



School absenteeism and mental health among sexual minority youth and heterosexual youth[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent school absenteeism is associated with negative outcomes such as conduct disorders, substance abuse, and dropping out of school. Mental health factors, such as depression and anxiety, have been found to be associated with increased absenteeism from school. Sexual minority youth (youth who are attracted to the same sex or endorse a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity) are a group at risk for increased absenteeism due to fear, avoidance, and higher rates of depression and anxiety than their heterosexual peers. The present study used longitudinal data to compare sexual minority youth and heterosexual youth on excused and unexcused absences from school and to evaluate differences in the relations between depression and anxiety symptoms and school absences among sexual minority youth and heterosexual youth. A total of 108 14- to 19-years-old adolescents (71% female and 26% sexual minority) completed self-report measures of excused and unexcused absences and depression and anxiety symptoms. Compared to heterosexual youth, sexual minority youth reported more excused and unexcused absences and more depression and anxiety symptoms. Sexual minority status significantly moderated the effects of depression and anxiety symptoms on unexcused absences such that depression and anxiety symptoms were stronger predictors of unexcused absences for sexual minority youth than for heterosexual youth. The results demonstrate that sexual minority status and mental health are important factors to consider when assessing school absenteeism and when developing interventions to prevent or reduce school absenteeism among adolescents.

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1. Introduction

School absenteeism is associated with myriad negative outcomes including social isolation, mood and conduct disorders, sleep disturbances, substance abuse, and longer term outcomes such as dropping out from school entirely (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008; Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Kearney, 1993; Wood et al., 2012). A longitudinal study of 9- to 16-year-olds found that, depending on the type of school absence (school refusal due to anxiety, unexcused or unexplained absence, and mixed school refusal behavior), 25% to 90% of those missing school met criteria for a diagnosis as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), whereas less than 7% of those who did not miss school met the criteria for a DSM-IV diagnosis (Egger et al., 2003). The directionality of these relations is often unclear, although analysis of large-scale longitudinal datasets has found somewhat more support for psychopathology leading to absenteeism rather than the other way around (Wood et al., 2012). These results suggest that it is possible to use psychological measures to identify those at risk for skipping school before the onset of the behavior and therefore create an opportunity for preventive intervention.

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School absenteeism can be categorized in multiple ways. Some researchers suggest categorizing absenteeism by considering the motive for skipping school and thereby differentiating between “anxious school refusers” and “truants.” Anxious school refusers miss school because of social phobia, separation anxiety, or fear of harm at school, whereas truants skip school due to lack of interest or defiance of authority (Egger et al., 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001). Some of the more common causes of truancy are unsupportive school environment, lack of community support, and an unstable family life (McCray, 2006). Anxious school refusal behavior and truancy are both associated with negative outcomes, although differences can be found. Not surprisingly, anxious school refusers are more likely to meet criteria for a mood disorder, whereas truants are more likely to meet criteria for a conduct disorder (Egger et al., 2003). Another way to categorize absenteeism is by classifying absences as excused or unexcused. Excused absences can be for a variety of reasons (e.g., illness and family vacation), but such absences require permission from a parent or guardian and school officials. Unexcused absences are absences without explanation or permission. Research has found that both excused and unexcused absences are associated with risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, sexual activity, and violence), but unexcused absences are associated with significantly more risk behaviors than excused absences (Eaton et al., 2008). For the purposes of this article, we differentiate between excused absences and unexcused absences and examine depression and anxiety symptoms as predictors of each.

Previous research has identified sexual minority youth¹ (SMY; youth who are attracted to the same sex or endorse a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity) as an at-risk population, and many United States federal agencies, including the Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services, have called for more research on SMY and more protection for SMY in schools (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Institute of Medicine, 2011; United States Department of Education, 2011). SMY are at greater risk for many negative health outcomes in general and negative mental health outcomes in particular (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, & Goodman, 1999; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Marshal et al., 2011, 2012; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Russell & Joyner, 2001). A meta-analysis of 24 studies measuring mental health of SMY found that SMY report significantly higher rates of depression and are 3 times more likely to report suicidality (suicide ideation and suicide attempts) than heterosexual youth (Marshal et al., 2011). Another study found that 22% of SMY in the 11th grade attempted suicide in the past 12 months compared to 4% of heterosexual youth (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Multiple studies have also found SMY to have a higher prevalence of anxiety symptoms and disorders (Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999; Kerr, Santurri, & Peters, 2013; Marshal et al., 2012).

The mental health disparities found between SMY and heterosexual youth can be understood through the minority stress hypothesis, which contends that the stigma and discrimination experienced by sexual minorities create a hostile social environment that leads to chronic stress and mental health disorders (Meyer, 2003). It is well documented that sexual minority students report greater victimization or bullying in school than heterosexual students (Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Shields, Whitaker, Glassman, Franks, & Howard, 2012; Toomey & Russell, 2013) and recent research has demonstrated that the increased victimization is partly responsible for mental health disparities in SMY (Burton et al., 2013). It is reasonable to extend the minority stress hypothesis to include school absenteeism because if school is perceived as a hostile environment for some SMY then they will be more likely to skip school. Friedman et al. (2011) found that, compared to heterosexual youth, SMY reported higher rates of being assaulted in school by a peer with a weapon and higher rates of skipping school due to fear. Therefore, understanding school related variables is important in order to advance our understanding of the challenges faced by SMY.

The higher prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms in SMY (Marshal et al., 2011) and greater levels of victimization in school (Toomey & Russell, 2013) suggest that SMY may be at higher risk for school absenteeism because both mental health and victimization are associated with absenteeism (Poteat et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2012). There is relatively little research on school absenteeism among SMY and even less research that compares absenteeism among SMY and heterosexual youth. One study used a large school-based sample to examine the effects of homophobic victimization on educational and psychosocial outcomes for SMY and heterosexual youth in grades 7 to 12 and found that SMY had higher rates of self-reported truancy than heterosexual youth (Poteat et al., 2011). Poteat et al. (2011) further found that homophobic victimization reduces school belonging and increases truancy in both SMY and heterosexual youth, but the study was not able to examine the relation between mental health and absenteeism in depth. Absenteeism among SMY is a concern because other research has found that, in male adolescents who engage in same-sex sexual behavior, school absence due to fear is associated with greater number of same-sex sexual partners (DuRant, Krowchuk, & Sinal, 1998), which is a risk factor for sexually transmitted infections. Also a retrospective study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults found that school absenteeism was associated with suicide ideation while in school (Rivers, 2000), but the study did not include a heterosexual comparison group, so it could not determine if the association between absenteeism and suicidality is unique to SMY. This study also asked participants about school absenteeism and suicidality during their high school years more than 10 years after they graduated high school; thus, the resulting data may have been generally inaccurate or perhaps biased. School absenteeism is clearly associated with negative outcomes in SMY, but whether those outcomes differ from those found in the general population is not currently known. The present study fills in these gaps in the research by comparing school absenteeism and mental health in SMY and heterosexual youth.

Our study used a 6-month longitudinal design to address two aims: (a) determine if there are differences in excused and unexcused absences between SMY and heterosexual youth and (b) explore sexual minority status as a moderator of the previously established relations between mental health and school absences. We predicted that, based on group differences for depression

¹ The term “sexual minority youth” is a term commonly used in research reports to describe lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. “Sexual minority youth” is not a term typically used in school settings or everyday language. For information on preferred language outside of a research context, see materials created and distributed by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org).

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