GLSEN®

The 2011 National School Climate Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings on the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools

METHODS

GLSEN used two methods to obtain a representative national sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth to participate in a survey: 1) outreach through national, regional, and local organizations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBT youth, and 2) targeted advertising on the social networking site Facebook. For the first method, we asked organizations to direct youth to the National School Climate Survey, which was available on GLSEN's website, through their organizations' emails, listservs, websites, and social networking sites. Additionally, a paper version of the survey was made available to local community groups/organizations with limited capacity to access the Internet. To ensure representation of transgender youth, youth of color, and youth in rural communities, we made special efforts to notify groups and organizations that work predominantly with these populations. For the second method, we posted advertisements for the study on Facebook, targeting all users between 13 and 18 years of age who gave some indication on their profile that they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

The final sample consisted of a total of 8,584 students between the ages of 13 and 20. Students were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and from 3,224 unique school districts. About two-thirds of the sample (67.9%) was White, about half (49.6%) was female, and over half identified as gay or lesbian (61.3%). Students were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers in grades 10 and 11.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

In 1999, GLSEN identified the need for national data on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students and launched the first National School Climate Survey (NSCS). At the time, the school experiences of LGBT youth were under-documented and nearly absent from national studies of adolescents. For more than a decade, the biennial NSCS has documented the unique challenges LGBT students face and identified interventions that can improve school climate. The survey explores the prevalence of anti-LGBT language and victimization, the effect that these experiences have on LGBT students' achievement and well-being, and the utility of interventions in lessening the negative effects of a hostile school climate and promoting a positive educational experience. The survey also examines demographic and community-level differences in LGBT students' experiences.

The NSCS remains one of the few studies to examine the school experiences of LGBT students nationally, and its results have been vital to GLSEN's understanding of the issues that LGBT students face, thereby informing our ongoing work to ensure safe and affirming schools for all.

In our 2011 survey, we examine the experiences of LGBT students with regard to indicators of negative school climate:

- hearing biased remarks, including homophobic remarks, in school;
- feeling unsafe in school because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation, gender expression, or race/ethnicity;
- missing classes or days of school because of safety reasons; and
- experiencing harassment and assault in school.

We also examine:

- the possible negative effects of a hostile school climate on LGBT students' academic achievement, educational aspirations, and psychological well-being;
- whether or not students report experiences of victimization to school officials or to family members and how these adults address the problem; and
- how the school experiences of LGBT students differ by personal and community characteristics.

In addition, we demonstrate the degree to which LGBT students have access to supportive resources in school, and we explore the possible benefits of these resources, including:

- Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) or similar clubs;
- anti-bullying/harassment school policies and laws;
- supportive school staff; and
- curricula that are inclusive of LGBT-related topics.

Given that GLSEN has more than a decade of data, we examine changes over the time on indicators of negative school climate and levels of access to LGBT-related resources in schools.

Hostile School Climate

"People frequently call others 'fags' and 'homos.' Anything bad is 'so gay.' They say all of this in front of me, and it really starts to sting."

Schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBT students, the overwhelming majority of whom hear homophobic remarks and experience harassment or assault at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

BIASED REMARKS AT SCHOOL

- 84.9% of students heard "gay" used in a negative way (e.g., "that's so gay") frequently or often at school, and 91.4% reported that they felt distressed because of this language.

- 61.4% heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting "masculine enough" or "feminine enough") frequently or often.

- 71.3% heard other homophobic remarks (e.g., "dyke" or "faggot") frequently or often.

- 56.9% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 56.9% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff.

SAFETY AND VICTIMIZATION AT SCHOOL

- 63.5% felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, and 43.9% because of their gender expression.

- 81.9% were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 63.9% because of their gender expression.

- 38.3% were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 27.1% because of their gender expression.

- 18.3% were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 12.4% because of their gender expression.

- 55.2% of LGBT students experienced electronic harassment in the past year (via text messages or postings on Facebook), often known as cyberbullying.

The high incidence of harassment and assault is exacerbated by school staff who rarely, if ever, intervene on behalf of LGBT students.

- 60.4% of students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most often believing little to no action would be taken or the situation could become worse if reported.

- 36.7% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response.

Absenteeism

Many LGBT students avoid classes or miss entire days of school rather than face a hostile school climate. An unsafe school environment denies these students their right to an education.

- 29.8% of students skipped a class at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

- 31.8% missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

- Students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation were three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (57.9% vs. 19.6%).

- Students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their gender identity were more than twice as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (53.2% vs. 20.4%).

FREQUENCY OF MISSING DAYS OF SCHOOL IN THE PAST MONTH BECAUSE OF FEELING UNSAFE OR UNCOMFORTABLE

6 or More Days 6.3%
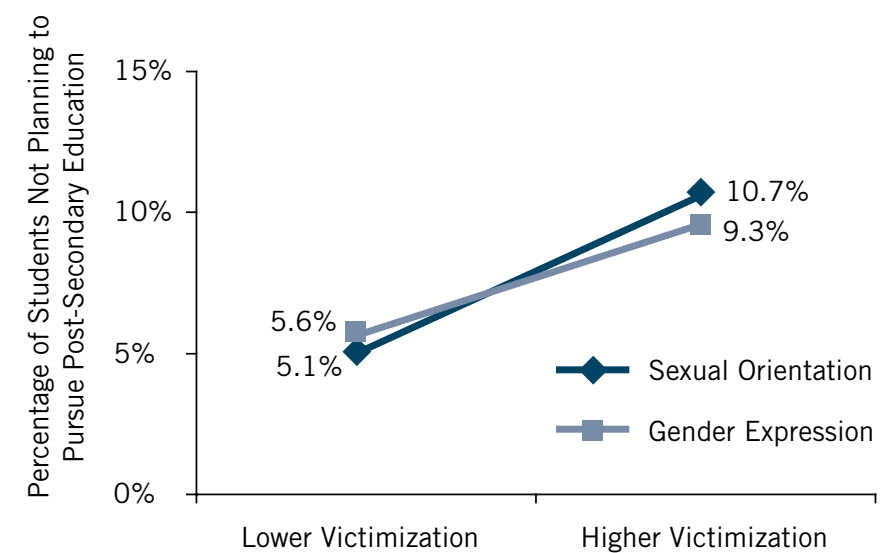4 or 5 Days 4.3%
2 or 3 Days 12.0%
1 Day 9.2%
0 Days 68.3%
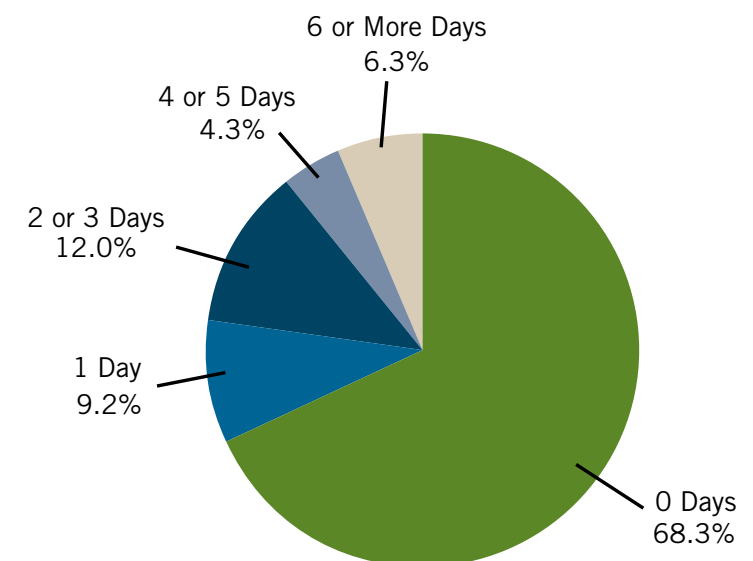
"I stopped going to school four months before graduation because I couldn't handle the bullying anymore. I will not get to attend my senior prom, and ... throw my graduation cap in the air."

PROBLEM

Lowered Educational Aspirations and Academic Achievement

"[School staff] said I should drop out and get my GED or 'be less gay.'"

School safety affects student success. Experiencing victimization in school hinders LGBT students' academic success and educational aspirations.

- Students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression had lower grade point averages than students who were less often harassed (2.9 vs. 3.2).

- Students who experienced higher levels of victimization in school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression were more than twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school) than those who experienced lower levels (10.7% vs. 5.1%).

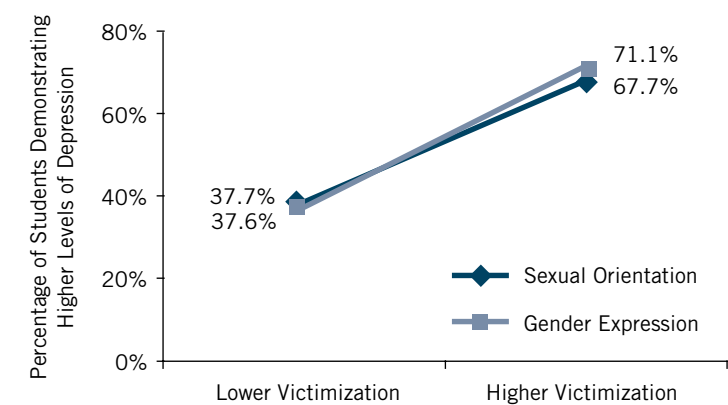**EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND SEVERITY OF VICTIMIZATION**

Poorer Psychological Well-Being

"Bullying in our school is mostly verbal, but it hurts just as much as any physical pain... Teachers rarely do anything about it."
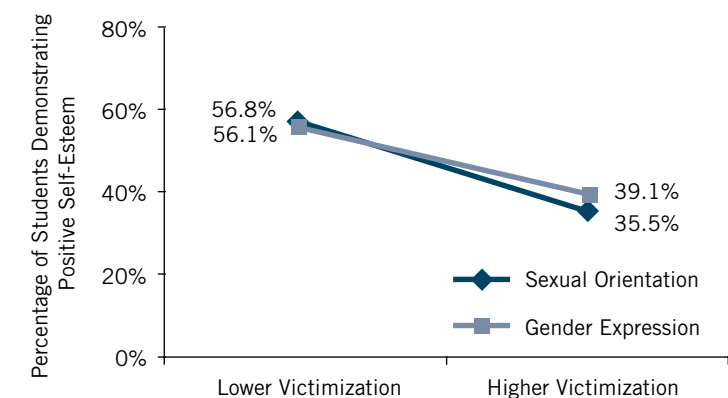
Experiences of harassment and assault in school are related to poorer psychological well-being for LGBT students:

- Students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender expression had higher levels of depression than those who reported lower levels of those types of victimization.

- Students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender expression had lower levels of self-esteem than those who reported lower levels of those types of victimization.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEPRESSION AND SEVERITY OF VICTIMIZATION

Percentage of Students Demonstrating Higher Levels of Depression

- Lower Victimization: 37.7% / 37.6%
- Higher Victimization: 71.1% / 67.7%

◆ Sexual Orientation
■ Gender Expression

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND SEVERITY OF VICTIMIZATION

Percentage of Students Demonstrating Positive Self-Esteem

- Lower Victimization: 56.8% / 56.1%
- Higher Victimization: 39.1% / 35.5%

◆ Sexual Orientation
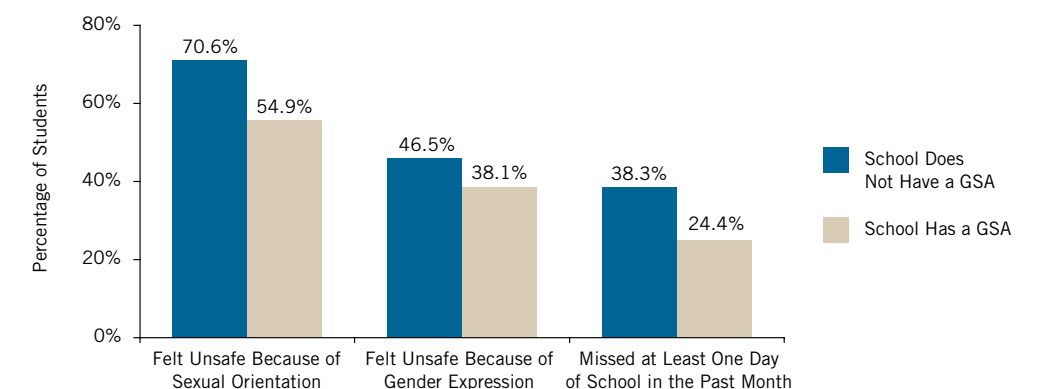■ Gender Expression

Gay-Straight Alliances

SOLUTION

"Due to the formation of the GSA about four months ago, the overall LGBTQ-acceptance has steadily risen. A lot of people aren't educated enough."

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and similar student clubs can provide safe, affirming spaces and critical support for LGBT students. GSAs also contribute to creating a more welcoming school environment.

- Students with a GSA in their school heard fewer homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke," and fewer expressions where "gay" was used in a negative way than students in schools without a GSA.

- Students with a GSA experienced less victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression. For example, 23.0% of students with a GSA experienced higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation, compared to 38.5% of those without a GSA.

- Students with a GSA were more likely to report that school personnel intervened when hearing homophobic remarks compared to students without a GSA — 19.8% vs. 12.0% said that staff intervened "most of the time" or "always."

- Students with a GSA were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation than those without a GSA (54.9% vs. 70.6%).

- Students with a GSA had a greater sense of connectedness to their school community than students without a GSA.

Yet, less than half (45.7%) of students said that their school had a GSA or similar student club.

PRESENCE OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY AND MISSING SCHOOL

Chart — Percentage of Students:

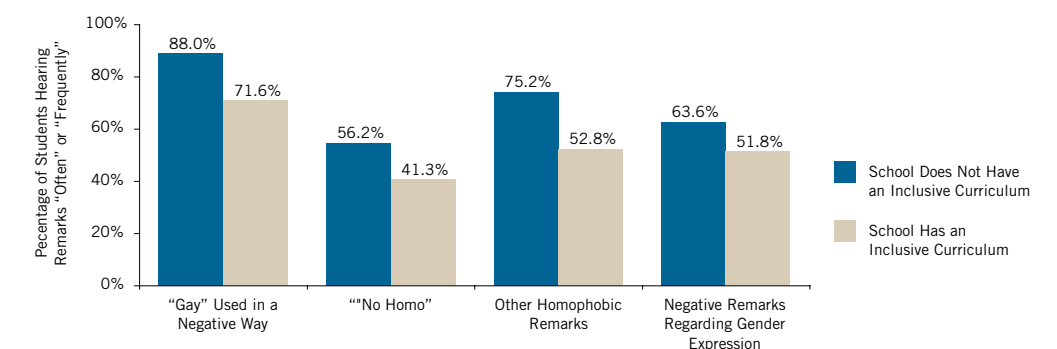|	Felt Unsafe Because of Sexual Orientation	Felt Unsafe Because of Gender Expression	Missed at Least One Day of School in the Past Month
School Does Not Have a GSA	70.6%	46.5%	38.3%
School Has a GSA	54.9%	38.1%	24.4%

Inclusive Curriculum

A curriculum that includes positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events (i.e., an inclusive curriculum) can promote respect for all and improve LGBT students' school experiences.

- Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum heard fewer homophobic remarks, including negative use of the word "gay," the phrase "no homo," and homophobic epithets (e.g., "fag" or "dyke"), and fewer negative comments about someone's gender expression than those without an inclusive curriculum.

- Less than half (43.4%) of students in schools with an inclusive curriculum felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, compared to two thirds (67.5%) of other students.

- Less than a fifth (17.7%) of students in schools with an inclusive curriculum had missed school in the past month compared to more than a third (34.8%) of other students.

- Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum were more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBT people than other students (67.7% vs. 33.2%).

- Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum had a greater sense of connectedness to their school community than other students.

However, only a small percentage of students were taught positive representations about LGBT people, history, or events in their schools (16.8%). Furthermore, less than half (44.1%) of students reported that they could find information about LGBT-related issues in their school library, and only two in five (42.1%) with Internet access at school reported being able to access LGBT-related information online via school computers.

INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM AND FREQUENCY OF HEARING BIASED REMARKS

Bar chart. Y-axis: Percentage of Students Hearing Remarks "Often" or "Frequently" (0% to 100%). Legend: School Does Not Have an Inclusive Curriculum (blue); School Has an Inclusive Curriculum (tan).

- "Gay" Used in a Negative Way: 88.0% / 71.6%
- "No Homo": 56.2% / 41.3%
- Other Homophobic Remarks: 75.2% / 52.8%
- Negative Remarks Regarding Gender Expression: 63.6% / 51.8%

"This year in my U.S. History class, my teacher used a textbook [that] actually did mention LGBT rights during the civil rights movement of the 60s, along with Harvey Milk Stonewall Riots, etc. — that made me happy!"
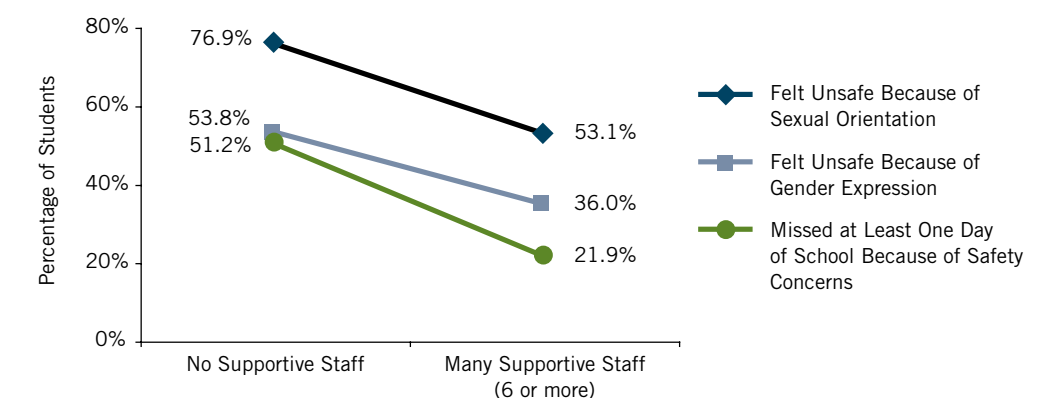
Supportive Educators

"I feel I was lucky enough to have staff that are understanding and respectful of LGBTQ teens, because even though some of the students aren't… I knew I would always have a few teachers to talk and share with. LGBTQ teens need that. They need to know that they're safe."

The presence of educators who are supportive of LGBT students can have a positive impact on the school experiences of these students, as well as their psychological well-being.

- About half (53.1 %) of students who had many (six or more) supportive staff at their school felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, compared to nearly three fourths (76.9%) of students with no supportive staff.

- Less than a quarter (21.9%) of students with many supportive staff had missed school in the past month compared to over half (51.2%) with no supportive staff.

- Students with greater numbers of supportive staff had a greater sense of being a part of their school community than other students.

- Students with many supportive staff reported higher grade point averages than other students (3.2 vs. 2.9).

- Students with a greater number of supportive staff also had higher educational aspirations — students with many supportive staff were about a third as likely to say they were not planning on attending college compared to students with no supportive educators (5.1% vs. 14.9%).

Although almost all students (95.0%) could identify at least one staff member supportive of LGBT students at their school, only about half (54.6%) could identify six or more supportive school staff.

SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL STAFF AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY AND MISSING SCHOOL

Chart: Percentage of Students (y-axis 0%–80%). Categories: No Supportive Staff; Many Supportive Staff (6 or more).

- Felt Unsafe Because of Sexual Orientation: 76.9% → 53.1%
- Felt Unsafe Because of Gender Expression: 53.8% → 36.0%
- Missed at Least One Day of School Because of Safety Concerns: 51.2% → 21.9%

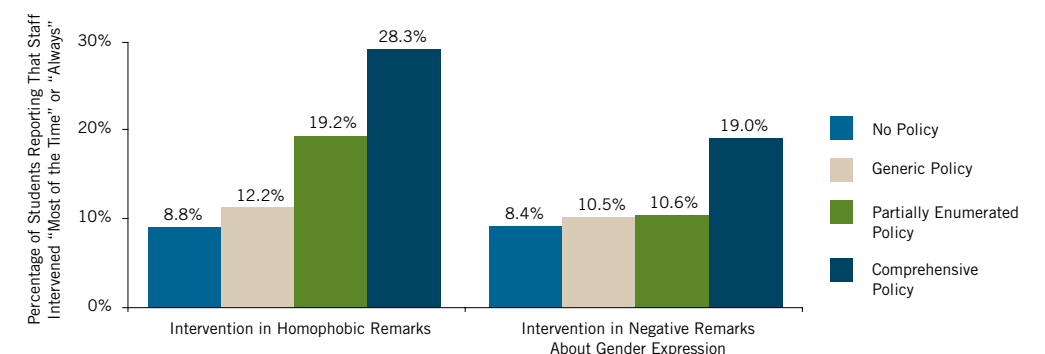# Comprehensive Bullying/ Harassment Policies and Laws

Comprehensive policies and laws — those that specifically enumerate personal characteristics including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, among others — are most effective at combating anti-LGBT bullying and harassment.

- Six in ten (59.5%) students in schools with comprehensive policies heard homophobic remarks (e.g., "faggot" or "dyke") often or frequently, compared to almost three quarters of students in schools with generic, non-enumerated policies (73.3%) or no policy whatsoever (73.8%).

- Students in schools with comprehensive policies were more likely than students in schools with a generic policy or no policy to report that staff intervened when hearing homophobic remarks (28.3% vs. 12.2% vs. 8.8%) or negative remarks about gender expression (19.0% vs. 10.5% vs. 8.4%).

However, only 7.4% of students reported that their school had a comprehensive policy (i.e., that specifically included both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) and only 15.6% reported that their policy included either sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

Results from the NSCS provide evidence that students who live in states with comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment laws experience less victimization because of their sexual orientation or gender expression and are more likely to have supportive resources, including a comprehensive school policy. Yet, only 15 states plus the District of Columbia have comprehensive laws that include sexual orientation and gender identity.

SCHOOL ANTI-BULLYING/HARASSMENT AND STAFF INTERVENTION IN BIASED REMARKS

Chart: Percentage of Students Reporting That Staff Intervened "Most of the Time" or "Always"

Intervention in Homophobic Remarks: No Policy 8.8%, Generic Policy 12.2%, Partially Enumerated Policy 19.2%, Comprehensive Policy 28.3%

Intervention in Negative Remarks About Gender Expression: No Policy 8.4%, Generic Policy 10.5%, Partially Enumerated Policy 10.6%, Comprehensive Policy 19.0%

Legend: No Policy, Generic Policy, Partially Enumerated Policy, Comprehensive Policy

"I feel as if the school tries to seem like a safe place, but… The anti-bullying policy doesn't say a thing about LGBT youth… It leaves me somewhat apprehensive that [reporting] will get turned right back on me."
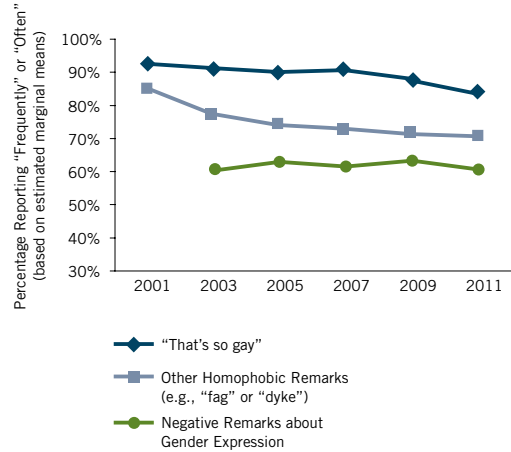
CHANGES IN SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR LGBT YOUTH OVER TIME:

Increases from past years in school resources may now be showing a positive effect on school climate for LGBT youth.

The National School Climate Survey, first conducted by GLSEN in 1999, remains the only study to consistently document the school experiences of LGBT students nationally. The 2011 NSCS marks the first time our findings show both decreases in negative indicators of school climate (biased remarks and victimization) and continued increases in most LGBT-related school resources and supports.
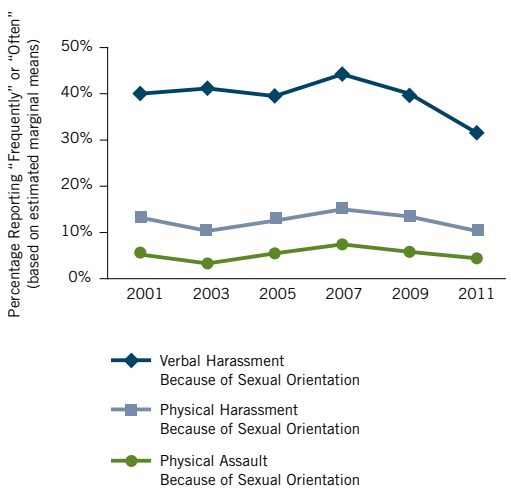
ANTI-LGBT REMARKS

Our results indicate a general trend that, while still prevalent, homophobic remarks (e.g., "dyke" or "faggot"), are on the decline. Students in 2011 reported a lower incidence of these remarks than all prior years. The percentage of students hearing these remarks frequently or often has dropped from over 80% in 2001 to about 70% in 2011. There has also been a small but consistent decline in the frequency of expressions such as "that's so gay" since 2001. However, there has been little change over time in the incidence of hearing negative remarks about gender expression.

Percentage Reporting "Frequently" or "Often" (based on estimated marginal means)

- "That's so gay"
- Other Homophobic Remarks (e.g., "fag" or "dyke")
- Negative Remarks about Gender Expression

HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT

Between 2001 to 2009, LGBT students' reports of harassment and assault remained relatively constant. In 2011, however, we saw a significant decrease in victimization based on sexual orientation. Changes in harassment and assault based on gender expression were similar to those for sexual orientation — verbal harassment was lower in 2011 than in all prior years, and physical harassment and assault were lower in 2011 than in 2009 and 2007.

Percentage Reporting "Frequently" or "Often" (based on estimated marginal means)

- Verbal Harassment Because of Sexual Orientation
- Physical Harassment Because of Sexual Orientation
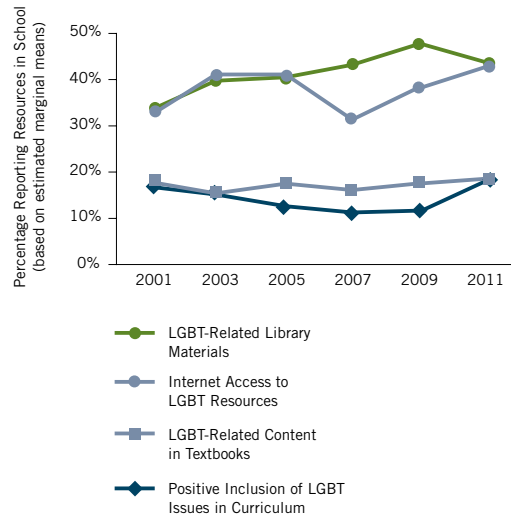- Physical Assault Because of Sexual Orientation

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

In 2011, we saw small increases from previous years in the percentage of students who reported having a GSA at school. The percentage of LGBT students with a GSA in their school was statistically higher in 2011 than all previous years except for 2003.

Percentage Reporting a GSA at School (based on estimated marginal means)
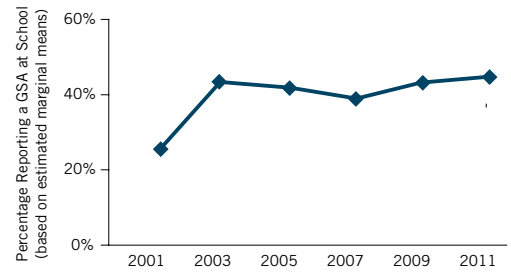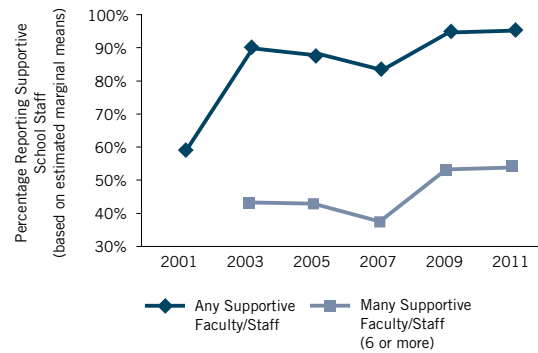
CURRICULAR RESOURCES

The percentage of students with access to LGBT-related Internet resources through their school computers showed a continued increase in 2011, and the percentage of students reporting positive representations of LGBT people, history, or events in their curriculum was significantly higher in 2011 than all prior survey years except for 2003. In contrast, the percentage of students who had LGBT-related resources in their school library peaked in 2009 and decreased slightly in 2011. There have been no changes over time in the percentage of students reporting inclusion of LGBT-related content in their textbooks.

Percentage Reporting Resources in School (based on estimated marginal means)

- LGBT-Related Library Materials
- Internet Access to LGBT Resources
- LGBT-Related Content in Textbooks
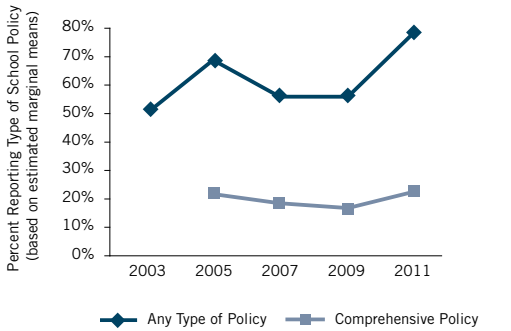- Positive Inclusion of LGBT Issues in Curriculum

SUPPORTIVE EDUCATORS

There was a continued trend in 2011 of an increasing number of supportive school staff over the past decade, including a small but statistically significant increase from 2009 to 2011.

Percentage Reporting Supportive School Staff (based on estimated marginal means)

- Any Supportive Faculty/Staff
- Many Supportive Faculty/Staff (6 or more)

ANTI-BULLYING/HARASSMENT POLICIES

In 2011, we saw a large increase in the percentage of students reporting any type of anti-bullying/harassment policy at their school. However, there was no increase in the percentage of students reporting that their school had a comprehensive policy, i.e., one that included protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

Percent Reporting Type of School Policy (based on estimated marginal means)

- Any Type of Policy
- Comprehensive Policy

Demographic and School Characteristic Differences in LGBT Students' Experiences

LGBT students are a diverse population, and although they may share some experiences related to school climate, their experiences may also vary by both students' personal characteristics and those of their school. In the full 2011 National School Climate Survey report, we examine differences in students' experiences based on race/ethnicity, gender, school level, school type (public, religious, private non-religious), region, and locale. Major findings regarding these differences are highlighted below.

GENDER IDENTITY & EXPRESSION

Compared to other LGBT students, transgender students faced the most hostile school climates whereas female non-transgender students were least likely to experience anti-LGBT victimization. In addition, gender nonconforming students experienced more negative experiences at school compared to students whose gender expression adhered to traditional gender norms.

- Transgender students were most likely to feel unsafe at school, with 80.0% of transgender students reporting that they felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression.
- Female students in our survey reported lower frequencies of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression and were less likely to feel unsafe at school.
- Gender nonconforming students reported higher levels of victimization and feeling unsafe at school. For example, 58.7% of gender nonconforming students experienced verbal harassment in the past year because of their gender expression, compared to 29.0% of their peers.

REGION

LGBT students attending schools in the Northeast and the West reported lower frequencies of victimization and hearing homophobic remarks and had greater access to resources and support than students in the South and Midwest.

- Students in the Northeast and the West reported hearing "gay" used in a negative way less frequently than students in the South and the Midwest.
- Overall, LGBT students from schools in the Northeast and the West reported significantly lower levels of victimization than students from schools in the South and the Midwest.
- In general, students in the Northeast were most likely to report having LGBT-related resources at school, such as inclusive curricula and supportive school personnel, followed by students in the West. Students in the South were least likely to have access to these resources and supports.

LOCALE

LGBT students in rural areas and small towns were less safe in school than students in urban and suburban areas. They also had fewer LGBT-related resources or supports in school.

- Students in rural/small town schools reported the highest frequency of hearing anti-LGBT language at school. For example, 53.8% of rural/small town students reported hearing homophobic remarks such as "fag" or "dyke" frequently, compared to 41.4% of suburban students and 39.0% of urban students.
- Students in rural/small town schools experienced higher levels victimization in school based on sexual orientation and gender expression.
- Students in rural/small town schools were least likely to have LGBT-related school resources or supports, particularly Gay-Straight Alliances and supportive school personnel.

SCHOOL LEVEL

On all of the indicators of school climate in the survey, middle school students fared worse than high school students and had fewer LGBT-related resources and supports.

- Students in middle school reported higher frequencies of victimization on sexual orientation and gender expression than students in high school. For example, about a third (35.5%) of middle school students experienced regular physical harassment (sometimes, often, or frequently) based on their sexual orientation, compared to less than a quarter (21.4%) of high school students.
- Although middle school students were less likely to have access to every resource and support about which we asked, the disparity between middle and high school students was greatest for Gay-Straight Alliances (6.3% for middle school students vs. 52.6% for high school students).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that there is an urgent need for action to create safe and affirming schools for LGBT students. Results from the 2011 National School Climate Survey demonstrate the ways in which school-based support — such as supportive staff, anti-bullying/harassment policies, LGBT-inclusive curricular resources, and GSAs — can positively affect LGBT students' school experiences. Furthermore, results show how comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment state laws can positively affect school climate for these students. Therefore, we recommend the following measures:

- Advocate for comprehensive bullying/harassment legislation at the state and federal levels that specifically enumerates sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as protected categories alongside others such as race, religion, and disability;
- Adopt and implement comprehensive bullying/harassment policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in individual schools and districts, with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience;
- Ensure that school policies and practices, such as those related to dress codes and school dances, do not discriminate against LGBT students;
- Support student clubs, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, that provide support for LGBT students and address LGBT issues in education;
- Provide training for school staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive teachers and other staff available to students; and
- Increase student access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history, and events through inclusive curricula and library and Internet resources.

Taken together, such measures can move us toward a future in which all students have the opportunity to learn and succeed in school, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

LEARN MORE

The full 2011 National School Climate Survey report goes into greater depth on the issues highlighted in this Executive Summary and explores a number of other topics, including:

- Experiences of harassment and assault and feelings of safety based on race/ethnicity, religion and disability;
- Frequency of sexual harassment, relational aggression, cyberbullying, and property damage;
- Relationship between being out (i.e., open about one's sexual orientation or gender identity) and students' school experiences and well-being;
- The prevalence of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and the impact they have on school climate and LGBT youth;
- School policies and practices that are discriminatory toward LGBT students; and
- LGBT student participation and experiences of harassment and assault in school athletics.

The full 2011 National School Climate Survey is available for download at glsen.org/research.

GLSEN®

GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. Established in 1990, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. GLSEN seeks to develop school climates where difference is valued for the positive contribution it makes to creating a more vibrant and diverse community.

For more information on our educator resources, research, public policy agenda, student leadership programs or development initiatives, visit www.glsen.org.

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