

# From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America

**A Survey of Students and Teachers**



**Commissioned by  
GLSEN**

**Researched by  
Harris Interactive**

**FROM TEASING TO TORMENT: SCHOOL CLIMATE IN AMERICA  
A SURVEY OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**

Conducted for:



Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

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**GLSEN**, or the **Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network** is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. For more information on GLSEN's research, educational resources, public policy agenda, student organizing programs or development initiatives, visit [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).

## FOREWARD FROM GLSEN

GLSEN envisions a future in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. To that end, much of our work focuses on making harassment and bullying on those bases unacceptable in America's schools. Given our commitment to making K through 12 schools safe for all students, we commissioned this report from Harris Interactive in order to place the issues on which we focus in a broader context, and to better understand how students and teachers in junior high and high schools across the country perceive and experience the problem of bullying and harassment of all kinds in their schools.

Findings from this study provide us with a clearer picture of the extent and nature of the problem of bullying and harassment, and confirm that it is, indeed, a central challenge facing all schools as they seek to serve all students. Two-thirds of the students surveyed report that they have been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted at school during the past year because of their appearance or their actual or perceived race/ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, or religion. Half of the teachers surveyed described bullying and harassment of all kinds as a serious problem in their schools. *From Teasing to Torment* also confirms that anti-LGBT bullying is a central piece of the bullying puzzle: Actual or perceived sexual orientation is one of the most common reasons that students are harassed by their peers, second only to physical appearance. This echoes GLSEN's own research, such as the National School Climate Survey, a biennial study of the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) secondary school students, which reveals a clear pattern of harassment and violence directed at these young people at school.

Perhaps the most important findings from this report relate to solutions for improving school safety. Teachers themselves are committed to action to address the problem, and many believe that comprehensive anti-harassment policies would make a difference in their schools. Indeed, students from schools that had inclusive school safety policies, ones that included sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression, were more likely to report feeling safe at school and were less likely to report harassment or negative remarks.

In 2004, the United States Departments of Justice and Education urge that “for youth to fulfill their potential in school, schools should be safe and secure places for all students...”<sup>1</sup> Today, we still have far to go on the issue. *From Teasing to Torment* gives voice to the students and teachers who experience and witness this on a daily basis, and provides educators and policymakers with valuable information about the specific nature of the problem that must be addressed – and ideas about ways to go about it – to ensure that schools provide all students with a safe and secure learning environment.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin Jennings". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'K' and 'J'.

Kevin Jennings  
Executive Director  
GLSEN

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<sup>1</sup> DeVoe, J.F., Peter, K., Kaufman, P., Miller, A., Noonan, M., Snyder, T.D., and Baum, K. (2004). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004* (NCES 2005–002/NCJ 205290). U.S. Departments of Education and Justice. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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## INTRODUCTION

Harris Interactive, Inc. conducted *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate In America*, on behalf of The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). This survey is based on online surveys completed by a nationally representative sample of 3450 students aged 13-18 and 1011 secondary school teachers. The survey is intended to explore teens' and secondary school teachers' experiences with and attitudes towards school harassment. Topics covered in the survey include frequency of harassment and bullying, exposure to offensive language and personal experiences with harassment at their school.

### **Survey Method**

#### Students

A nationally representative sample of 3450 students ages 13 through 18 participated in the online survey. Respondents are members of the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) panel and were invited to participate through password protected emails. Interviews averaged fifteen minutes in length and were conducted between January 13 and January 31, 2005.

#### Teachers

A nationally representative sample of 1011 secondary school teachers participated in the online survey. Respondents are members of the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) panel and were invited to participate through password protected emails. Interviews averaged ten minutes in length and were conducted between January 18 and January 25, 2005.

### **A Note on Reading the Exhibits and Figures**

An asterisk (\*) on a table signals a value of less than one-half percent (0.5%). A dash (-) represents a value of zero. Percentages may not always add up to 100% because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple answers from respondents. The base for each question is the total number of respondents answering that question. Note that in some cases results may be based on small sample sizes. This is typically true when questions were asked of subgroups. Caution should be used in drawing any conclusions from the results based on these small samples. Percentages depicted may not add up to 100% because some answer categories may be excluded from the figure.

**Project Responsibility and Acknowledgements**

The Harris team responsible for the design and analysis of the survey included Dana Markow, Ph.D., Senior Research Director, and Jordan Fein, Senior Research Associate. Harris Interactive, Inc. is responsible for final determination of the topics, question wording, collection of data, analysis and interpretation in the report.

Harris Interactive, Inc. is especially grateful to Joseph Kosciw, Ph.D. of GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) for his input and guidance.

**Public Release of Survey Findings**

All Harris Interactive, Inc. surveys are designed to comply with the code and standards of the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) and the code of the National Council of Public Polls (NCPP). Because data from the survey may be released to the public, release must stipulate that the complete report is also available.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall atmosphere or climate of a school is established by the behaviors and attitudes of the students, teachers and other school staff as well as the school's official policies. One measure of school climate is the levels of harassment experienced by the students. Harassment in school can take many forms from verbal to physical, although physical harassment is much less common. Verbal harassment includes name-calling, teasing and threats and can escalate to more physical forms such as pushing, hitting or assault with a weapon. Students who are harassed can be singled out for perceived or actual personal characteristics, such as physical appearance, race/ethnicity, religion, income level, physical or intellectual ability, gender or sexual orientation. Of course, sometimes harassment can occur for no apparent reason at all. The question is why should educators, parents and other concerned adults care, particularly if no physical harm is done? The reason is that harassment, even when it is limited to teasing and negative remarks, can interfere with a student's education. Previous research, such as *The 2003 National School Climate Survey* conducted by GLSEN and the American Association of University Women's *Hostile Hallways* reports (1993 and 2001), has found a direct linkage between academic performance and experiences of harassment and an unsafe learning environment in school. The present study, *From Teasing to Torment*, examines several aspects of the school climate that can detract from a safe learning environment, as well as teens' personal experiences with harassment. In addition, the survey examines the overall prevalence of offensive remarks and harassment at their school, whether experienced by that teen or their classmates, and the impact that has on their ability to learn. Secondary school teachers also contributed their perspectives on these issues and provided their views on what can be done to improve the situation.

Students tell us that harassment is not a rare phenomenon. Two-thirds of teens report that they have been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted during the past year because of their perceived or actual appearance, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, race/ethnicity, disability or religion. Most teens also report hearing students make negative or offensive remarks related to these characteristics at least occasionally. Half of students report that they frequently hear homophobic and sexist remarks being made by students and seven in ten frequently hear the expressions "that's so gay" or "you're so gay." The reason most frequently cited for being harassed is a student's appearance – the way they look or their body size. Four in ten teens report that students are frequently harassed for this reason. The next most common reason for frequent harassment is sexual orientation. One-third of teens report that students are frequently harassed because they are or are perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Despite these reports of personal experiences or observations of harassment, fewer students – 36% – describe bullying and harassment as a serious problem at their school. Students may not be aware of the extent of the problem for their fellow students or the impact that it is having on students in their school. Teachers do not hear students make negative remarks as frequently as the students themselves report hearing them, but they rate the problem of bullying and harassment as more serious. Half of teachers say that this is a serious problem at their school.

The severity and type of harassment that students experience in school varies by gender, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. Girls, for example, are more likely than boys to report feeling unsafe in school, particularly because of their personal appearance. Girls are also more likely to experience being verbally harassed because of their gender than are boys. Overall, White students report that they feel safe in their schools and experience fewer problems with name-calling and harassment in their schools. Latino/a students are more likely than White and Black students to experience racially-based harassment. Results from this study also demonstrate that it is not uncommon for students to be familiar with LGBT students in their schools. More than half of teens know another student who is gay, lesbian or bisexual and two in ten have a close personal friend at school who is LGBT. More than a third of secondary school teachers overall (and 54% of senior high school teachers) know a student at their school who is gay, lesbian or bisexual. LGBT students are over three times more likely than non-LGBT students to report that they feel unsafe at school (20% vs. 6%). The data also show that students who openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) have a more acute problem with being harassed in school. LGBT students also experience harassment more frequently. Nine in ten LGBT students have been verbally or physically harassed in the past year because of their physical appearance, race/ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender expression. In contrast, six in ten non-LGBT students have experienced such harassment in the past year. Because of their sexual orientation, two-thirds of LGBT students have been verbally harassed, 16% have been physically harassed and 8% have been physically assaulted. In addition, LGBT students are more likely than other students to report that they are verbally harassed for how they look and because of their gender expression, i.e. how traditionally masculine or feminine they act. One interpretation of this finding is sexual orientation, gender expression and appearance may be inextricably linked for many students and teachers. For example, a student, regardless of his or her sexual orientation, may be harassed because of how masculine or feminine he or she acts or because of his or her physical appearance, which may lead them to be harassed because they are perceived to be gay or lesbian.

Most students who experience harassment in school, regardless of demographics or reasons for the harassment, do not report these incidents of harassment to teachers or other school personnel. The most common reason these students give for not reporting harassment is because they did not think that the event was important or serious. Nevertheless, one in ten students do not report these incidents because they believe the teachers or staff are powerless to improve the situation. LGBT students are even more likely never to report such incidents than other students and are twice as likely to say that it is because school staff would not do anything. Teachers report that they would feel comfortable intervening if they observed harassment and that they frequently have intervened. An implication of these findings is the importance of bridging the gap between the support that teachers say they provide to students and students' perceptions of teachers' willingness to take action. Teachers may need to be made more aware of problems that students are having in school and be willing to identify themselves as resources for students experiencing harassment.

Most teachers tell us that they believe they have an obligation to ensure a safe learning environment for LGBT students with three-quarters of secondary school teachers strongly endorsing this view. Those teachers who know a LGBT student are more likely than those who do not to believe they have this obligation. Teachers believe that anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies would be most helpful in ensuring a safe learning environment for LGBT students. Most secondary schools have a policy for reporting incidents of harassment or assault. The majority of both teachers and students report that their school has a harassment policy (91% and 68%, respectively). Given the prevalence of harassment policies overall, does having a policy that goes further and specifically mentions sexual orientation or gender expression make a difference in school climate? This appears to be the case. More than half of teachers and students report that their school has this type of inclusive harassment policy in place and having an inclusive policy is associated with students feeling safer and describing less harassment or negative remarks at their school. Students whose schools have such a policy are also less likely than others to skip a class because they feel unsafe. However, this survey cannot address whether these policies caused the improved learning environment or whether schools that are safer and more attuned to the needs of their students, including their LGBT students, tend to be the ones to implement these policies.

The finding of a link between having anti-harassment policies in place and increased levels of safety is an encouraging result from the current study. Another noteworthy finding is that teachers believe they have an obligation to ensure a safe learning environment for LGBT students and that this belief is even more common among those teachers who know LGBT students. In this study, students have documented the pervasiveness of harassment and bullying in junior and senior high schools today. These problems are

magnified for the LGBT student, who is less likely to feel safe and more likely to experience a range of harassment. Although bullying and harassment is so pervasive in our nation's schools, it is of some comfort that teachers understand harassment to be a serious problem that needs to be addressed in schools today.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

### **I. Harassment in schools is experienced by a majority of students.**

- 65% of teens have been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted during the past year because of their perceived or actual appearance, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, race/ethnicity, disability or religion.
- 39% of teens report that students in their school are frequently harassed because of their physical appearance.
- 33% of teens report that students in their school are frequently harassed because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation.
- 52% of teens frequently hear students make homophobic remarks.
- 51% of teens frequently hear students make sexist remarks.
- 69% of teens frequently hear students say “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay”; expressions where “gay” is meant to mean something bad or devalued.
- 36% of teens indicate that bullying or harassment is a serious problem at their school.
- 53% of secondary school teachers say that bullying or harassment is a serious problem at their school.

### **II. Students who are or are perceived to be LGBT are frequent targets of harassment in school.**

- LGBT students are three times as likely as non-LGBT students to feel not safe at school (22% vs. 7%).
- 90% of LGBT teens (vs. 62% of non-LGBT teens) have been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted during the past year because of their perceived or actual appearance, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, race/ethnicity, disability or religion.

### **III. The nature of bullying and harassment varies by the type of school the students attend.**

- Junior high school students are more likely to report harassment because of physical appearance or body size frequently occurs (48% vs. 39%).
- Junior high school students are more likely to frequently have rumors or lies spread about them (17% vs. 10%).
- Junior high school teachers are more likely to describe bullying and harassment as a serious problem at their school (64% vs. 46%).

- Public school students are more likely than others to consider bullying or harassment to be a serious problem at their school (38% vs. 14%).
- Public school students are less likely than private or parochial students to feel very safe at their school (44% vs. 81%).
- Public school students are more likely than private or parochial school students to report that harassment based on sexual orientation frequently occurs (34% vs. 18%). However, private school students are much less likely to know a student in their school who identifies as LGBT (36% vs. 57%), to have a close friend who is LGBT (10% vs. 20%) or to identify as LGBT themselves (2% vs. 6%).

**IV. Teachers believe they have an obligation to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for LGBT students.**

- 73% of teachers strongly agree that they have an obligation to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for LGBT students. Half of these teachers (47%) believe that anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies would be most helpful in achieving this.
- 53% of teachers report that bullying and harassment of students is a serious problem at their school.

**V. Most schools have some type of anti-harassment policy, however only about half of these policies specify sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.**

- More than two-thirds of students (68%) report that their school has a policy for reporting incidents of harassment. Only 4% report that their school does not have a policy, while 27% are not sure.
- Nine in ten teachers (91%) report that their school has a policy for reporting incidents of harassment.
- 48% of secondary school students and 51% of teachers report that their school has a harassment policy that specifically mentions sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.
- Private school teachers are less likely than public school teachers to work in schools that have this type of inclusive policy (39% vs. 52% of teachers).

**VI. Students from schools with a policy that includes sexual orientation or gender report fewer problems with school safety in general.**

- Students whose schools have a policy that includes sexual orientation or gender identity/expression are less likely than other students to report a serious harassment problem at their school (33% vs. 44%).
- Students from schools with an inclusive policy report that others are less often harassed in their school because of their physical appearance (36% vs. 52%), their sexual orientation (32% vs. 43%) or their gender expression (26% vs. 37%).
- Students from schools with an inclusive policy are also more likely to feel very safe at school (54% vs. 36%) and one-third as likely to skip a class because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe (5% vs. 16%).

