Bullying, Cyberbullying, and LGBTQ Students

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Bullying that specifically targets youth and young adults based on their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression has been a problem for decades. The increased utilization of technology among youth (and, well, just about everyone) has resulted in bullying behaviors moving online. As a result, cyberbullying perpetrated against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth has emerged. A clarion call about this problem has been issued by politicians, legislators, celebrities, and others following a 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 2010 suicide of 18-year-old Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi. Tyler's last words were shared via a Facebook status update: "jumping off the gw bridge sorry," apparently prompted by the hurtful actions of his roommates. That is, 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 an egregious form of cyberbullying. While it was not a typical case, it did involve many aspects commonly found in cyberbullying (e.g., mistreatment carried out using communications technology) and therefore revived an interest in assessing how LGBTQ youth might be uniquely harmed by peer aggression.

Unfortunately, tragic cases continue to occur. On September 22, 2019, 16-year-old Channing Smith from rural Tennessee died by suicide after explicit messages he sent to another boy were posted on Instagram and Snapchat.[2] It is clear that more can be done to prevent these incidents of hate perpetrated online. Let's explore what the research says about the problem at hand, and then discuss relevant strategies that youth-serving adults can implement.

The Victimization of LGBTQ Individuals

The LGBTQ community comprises approximately 4.5% of the US population,[3] but is disproportionately targeted for hate and violence. According to the FBI, 1,445 individuals were the victim of a hate crime due to sexual-orientation bias in 2018 while another 215 were targeted based on their gender or gender-identity.[4] These numbers represent 23.3% of all hate crimes reported to the police that year, and reflect a 2% increase in LGBTQ violence and an alarming 34% increase in anti-trans violence from 2017. The numbers, however, aren't perfect since the FBI data relies on hate crimes that are reported to, and categorized as such by, the police. Specific to the experiences of young persons, the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) found that nearly twice as many LGBTQ high school students had been threatened or injured with a weapon at school than heterosexual students (9.4% compared to 5.4%).[5] In addition, LGBTQ students were significantly more likely to skip school because they felt unsafe, compared to heterosexual students (10% compared to 6.7%).

Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Sexual Orientation/ Gender Identity

According to a 2017 report by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educational Network (GLSEN),[6] "70.1% of LGBTQ students were verbally harassed at school for their sexual orientation, 59.1% for their gender expression, and 53.2% for their gender. Relatedly, 28.3% of LGBTQ students were physically harassed at school for their sexual orientation, 24.4% for their gender expression, and 22.8% for their gender. Interestingly, sexual minority boys appear to be bullied more frequently than sexual minority girls.[7] These rates approximate what was found in the 2017 YRBS, where 33.0% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students had been bullied on

school property in the previous 12 months compared to 17.1% of heterosexual students.[5]

With regard to negative consequences, studies are clear that bullying among LGBTQ youth is associated with various forms of emotional distress[7,8] mental health issues,[9-11] suicidal thoughts and attempts,[12-14] absenteeism,[15] and substance use.[16,17] Research also shows that sexual minority youth may engage in bullying more so than their heterosexual counterparts,[10,18] perhaps because they have been on the receiving end of harassment due to their sexual orientation/identity.

We know that youth in the sexual minority can benefit from the wealth of resources available online to help them process, understand, express, and celebrate their identity.[19,20] However, cyberbullying can also occur with this form of connectedness, and seems to strongly affect a large segment of LGBTQ students. For instance, the aforementioned GLSEN study found that almost half (48.7%) of LGBTQ students were cyberbullied.[6] Other researchers have further illuminated the cyberbullying experiences of LGBTQ students, as well as the harmful psychological and emotional impacts. Abreu and Kenny[21] systematically reviewed 27 empirical studies and found that the prevalence of victimization in this population ranges between 10.5% and 71.3% (depending on the various ways that cyberbullying was measured, and the differences in the demographics of the groups studied). They make clear that "sexual minority and gender expansive adolescents are disproportionally more often victims of cyberbullying than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts,"[21:89] which supports research by other scholars in the field[22-25] as well as findings from the US's Centers for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Study.[26]

In terms of negative outcomes, studies have identified a higher rate of depression[27-30] and suicidal thoughts and attempts among LGTBQ youth who were cyberbullied[23,28,31] – although this literature base is still incipient. Sexual minority youth are also more likely to be perpetrators of cyberbullying,[25,32] but this finding is much less conclusive (also because of limited research to date).[24] Offending

among this population merits deeper examination as the vast majority of conducted studies focus on the experience of targets rather than aggressors.

Our Research

We have explored how bullying and cyberbullying affects LGBTQ youth in several of our studies. We first looked into this issue in the spring of 2010 when we surveyed approximately 4,400 randomly-selected students ages 11-18 from a large public school district. Over 72% of LGBTQ students reported being bullied at some point in their lifetime compared to 63% of heterosexual students. The difference was even more striking when focusing on cyberbullying: almost twice as many LGBTQ students reported being cyberbullied compared to heterosexual students (36.1% compared to 20.1%). LGBTQ students were also significantly more likely to report that they had bullied and/or cyberbullied others during their lifetimes. This likely reflects the
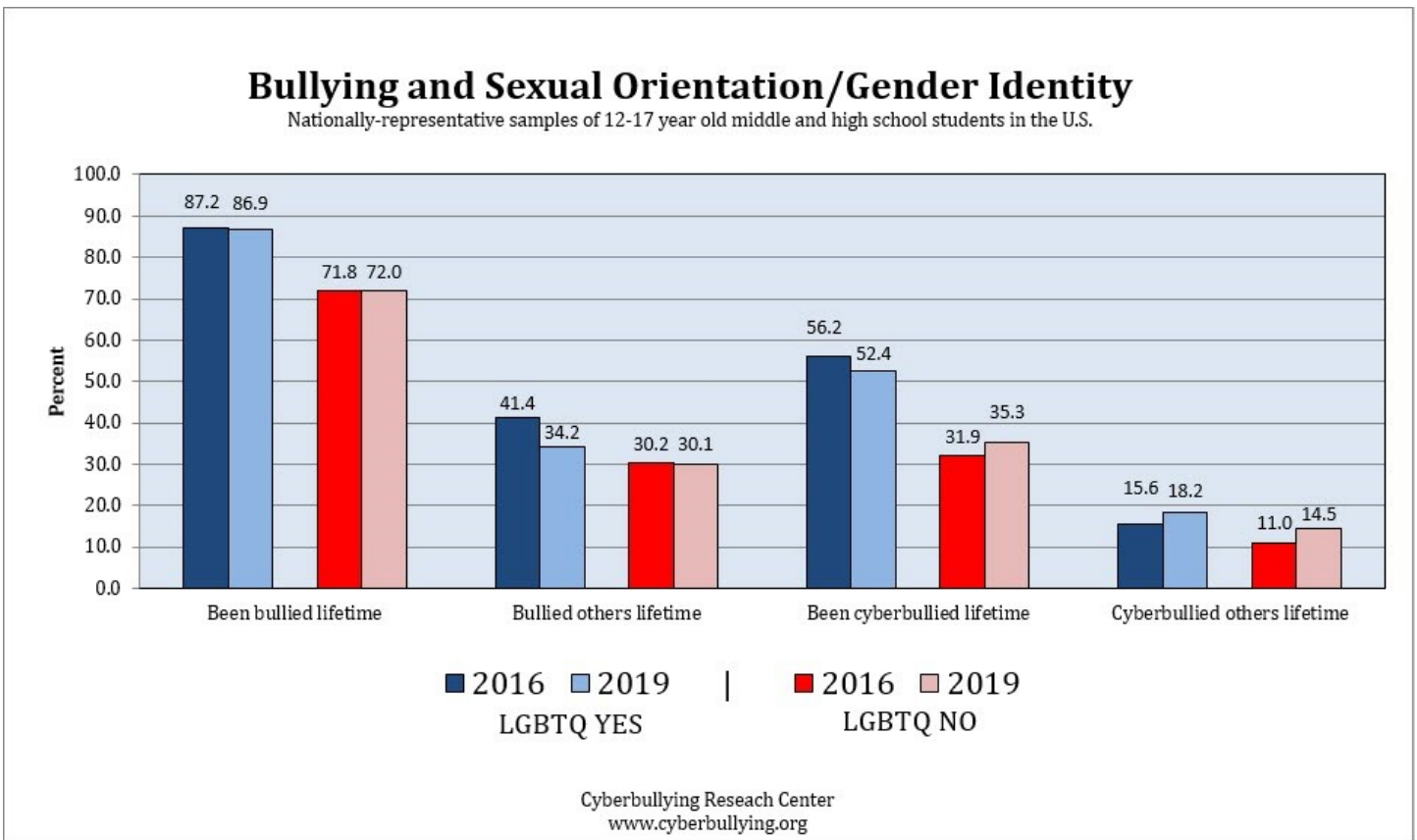
close connection between victimization and offending and the overall retaliatory nature of peer harassment. Indeed, one of the most common reasons students give for bullying or cyberbullying others is retaliation – they felt the target deserved to be bullied because of something that had been done to them.[33] Because of these significant differences in experience with bullying and cyberbullying based on sexual orientation and identity, we have continued to explore this relationship in our subsequent national studies over the years.

In 2016, we surveyed a national sample of over 5,500 12-17 year old middle and high school students across the United States. Here again we found that non-heterosexual students were significantly more likely to have experienced bullying in all of its forms compared to heterosexual students. Over 87% of LGBTQ students had been bullied at school in their lifetime as compared to 72% of non-LGBTQ students. In addition, 56% of LGBTQ students had been cyberbullied in their lifetime compared to 32% of non-LGBTQ students.
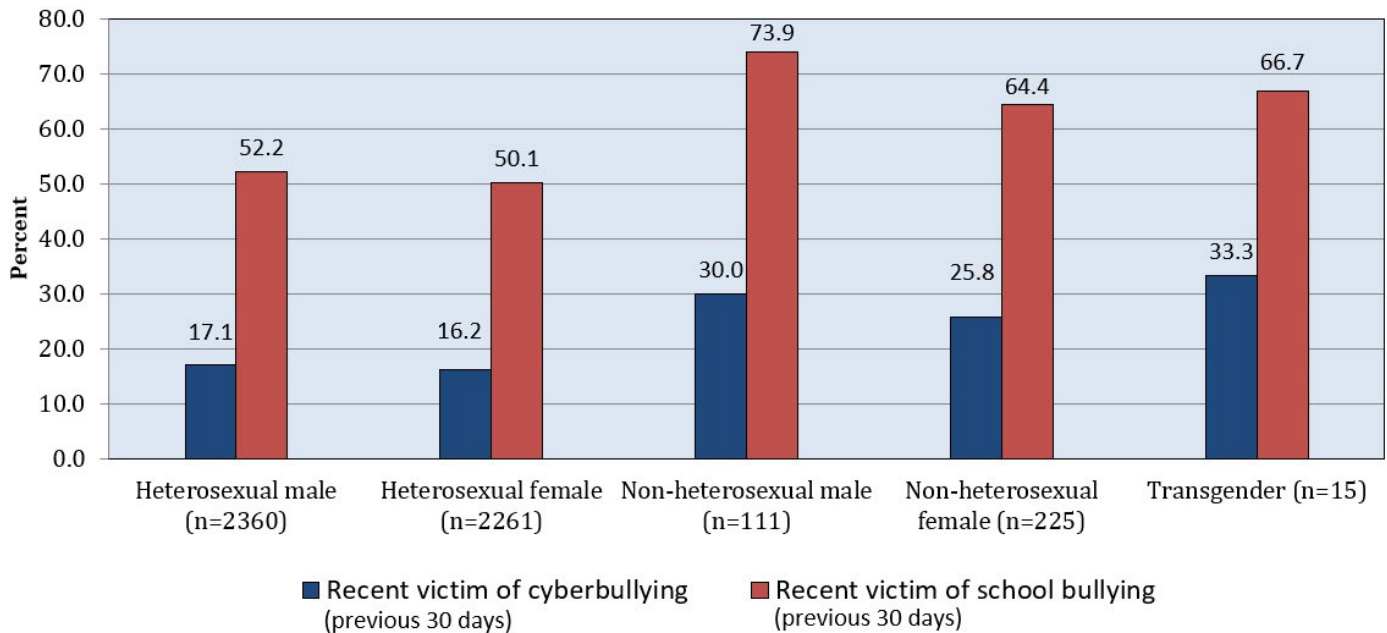
In 2019, we surveyed another sample of 4,500 students from across the US. Results from this study were similar to what we found in 2016. That is, among LGBTQ students, 87% had been bullied at school and 52% had been bullied online at some point in their lives (compared to 72% and 35%, respectively, for non-LGBTQ students). It is clear from our research over the years that LGBTQ students experience more bullying and cyberbullying than non-LGBTQ students.

In breaking our 2019 data down even further, we found that non-heterosexual males were the most likely to have been bullied at school (73.9%) and online (30%) in the most recent 30 days. The one exception to this is transgender students, who were slightly more likely to have been bullied online (33.3%). However, our sample size is too low for that group (n=15) for us to draw any meaningful conclusions or make any useful comparisons there. Heterosexual female students were the least likely to have been bullied at school or online.

Bullying and Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity
Nationally-representative samples of 12-17 year old middle and high school students in the U.S.

Cyberbullying Research Center
www.cyberbullying.org

Bullying, Sexual Orientation, and Gender

Nationally-representative sample of 12-17 year old middle and high school students in the U.S.

Percent

Group	Recent victim of cyberbullying (previous 30 days)	Recent victim of school bullying (previous 30 days)
Heterosexual male (n=2360)	17.1	52.2
Heterosexual female (n=2261)	16.2	50.1
Non-heterosexual male (n=111)	30.0	73.9
Non-heterosexual female (n=225)	25.8	64.4
Transgender (n=15)	33.3	66.7

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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, 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."[34:8,35] In addition, a new important piece of legislation - the Equality Act[36] - is currently being evaluated by the Senate (after having passed the House of Representatives in May 2019). If and when it is ratified, it would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex-based stereotypes across the United States.

Prevention Strategies to Support LGBTQ Youth

A number of initiatives are critical 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.[8,37-43] 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.[6,41,44] 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 sexual orientation. Moreover, students there were more likely to seek help from staff, and more likely to see staff step in to help targets.[39,45,46] Thankfully, many policies in schools that prohibit bullying based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability also include the basis of sexual orientation. Regardless of whether it is clearly specified in your own policy, educators should address any bullying

offline or online which is brought to their attention, or about which they reasonably should have known or foreseen. A formal 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 mistreatment.

Programming and training for the entire school community that sensitize and educate staff, students, and even the parent community on the needs and experiences of LGBTQ students can also preempt problems.[47,48] Indeed, education specifically focused on promoting empathy and perspective taking has been linked to lower homophobic bullying behavior by students.[41,49] With regard to specific curricula, the "Second Step" social and emotional learning program has shown promise in significantly decreasing bullying based on sexual orientation.[50] Furthermore, creating and publicizing the availability of counseling and support from specially-trained personnel on campus can help to embolden fearful youth to seek assistance.[8,39,41,48,51,52] 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.[53,54] To be sure, though, adults may not always recognize language and slang that is harmful towards the sexual minority[55,56] and would do well to grow in their knowledge and understanding of how nuanced discrimination and harassment play out among today's youth.

It is well known that having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) formally set up on campus can lead to less victimization and a greater sense of belonging at school.[8,37,39,57-60] Also essential is the presence of administrators, teachers, and staff who are openly supportive of (and knowledgeable about) LGBTQ perspectives and issues, and who make themselves available as a resource to students.[48,52,61] Bringing LGBTQ youth to the proverbial table to provide guidance on bullying prevention programs and policies is highly recommended as well.[21] Moreover, positive representations of LGBTQ people and events in classroom discussions, school-wide assemblies, library materials, curriculums, posters and signage, and through other mediums champion the inherent value and unique contributions of all people.[39,48,61-63] Finally, cultivating inclusiveness at school[41,64] and in sports, clubs, and other social activities[45,62] can promote a climate that not only accepts but embraces diversity, and empowers questioning youth to safely figure out who they are.[45,62] We strongly encourage implementation of these suggested practices, and believe they will lead to measurable improvements in the psychosocial well-being of the LGBTQ youth under your care.

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