Cyberbullying Research Summary
Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Sexual Orientation

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Bullying that specifically targets youth and young adults based on their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, though a perennial problem, has garnered significant attention in recent months within the media and from society at large. A clarion call about this problem has been issued by politicians, legislators, celebrities, and others following the recent wave of suicides involving a number of teenagers across the United States. Catapulting this issue to prominence, and stirring the emotions of many, was the suicide of 18-year-old Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi on September 22, 2010. Tyler's last words were shared via a Facebook status update: "jumping off the gw bridge sorry," and apparently prompted by the actions of his roommates. Specifically, they secretly and remotely enabled a webcam in the room where Tyler and a male friend were sharing a private moment – and then broadcasted the streaming video footage across the Internet for all to see and comment on.[1] Many considered this "cyberbullying" – which we define as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices."[2] While it was not a typical case it did involve many aspects commonly found in cyberbullying and therefore revived an interest in the link between harassment and sexual orientation.

Hate, Harassment, and Sexual Orientation/Identity

According to an analysis of FBI data by the Southern Poverty Law Center, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) citizens are the minority group most likely to be the target of a violent hate crimes in the United States.[3] Based on data from 1995 to 2008, homosexuals were 2.4 times more likely than Jews and almost 14 times more likely than Latinos to be the victim of a personal hate crime. These data, however, aren't perfect since estimates of particular minority groups in the U.S. are often debated and FBI data relies on hate crimes that are reported, and categorized as such, by the police.

However, violent hate crimes are the exception and not the norm – many more LGBT individuals, adults and youth, are subjected to bullying and harassment. Recent findings from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educational Network (GLSEN) based on data from 7,261 middle- and high-school students from all 50 states and the District of Columbia in 2009 sheds light on the frequency and scope of bullying perpetrated against others based on sexual orientation and gender. Their study – composed of youth contacted through community-based groups, online outreach, and targeted advertising on the social net-working sites Facebook and MySpace – found that 9 out of 10 LGBT students has been harassed at school during the past year.[4]

In addition, in their national study assessing the implications of cyberbullying on LGBT youth, Blumenfeld and Cooper[5] found that 54% of respondents reported being cyberbullied within the past three months. These results are largely in line with findings from a nationally representative study commissioned by the National Mental Health Association in 2002 which found that 78% of 12- to 17-year-old students who were gay, or who were perceived to be gay, were teased or bullied in their schools.

In the GLSEN study, 85% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40% reported being physically harassed, and 19% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual identity. Moreover, 64% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 27% reported being physically harassed, and 13% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their gender expression.[4] Finally, 61% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual identity, while 40% felt unsafe due to their gender expression.

Bullying and harassment among this population does not only lead to emotional and psychological pain, it appears to also affect students' participation in, and success at, school. More than four times as many LGBT students missed at least one day of school in the last month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (6.7% of all students compared to 30% of LGBT students missed a day because they were concerned about their safety).[4]

Furthermore, their GPA suffers as well; students who were more frequently harassed due to their sexual identity or gender expression earned almost half a grade lower (2.7 GPA) than students who were less often harassed (3.1 GPA).[4, 6] Depression, lower self-esteem, and higher anxiety were also statistically linked to bullying based on sexual orientation.

Notably, these negative outcomes are not limited to one's adolescent years. Recent research[7] also found that LGBT

youth who transgress societal gender norms suffer victimization that then leads to increased levels of depression and decreased levels of life satisfaction during their young adult years. As might be expected, nationally-based research has also shown that LGBT teens are more than twice as likely to think about or attempt suicide as compared to their heterosexual peers.[8, 9] LGBT students who are bullied also tend towards absenteeism,[10] substance use,[11, 12] risky sexual behaviors, and other mental health difficulties.[13-15]

Within higher education, in their comprehensive study "2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People" Sue Rankin and her colleagues found that academic and social climates on the majority of colleges and universities remain chilly and unwelcoming.[16] The study found that higher education has failed to provide environments for LGBT people to learn, research, and grow professionally and socially to their potential. LGBT students, staff members, faculty members, and administrators were significantly more likely to experience harassment when compared with their heterosexual counterparts (23% compared to 12%) and were seven times more likely to indicate the harassment was based on their sexual identity. They also seriously considered leaving their institution more often, avoided LGBT areas of campus, feared for their physical safety due to sexual identity, and avoided disclosure of sexual identity due to intimidation and fear of negative consequence.

Our Research

We have explored the intersection of sexual orientation and cyber-bullying in several of our studies. Most recently, in the spring of 2010, we surveyed approximately 4,400 randomly-selected students between the ages of 11 and 18 from a large public school district. In our sample, about 9% of students reported being non-heterosexual or questioning. 6.2% of girls and 2.6% of boys reported being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. And these students were significantly more likely to report being involved in bullying and cyberbullying, both as a target and a bully.

As noted in Chart 1, over 72% of LGBT students reported being the target of a bully at some point in their lifetime compared to 63% of heterosexual students. The

difference is even more striking when focusing on cyberbullying: almost twice as many LGBT students reported experiencing cyberbullying compared to heterosexual students (36.1% compared to 20.1%). These differences were also noted in traditional bullying behaviors. LGBT students were significantly more likely to report that they had bullied and/or cyberbullied others during their lifetimes. This likely reflects the close connection between victimization and offending and the overall retaliatory nature of peer harassment. Indeed, one of the most common reasons students give for bullying or cyberbullying others is retaliation – they felt the target deserved to be bullied because of something that had been done to them.[2]
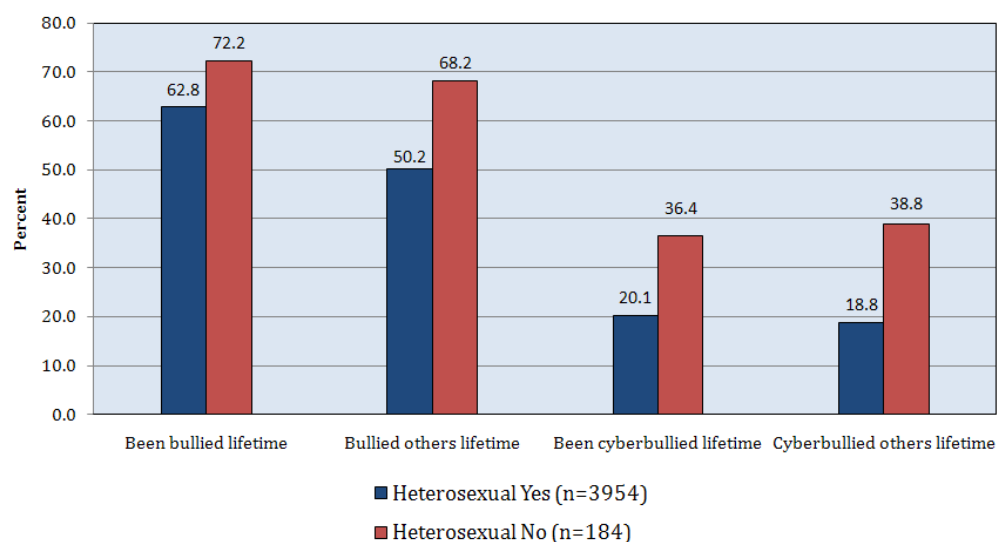
Differences in *recent* experiences with cyberbullying based on sexual orientation are even more striking. For example, 17.3% of LGBT students reported being the victim of cyberbullying in the previous 30 days compared to 6.8% of heterosexual students. And 20.7% of LGBT students admitted to cyberbullying others in the previous 30 days compared to 7.9% of heterosexual students.

When broken down by sex we find that heterosexual males are the least likely group to have experienced cyberbullying (15.7%) where as non-heterosexual females are the most likely to have been the target (38.3%) (see Chart 2).

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Chart 1: Bullying by Sexual Orientation

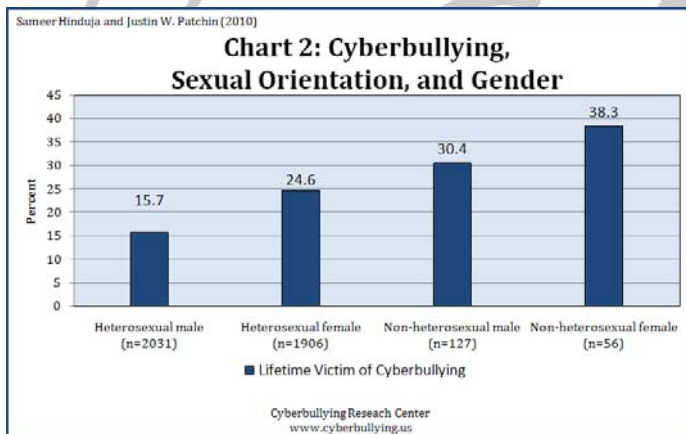Random sample of 11-18 year-olds from large school district in the southern U.S.

Category	Heterosexual Yes (n=3954)	Heterosexual No (n=184)
Been bullied lifetime	62.8	72.2
Bullied others lifetime	50.2	68.2
Been cyberbullied lifetime	20.1	36.4
Cyberbullied others lifetime	18.8	38.8

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*Statistically significant differences (p<.001; two-tailed)

Bullying, Sexual Orientation, and the Law

Bullying based on sexual orientation is not *expressly* prohibited by federal anti-discrimination laws in America (i.e., Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). The U.S. Department of Education has, however, recently clarified the applicability of Title IX in these cases, as the law prohibits "sex discrimination" if students are harassed "for exhibiting what is perceived as a stereotypical characteristic for their sex, or for failing to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity." The law also prohibits "sexual harassment and gender-based harassment of all students, regardless of the actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity of the harasser or target."[17, 18]

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Chart 2: Cyberbullying, Sexual Orientation, and Gender

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Schools may be violating the civil rights of students who suffer from bullying based on one's sexual orientation if the harassment creates a hostile environment and is not meaningfully addressed by school personnel. Thankfully, many policies in schools that prohibit bullying based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability also include the basis of sexual orientation. With or without a formal policy, school officials should address bullying which is brought to their attention, or about which they reasonably should have known. An investigation must take place, the scope of which will vary depending on the circumstances of each incident. If allegations are proven credible, specific steps must be taken to protect the target and stop the bullying.

Preventing Bullying and Cyberbullying Based on Sexual Orientation

A number of initiatives are essential to assist, affirm, and safeguard sexual minority youth within the school environment, and do not require a great amount of time or resources to implement.[19, 20] First, explicit policies must be in place that prohibit and specify sanctions for any student who teases, threatens, excludes, or otherwise mistreats another individual based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.[21] The GLSEN research from 2009 has shown that students at schools with such policies in place overheard less homophobic comments and experienced less victimization related to their sexual orientation. Moreover, they were more likely to seek help from staff, and more likely to see staff step in to help victims.[4]

Workshops for the entire school community that sensitize and educate staff on the needs and experiences of LGBT students can also preempt some of the problems that stem from responses by well-meaning but misinformed adults.[22] Creating and publicizing the availability of counseling and support from specially-trained personnel on campus will help to embolden fearful youth to seek assistance.[23] Pointing out and making a negative example of gender-biased speech or conduct, homophobic jokes or epithets, and ignorant references which might offend any minority group is also crucial in building and maintaining an inclusive and safe environment for all students.[24]

Additionally, having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) formally set up on campus appears to lead to less victimization and a greater sense of belonging at school.[6, 19, 25] Also essential is the presence of administrators, teachers, and staff who are openly supportive of (and knowledgeable about) LGBT perspectives and issues, and make themselves available as a resource to students.[22, 26] Moreover, positive representations of LGBT people and events in classroom discussions, school-wide assemblies, library materials, curriculums, posters and signage, and through other mediums champions the inherent value and unique contributions of all people.[22, 26-28] Finally, cultivating inclusiveness in sports, clubs, and other social activities promotes a climate that not only accepts but embraces diversity and empowers questioning youth to safely figure out who they are.[4, 27] We strongly encourage implementation of these suggested practices, and believe they will lead to measurable improvements in the psychosocial well-being of the LGBT adolescents under your care at school.

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Notes

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