

# How Gay–Straight Alliance Groups Mitigate the Relationship Between Gay-Bias Victimization and Adolescent Suicide Attempts

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**Objective:** We examined the relationships between victimization from being bullied, suicide, hopelessness, and the presence of a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) on a school campus. **Method:** We analyzed data from the California Healthy Kids Survey from 2005 to 2007 using hierarchical modeling. **Results:** We found that gay-bias (versus non-gay-bias) victimization is meaningfully connected with the inwardly destructive behavior of attempted suicide among adolescents. We also found that hopelessness helps explain associations between gay-bias victimization and suicide attempts and that the presence of a GSA club on a school's campus attenuates significant connections between gay-bias victimization and suicide attempts by reducing hopelessness. **Conclusion:** Gay-bias victims are more likely than other victims to attempt suicide while also feeling more hopeless. The presence of a GSA on campus may help to reduce the attempted suicide and hopelessness associated with gay-bias victimization. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2014;■(■):■–■. **Key Words:** bully, victimization, hopelessness, suicide, gay

Adolescents in the United States often encounter bullying at school.<sup>1</sup> Bullying is the intentional and repetitive physical, verbal, social, or cyber acts of aggression toward a victim,<sup>1</sup> and appears to be on the rise. In 2001, 14% of adolescents reported victimization by a bully (“victimization”) at school; by 2011, that number had doubled to 28%.<sup>2,3</sup> Although bullying has been around for decades, the emergence of the Internet and increased consumption of social media have provided additional outlets and opportunities for bullying.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to cope, victims may engage in numerous behaviors, ranging from isolation to self-destructive tendencies, including attempted suicide.<sup>5–6</sup> Considerable research has investigated negative behaviors associated with victimization,<sup>7</sup> with much of this work examining the

relationship between victimization and suicide.<sup>6,8</sup> Other research has investigated ways to reduce adolescent bullying.<sup>9,10</sup> Although reducing bullying is paramount, little research has investigated ways to mitigate associated negative effects on victims. Furthermore, most research suggesting ways to mitigate these effects has treated victimization homogeneously,<sup>1,11</sup> failing to explore potential differences in reasons for which adolescents might perceive themselves as bullying targets. Adolescents report being bullied for several reasons, including sexual orientation, gender, disability, race, and religion<sup>10</sup>; therefore, not all victims are likely to react the same way or to be perceived as deserving equal sympathy.

Victimization based on sexual orientation, specifically gay-bias victimization, is of special concern. The 2011 National School Climate Survey reported that 63.5% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation.<sup>12</sup> Among these students, 81.9% reported verbal harassment (e.g., being called names, threatened), 38.3% reported physical harassment (e.g., being pushed, shoved), and 18.3% reported physical assault (e.g., being



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punched, kicked). Even more disconcerting, victimization associated with sexual orientation is linked to higher rates of suicide ideation<sup>5,13,14</sup> and suicide attempts.<sup>7,15</sup>

Although prior work confirms that bias-based versus general victimization is more strongly associated with negative behaviors,<sup>10</sup> our research explores the nature of gay-bias victimization as distinct from other biases in terms of its strong association with suicide attempts, and examines ways to reduce that association. Gay individuals are often categorized as having stigmatized minority status,<sup>16,17</sup> with gay adolescents more likely to have high levels of gender nonconformity,<sup>18</sup> doubts about societal acceptance,<sup>19</sup> and social isolation.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, many people still believe that sexual orientation is an individual choice.<sup>21</sup> Hence, from an attribution theory locus of control perspective,<sup>24,22</sup> the gay-bias victim may attribute the bias and interpret harassment more internally, perceiving the self as the core problem; therefore, associated negative behaviors will focus more internally. Thus, we hypothesize that gay-bias victims as compared to non-gay-bias victims (those bullied for reasons other than being gay) will engage in more internally focused negative behaviors such as suicide attempts as compared to more externally focused behaviors (e.g., damaging school property) that may be exhibited by other types of victims (e.g., race bias, religion bias).

Yet positive social connections can buffer the effects of social isolation; one of the earliest commentators on suicide, philosopher Emile Durkheim,<sup>23</sup> observed that social connections can help protect against suicide. Recent research demonstrates that lower social support for gay-bias victims is associated with greater suicide ideation.<sup>5</sup> While not examining the role of bullying or victimization, research also shows that sexual minority students surrounded by a more protective school climate had significantly fewer suicidal thoughts than those in a less supportive climate.<sup>17</sup> In this study, a supportive school climate is measured with multiple items; one item is the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), an organized group promoting social identification among gay youth and positive support of gay identification by members of the straight community (<http://www.gsanetwork.org/>). Hatzenbuehler *et al.* found a similar, but nonsignificant, pattern of effects on suicide attempts.<sup>17</sup> That is, this multidimensional measure of supportive school climate was associated with lower suicide attempts for sexual minority youth.

Consistent with past findings, we expect that gay-bias victims would benefit from available and relevant social connections offered by school groups such as the GSA. In our model, we focused specifically on the presence of a GSA and hypothesized that this presence would mitigate the association between gay-bias victimization and attempted suicide.

Research has long identified hopelessness as a mediator of the relationship between depression and suicidal ideation<sup>5</sup> and behavior.<sup>24,25</sup> Hirsch *et al.* found that higher levels of hopelessness among students resulted in higher levels of suicide attempts.<sup>28</sup> Although gay-bias victims are likely at greater risk for developing a sense of hopelessness, the presence of a GSA should attenuate the sense of hopelessness by offering social connectedness.<sup>26,27</sup> Therefore, we hypothesized that hopelessness would mediate the relationship between gay-bias victimization and suicide attempts, and that this effect would be moderated by the presence of a GSA.

## METHOD

### Sample and Measures

We used a large, real-world sample of diverse adolescents. The data came from more than 200,000 students (2,148 schools) in grades 7, 9, and 11 who completed the long-form California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) between 2005 and 2007.<sup>28</sup> The core questions of the CHKS were required by law. However, the long-form version, which included variables that assessed whether adolescents had attempted suicide, was voluntary. We used 2005 to 2007 data because almost 10% of schools voluntarily administered the long-form CHKS during those years, compared to more recent 2007 to 2010 data, when less than 3% of schools voluntarily administered the long-form version. We randomly sampled the larger CHKS data set, analyzing 10,000 adolescents (1,287 schools) for the sake of computational efficiency. Respondents reported age by category: 21% were 12 years and under, 11% were 13 years, 24% were 14 years, 12% were 15 years, 23% were 16 years, and 9% were 17 years or older. They also reported gender (53% are female) and ethnicity (40% white, 13% Asian, 7% black, 38% Hispanic, and 18% other).

Attempted suicide, damaged school property, and victimization used the same scale (0 = 0 times; 1 = 1 time; 2 = 2 or 3 times; 3 = 4 or more times). Attempted suicide was measured as the mean score of rated answers to the following questions: "During the past 12 months, did you actually attempt suicide?" and "During the past 12 months, did attempted suicide result in medical treatment of an injury/poisoning/overdose?" Damaged school property was measured

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