

SCHOOL SAFETY FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Most of the research on student bullying and school safety focuses on high school students. In particular, studies of harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression have rarely focused on middle school students, nor have many studies examined school policies or strategies that make middle schools safer.

In this research brief we use data from three middle schools in one school district in California to study school safety for middle school students. Nearly every student in three schools participated: over 1,500 students completed surveys. The schools were ethnically diverse; a total of 47 students (3%) reported that they were lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB); the survey did not include questions about students' gender identity as transgender or questioning.

Results show that middle school students report considerable bullying and harassment, as well as concerns for their safety. Males and females report different types of harassment and different responses to teachers' efforts to promote safety. Compared to their heterosexual or "straight" peers, LGB students report more harassment, and greater fear for their own safety. There were no major differences in experiences of harassment, safety, or school safety strategies across the different ethnic groups in this study.

Finding 1: Female middle school students were more likely to experience social bullying; male students were more likely to experience physical bullying.

Physical versus Social Bullying:

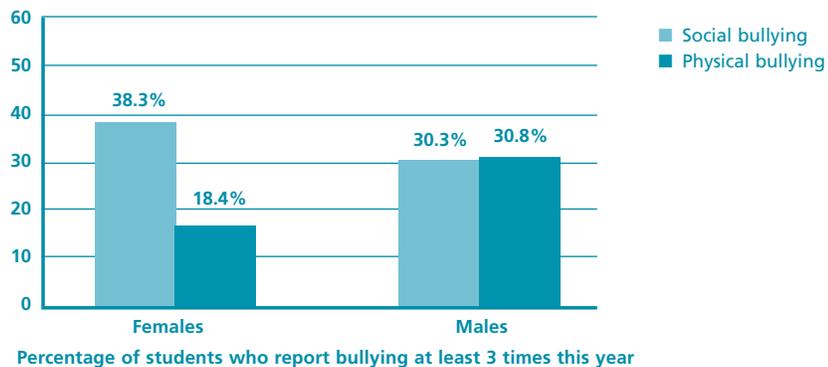
In this study, **physical bullying** includes being pushed shoved or hit, threatened or injured with a weapon, being in a physical fight, or having property damaged or stolen. Most students reported being physically victimized 1-2 times in the last school year.

Social bullying, or bias-based bullying, includes being bullied or harassed based on sex, perceived sexual orientation, disability, body size or looks, or having mean rumors or sexual jokes told about you. Almost half of students report being socially victimized at least three times during the school year.

Most research breaks bullying up into two types: physical or social. We found important gender differences: male middle school students experienced equal amounts of physical and social bullying, whereas female students reported far more social bullying and much less physical bullying (See Figure 1).

Overall, female middle school students reported more social bullying at school than male students. At the high levels of social bullying (3 or more times that school year), 38% of female students reported a sexual joke, comment, or gesture made towards them, a mean rumor or lie spread about them, or being put down because of the way that they look; 30% of male students reported social bullying this frequently. 31% of male students reported physical bullying, compared to only 18% of females. Males were more likely to experience pushing, hitting and shoving, threats with weapons, participation in a physical fight, and having property damaged or stolen than female students.

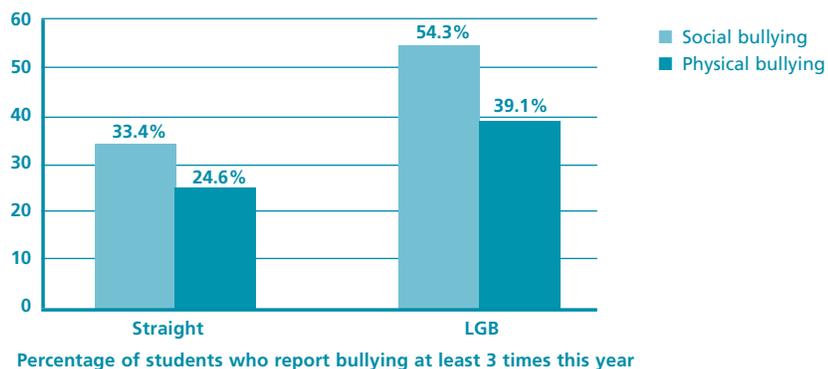
Figure 1
GENDER DIFFERENCES IN HIGH LEVELS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL BULLYING



Finding 2: LGB middle school students report more social and physical bullying than straight students.

LGB middle school students reported more types of bullying and experiences of bullying at a more frequent rate than straight youth. They reported more pushing, hitting, and shoving than any other type of victimization, followed closely by sexual jokes and comments being directed towards them, being put down because of how they look or talk, and having mean rumors spread about them. Figure 2 shows that over half (54%) of LGB middle school students reported social bullying at least three times in the past year, compared to one-third (33%) of straight students; 39% of LGB students reported physical bullying, compared to one-quarter (25%) of straight students.

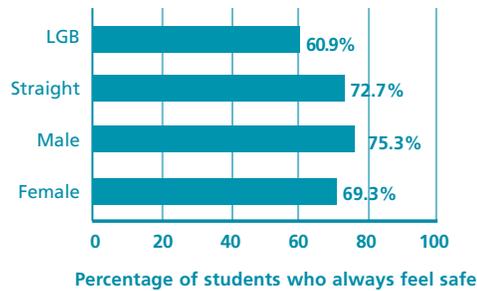
Figure 2
LGB MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS REPORT MORE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL BULLYING



Finding 3: Most students feel safe in middle school; LGB students feel much less safe than straight students.

Nearly three out of four students reported that they always feel safe at their middle schools (Figure 3). However, females were a little bit less likely than males (69% versus 75%) to say that they always feel safe. LGB students were much less likely than straight students (61% versus 73%) to say that they always feel safe. Overall, nearly 40% of LGB middle school students do not feel safe all the time at school.

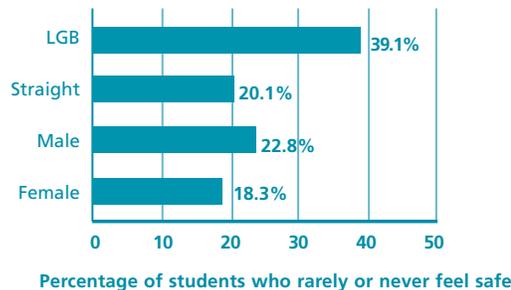
Figure 3
LGB MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE LESS LIKELY TO "ALWAYS FEEL SAFE"



Finding 4: Middle school students feel less safe in unsupervised places on campus; male and LGB students reported feeling less safe in unsupervised places. However, all students feel safer when teachers intervene and stop harassment.

Concerns about safety were much higher in places on middle school campuses that are unsupervised by teachers or school staff, including the hallways, locker rooms, bathrooms, at lunch, and on the school yard. Figure 4 shows the proportion of students who said that they rarely feel safe in unsupervised places on campus. Males were more likely than females (23% versus 18%) to say that they rarely feel safe. LGB youth were much more likely to report that they "rarely feel safe" in these unsupervised places: almost 40% said they rarely felt safe, twice as many as the straight students who felt unsafe (20%).

Figure 4
LGB MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FEEL UNSAFE IN UNSUPERVISED PLACES



Recommendations

- Address issues of harassment and bullying during in middle school grades to lay the foundation for safe transitions into high school.
- Consider interventions that specifically address physical bullying as well as social bullying.
- Middle school is not too early to address issues of safety for LGB students.
- Teacher intervention to stop negative comments based on gender and sexual orientation or other kinds of bullying can help students to feel safer, even in the places on campus that are unsupervised, such as hallways, locker rooms, and playgrounds.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

These data were taken from the Middle School Safety Study, sponsored by the California Safe Schools Coalition. Three middle schools in one school district administered surveys to all of the students enrolled in the schools. A total of 1,546 students completed surveys: 27% were 6th graders, 37% were 7th graders, and 35% were 8th graders. Half (49%) were female. The schools were ethnically diverse with 39% African American, 24% white, 21% Latino, and 14% Asian. A total of 47 students (3%) reported that they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Suggested citation:

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