-based harassment than normal weight or underweight adolescents; racial/ethnic minority adolescents, higher rates of race-based harassment than white adolescents; lower-middle/low-socioeconomic status (SES) adolescents, higher rates of SES-based harassment than upper-middle/high-SES adolescents; and girls, higher rates of sexual harassment than boys. Furthermore, a key aim of the present study was to explore differences in the prevalence of each type of harassment across all sociodemographic and weight-status groups. For example, we explored whether overweight youth experience different types of harassment (e.g., sexual, race-based), to learn more about their vulnerability.

## Methods

### *Study design and population*

We designed the EAT 2010 study to examine dietary intake, physical activity, weight control behaviors, weight status, and factors associated with these outcomes in adolescents. Surveys and anthropometric measures were completed by 2,793 adolescents during the 2009–2010 academic year. The study population includes adolescents from 20 public middle schools and high schools in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota, which serve socioeconomically and racially/ethnically diverse communities. The mean age of the study population was 14.4 years (standard deviation, 2.0); 46.1% were in middle school (sixth to eighth grades) and 53.9% were in high school (ninth to 12th grades). Participants were equally divided by gender (46.8% boys and 53.2% girls).

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 [30]. After survey completion, participants were given a \$10 gift card. The University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Committee and the research boards of the participating school districts approved all study procedures. Unless the parent or guardian indicated refusal, adolescents were given the opportunity to assent. Among adolescents who were at school on the days of survey administration, 96.3% had parental consent and chose to participate.

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