



ADDRESSING LGBTQ STUDENT BULLYING

Perspectives of LGBTQ Students and School Health Professionals in
Massachusetts Schools



ABOUT THE STUDY

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students experience **significant bullying** that undermines their mental and physical health. According to GLSEN, 85% of LGBTQ students experience verbal bullying, 88% social bullying, 60% sexual harassment, and 34.7% physical bullying in the past year (Kosciw et al., 2018).
- School health professionals (SHPs; i.e., school nurses, psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors, adjustment counselors) are vital to promoting safe school environments.
- We conducted this study to **understand the experiences of LGBTQ students and school health professionals in Massachusetts around bullying**, including how school health professionals have responded to these bullying incidents and what impacts them supporting LGBTQ students.

Source: Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2018). The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools. New York: GLSEN.

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STUDY METHODS

We conducted a survey and online focus groups with LGBTQ youth and SHPs in Massachusetts. Participants were asked to describe bullying experiences of LGBTQ students at school, discussing experiences unique to transgender students and students of color. They were also asked about family involvement, support from SHPs, and potential interventions.

Who participated in the study?	
28 LGBTQ Youth	19 SHPs
14-22 years old (average age 17)	28-67 years old (average age 49)
18 transgender youth	19 cisgender female SHPs
4 gender non-conforming youth	1 transgender SHP
10 youth of color	1 SHP of color
10 youth living in the Greater Boston Area	8 SHPs working in the Greater Boston Area

BULLYING EXPERIENCES

LGBTQ STUDENTS

*reported many instances of bullying, including offensive jokes, microaggressions, physical violence, and cyber bullying, but the **majority of students spoke of verbal harassment.***

TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

spoke of these experiences as well as slurs, misgendering, “dead naming,” bullying while using the bathroom, rumors, ostracizing, and sexual violence.

“When I wear a skirt... students try to lift it/pull it down. I am groped weekly.”

WHITE, MOSTLY
LESBIAN,
TRANSGENDER FEMALE
YOUTH

“I, in school, was outcasted for being visibly trans and queer. In a school of almost two thousand people, I had no friends, no one to sit with, no one to hang out with.”

NATIVE HAWAIIAN/ OTHER
PACIFIC ISLANDER AND WHITE,
QUEER, GENDER NON-
CONFORMING YOUTH

LGBTQ STUDENTS OF COLOR

*reported unique experiences with bullying, including **stereotyping, discrimination, having their experiences being perceived as less valid, social isolation, and ostracizing.***

Many SHPs did not know of bullying happening at their school, but of those who did they mostly reported verbal harassment and offensive jokes. **No school health professional spoke of physical or sexual violence.**



INTERVENTION FROM SCHOOL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Most youth said they never received support from an adult at school around bullying. Some SHPs reported providing bullied LGBTQ youth emotional support.

"I consoled a first grader when she was told by an older student that she couldn't use the girl's bathroom because she is a boy. I felt terrible...I empathized that it probably didn't make her feel good when another student called her a boy."

White, female, school nurse

SCHOOL CULTURE

In general, **SHPs perceived their schools to be inclusive (74%),** while **youth spoke more about challenges** and schools needing improvement.

"This is similar to what happens at my school. In theory I live in a liberal place, but my school isn't so great in reality. In health class we do touch on gender identity but everyone makes it into a joke, even kind of the teacher."

White, pansexual, gender non-conforming youth

"My principal has made it a school norm to be supportive and inclusive of ALL students, including having professional development on sexuality/ LGBTQ issues...That has helped make our school a safe place for LGBTQ students of color."

White, female, health education teacher

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS

to intervening in bullying

EDUCATIONAL

- *lack of knowledge of LGBTQ students (58% of SHPs said this was a barrier)*
- *lack of skills to intervene (58% of SHPs said this was a barrier)*
- *negative attitudes towards LGBTQ students*
- *resources available to support LGBTQ students*

"I think that a lot of school health professionals want to help LGBTQ+ students but they don't know how or they might be afraid of doing/ saying the wrong thing."

ASIAN, QUEER,
TRANSGENDER
GENDER NON-
CONFORMING
YOUTH

RELATIONAL

- *lack of trust and follow through from SHPs*
- *lack of confidentiality and students' fears of being outed to family*
- *close relationships between school health professionals and students*
- *SHPs who are a "champion" of LGBTQ issues/students*

"Usually, my challenge is with parents who have differing views or don't support their children's preference or feelings. It is very difficult to walk the fine line as a school staff and knowing I can only "do so much without crossing the line." Maintaining student safety is a priority, but also a challenge during the non-school hours."

WHITE, FEMALE,
SOCIAL WORKER

CONTEXTUAL

- *lack of school buy-in*
- *lack of time and staff (58% of SHPs said this was a barrier)*
- *undefined staff roles,*
- *school culture of inclusivity*

"I guess it's because I've never heard of anyone go to their guidance counselor for LGBTQ+ related reasons, so I'm afraid I would be overstepping the boundaries of what you should share with a school official. It feels like the wrong place for it, I guess."

WHITE,
TRANSGENDER
QUESTIONING
YOUTH





INTERSECTIONALITY

LGBTQ students of color brought up unique barriers and facilitators they encountered to receiving support from SHPs. **They spoke of a lack of: 1.) knowledge around their needs, 2.) representation of LGBTQ staff of color, and 3.) knowledge on intersectionality - LGBTQ youth with multiple identities, such as transgender, Latinx, and lesbian, may be most vulnerable to bullying.** School health professionals also recognized a need for knowledge about intersectionality and LGBTQ students of color.

"I believe that health professionals should be pushed to consider the two-pronged pressure on [Queer and Trans People of Color] QTPOC...introducing professionals in my community could be monumental for QTPOC trying to relate to and find comfort in health professionals."

Hispanic, asexual, female youth

"I guess we need more information to differentiate the needs of non-white students from white students who are LGBTQ. We are so accustomed to treating everybody equally that I don't know I would think to approach different races in a unique manner."

White, female, school nurse

For more information about this study or interest in piloting the intervention at your school, please contact Dr. Sari Reisner (sari.reisner@childrens.harvard.edu).

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INTERVENTION IDEAS

Students and SHPs identified ideas for interventions:

- educating staff on LGBTQ terminology, intersectionality, and bullying policies
- creating tools to assess LGBTQ student needs
- developing SHPs' skills in supporting students through scripts or role plays
- linking staff to outside resources and contacts

NEXT STEPS

The next step of our study is to pilot an intervention, incorporating feedback from you – our fantastic participants. We have developed a Student Support Form to help SHPs talk through bullying experiences and health needs with students, accompanied by a Companion training tool. The Companion includes important terminology, key information on intersectionality and bullying, and resource lists for SHPs. **Please keep in contact and reach out if your school would be interested in piloting the intervention!**

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Thank you!

PARTICIPANTS

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RESEARCH TEAM

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Where is this work now?

- Published in Journal of LGBT Youth:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19361653.2019.1653808>
- Presented at conferences: American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Boston Children's Hospital LGBTQ Week, and Massachusetts conferences for school nurses and guidance counselors
- Harvard Catalyst podcast with YCAB members, Kira and Landon:
<https://catalyst.harvard.edu/services/thinkresearch/>