



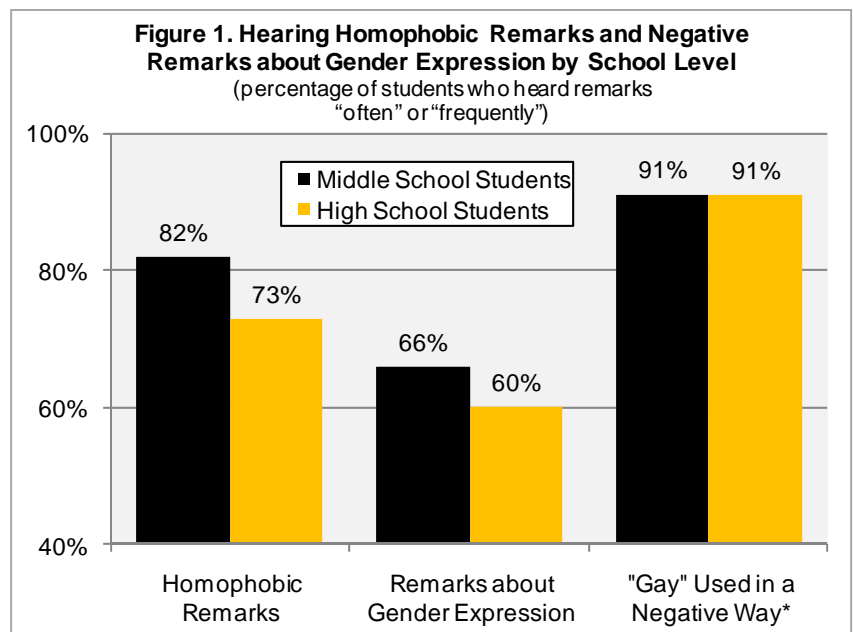
Research Brief

THE EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: FINDINGS FROM THE 2007 NATIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY

For many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) middle school students, school is not a safe place. LGBT students in middle school regularly hear derogatory remarks and are harassed in school, and are more likely to experience such events than high school students. In addition, they report little intervention by middle school staff. These experiences negatively affect students' academic performance and ability to attend school. Unfortunately, most LGBT middle school students attend schools without school-based resources and supports that can improve their school experiences and mitigate the negative effects of a hostile environment, such as Gay-Straight Alliances and supportive educators. Further, LGBT students in middle school are less likely than those in high school to have access to school-based resources. Thus, middle school students face more hostile school climates than high school students, yet have less access to school resources and supports that can address these issues. Middle school administrators and educators, education policymakers and others concerned about issues of safety in our nation's middle schools must continue to take action to address the factors creating such hostile climates in order to create safer and more affirming schools for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

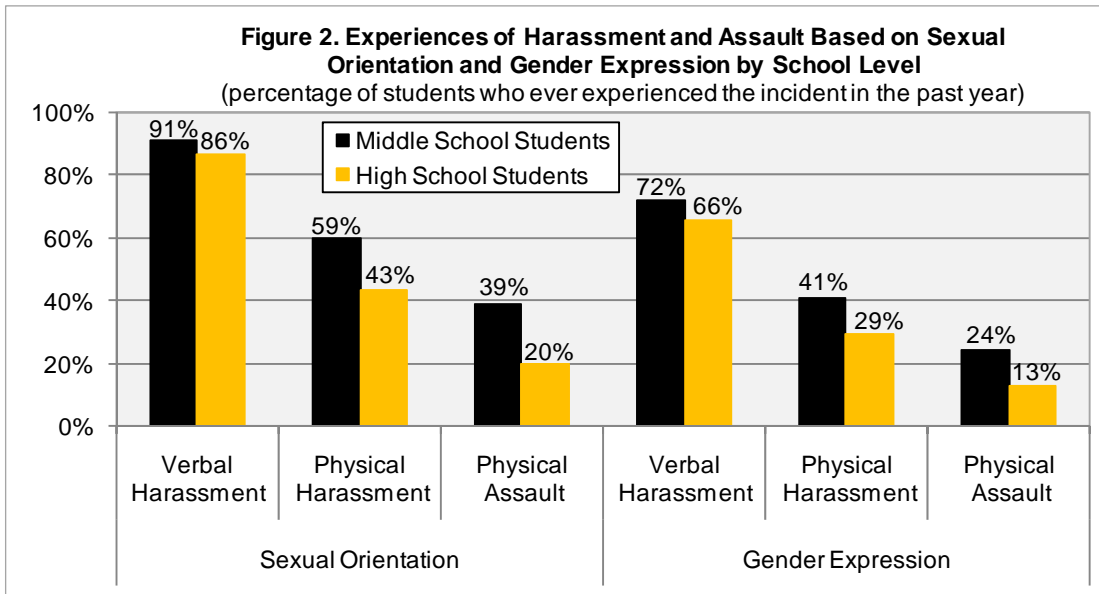
FINDING 1: Homophobic remarks and negative comments about someone's gender expression were pervasive in middle schools. LGBT middle school students were more likely to report hearing biased remarks than high school students. Unfortunately, middle school staff often failed to address the use of such language in school.

- Nine in ten LGBT middle school students (91%) said that they heard the word "gay" used in a negative or derogatory way often or frequently in school, such as the expression "you're so gay."
- Eight in ten middle school students (82%) reported hearing homophobic epithets (e.g., "faggot" or "dyke") often or frequently from other students in school – a higher percentage than with high school students (see Figure 1). In addition, six in ten students (63%) heard school staff make homophobic remarks.
- Negative comments about how someone expressed their gender, such as remarks about someone not acting "masculine" or "feminine enough," were also commonly heard. About two-thirds of LGBT middle school students heard negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently from their peers (66%) – also a



higher frequency than was reported by high school students (see also Figure 1). Further, nearly two-thirds of middle school students also heard such remarks from school staff (62%).

- Middle school staff often failed to intervene when homophobic remarks and negative comments about someone’s gender expression were made in their presence in school. Less than a fifth of LGBT middle school students reported that school staff frequently (“most of the time” or “always”) intervened when hearing homophobic remarks (16%) or comments about someone’s gender expression (17%). Although such language was more common in middle school, intervention by school staff with biased remarks did not significantly differ between middle and high school students.

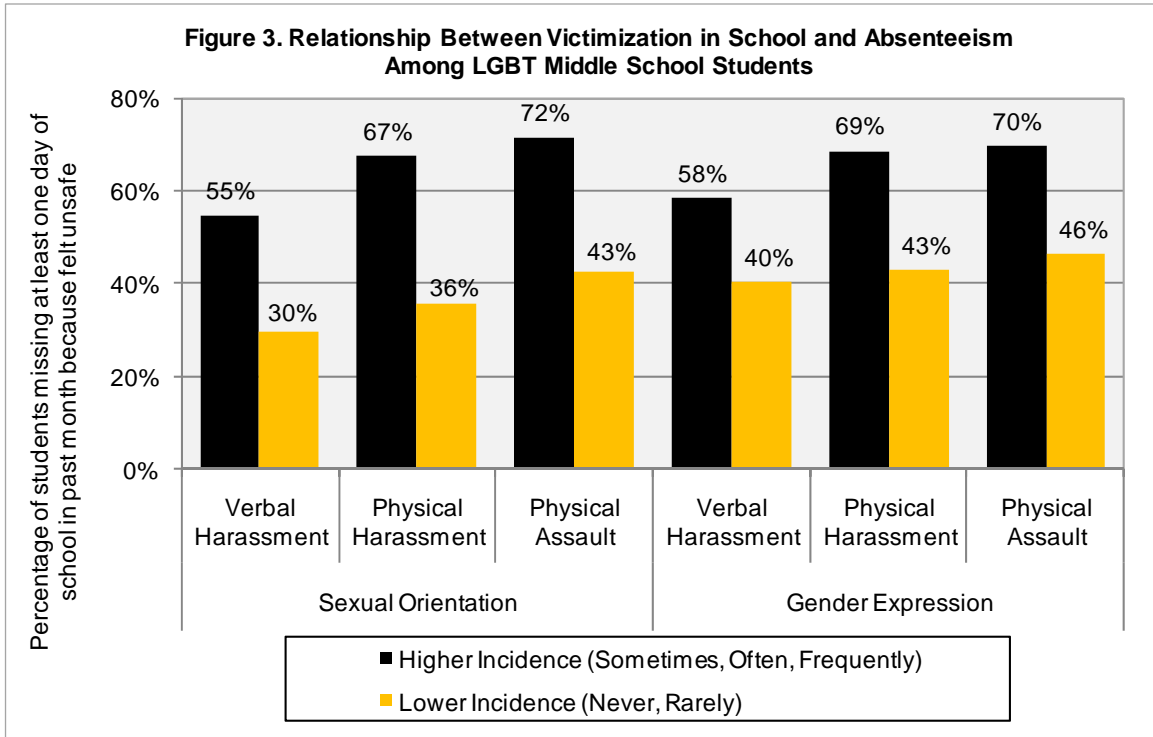


FINDING 2: The majority of LGBT middle school students experienced verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender expression, and sizable percentages were physically harassed or assaulted based on these characteristics. Middle school students reported higher levels of victimization than LGBT high school students. Further, the majority of middle school students *never* told school authorities about these incidents.

- About 9 in 10 LGBT students in middle school (91%) were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in school because of their sexual orientation, with 8 in 10 (81%) being regularly harassed (sometimes, often or frequently). Also, 7 in 10 (72%) reported having been verbally harassed in school because of their gender expression.
- About 6 in 10 LGBT students in middle school (59%) experienced physical harassment (e.g., pushed or shoved) in school because of their sexual orientation, and 4 in 10 (41%) were physically harassed because of how they expressed their gender.
- Incidents of physical assault (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) were less often reported, but nevertheless, more than a third of middle school students (39%) had been assaulted in school because of their sexual orientation and about a quarter (24%) because of their gender expression.
- LGBT middle school students were significantly more likely than high school students to report experiencing victimization related to sexual orientation and gender expression, and the difference was even greater when the severity of harassment was higher. As shown in Figure 2, for

example, middle school students were nearly twice as likely to be physically assaulted based on their sexual orientation than were high school students (39% vs. 20%).

Unfortunately, LGBT middle school students who experience victimization in school may not be receiving the help or support they need to deal with these experiences. Many middle school students who were harassed or assaulted in school *never* reported the incident to adult authorities – 57% never told school staff and 50% never told a parent or other family member. Among middle school students who did tell school authorities about an incident, less than a third (29%) said that reporting resulted in effective intervention by school staff.



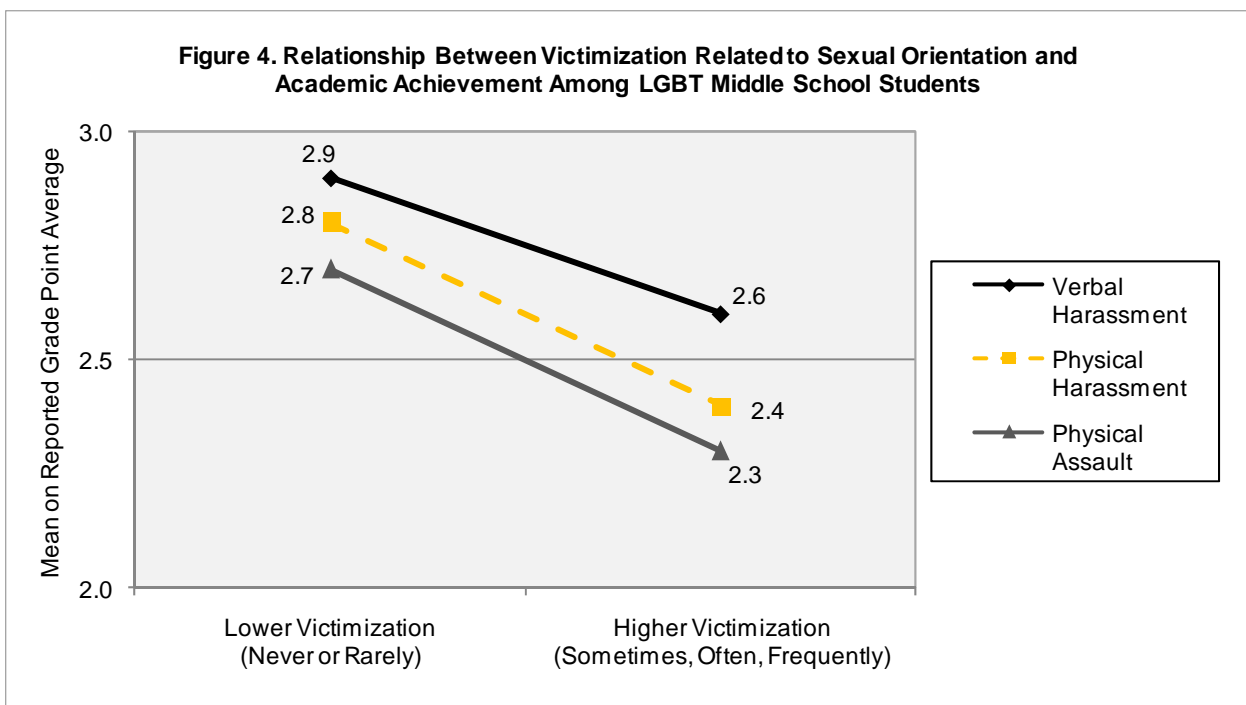
FINDING 3: LGBT middle school students often missed classes or did not attend school altogether because they felt unsafe. Students who experienced high levels of harassment or assault were even more likely to report missing school.

Half of LGBT students in middle school (50%) reported missing at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe. Further, more than a third of middle school students (39%) skipped a class at least once in the past month due to concerns for their own safety.

Given the pervasiveness of harassment and assault in middle schools, it is not surprising that so many LGBT middle school students missed school because of safety concerns. In fact, middle school students who were more frequently harassed were even more likely to be absent from school (see Figure 3). For example, nearly three-quarters of middle school students (72%) who were physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation missed at least a day of school due to safety concerns, compared to less than half (43%) of other students. Similarly, middle school students who experienced high levels of harassment or assault based on their gender expression were much more likely to miss days of school (see also Figure 3).

FINDING 4: Harassment and absenteeism as a result of an unsafe school environment negatively affected LGBT middle school students' academic performance and ability to attend school.

- LGBT middle school students who missed days of school because they felt unsafe had grade point averages (GPAs) about half a grade lower than those students who did not miss school because of safety concerns – 2.4 vs. 2.9 (out of 4.0).
- LGBT middle school students who experienced high levels of harassment or assault because of their sexual orientation reported significantly lower GPAs than students who were never or rarely victimized in school for this reason. For example, the GPAs of students who experienced high levels of physical harassment because of their sexual orientation were almost half a grade lower than other students – 2.4 vs. 2.8 (see Figure 4).

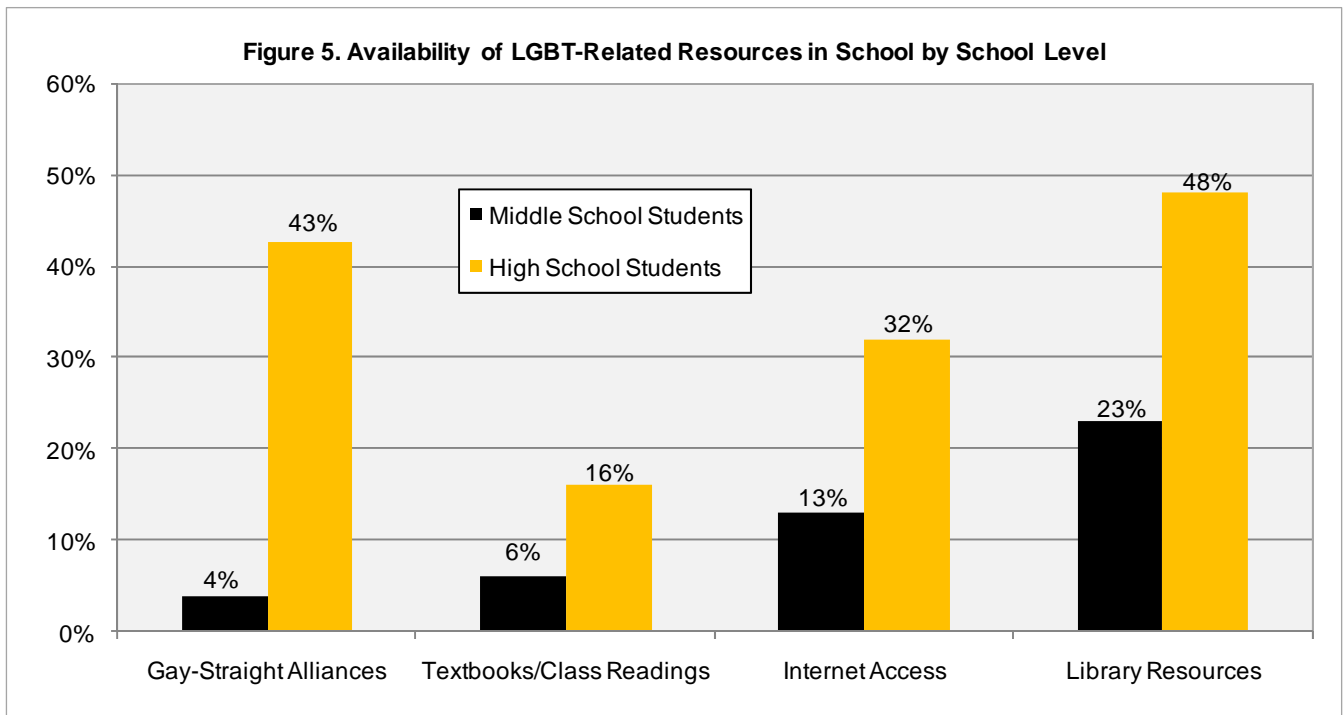


FINDING 5: Many LGBT students in middle school did not have access to important resources and interventions that can improve school climate.

Findings from GLSEN's 2007 *National School Climate Survey* (www.glsen.org/research) demonstrate that the presence of supportive school staff, student clubs that address LGBT students' issues (often called Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs), LGBT-inclusive curricular resources and comprehensive anti-harassment policies are related to more positive school climates. LGBT students reported a greater sense of safety and less absenteeism when they had supportive educators, access to GSAs and were taught about LGBT-related topics in school. In addition, students experienced fewer incidents of harassment and assault and reported more effective intervention by school staff when incidents did occur when the school had a comprehensive anti-harassment policy that explicitly prohibited harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. LGBT students in schools with these types of resources and interventions were also less likely to hear homophobic remarks in school. Unfortunately,

with the exception of supportive school staff, few LGBT students in middle schools reported having access to these resources and interventions in school. In fact, middle school students were less likely to have access to GSAs, supportive staff and inclusive curricular resources than LGBT students in high school:

- *Gay-Straight Alliances.* Very few LGBT middle school students (4%) reported that their school had a GSA or similar student club, and they were much less likely to have a GSA than students in high school (see Figure 5).
- *Supportive School Staff.* Nearly two-thirds of middle school LGBT students (64%) reported having at least one teacher or other school staff person in school who they felt was supportive of LGBT students, but they were less likely than high school students (86%) to report having supportive school staff.
- *LGBT-Inclusive Curricular Resources.* Middle school students were much less likely than high school students to report having access to curricular resources that included positive representations of LGBT people, history or events. As shown in Figure 5:
 - Only about a quarter of middle school students (23%) reported that their school library contained books or other resources that were inclusive of LGBT-related topics, compared to half of high school students (48%).
 - Less than a fifth of LGBT students in middle school (13%) reported that they could access information about LGBT-related topics via their school's Internet, compared to a third of high school students (32%).
 - Middle school students were less likely to report that LGBT-related topics were included in school textbooks and other assigned readings - 6% versus 16% of LGBT students in high school.



Comprehensive School Anti-Harassment Policies. When asked about the presence of school policies addressing harassment, 52% of LGBT middle school students reported that their school had some type of anti-harassment policy. However, less than a fifth (17%) of middle school students reported that the policy explicitly mentioned protections from harassment based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression. Reports of school anti-harassment policies did not significantly differ between middle and high school students, which may be because individual school policies are often based on school district policies and regulations. Thus, students attending middle or high schools in the same district would most likely have the same or similar anti-harassment policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

U.S. middle schools are unsafe for many LGBT students, with climates that are even more hostile than those experienced by LGBT high school students. Biased and derogatory language, especially homophobic language, was very common and middle school students heard biased remarks not only from their peers, but from school personnel as well. Middle school students also faced harassment in school, both verbal and physical in nature, with sexual orientation and gender expression being the characteristics most commonly targeted. These experiences led many middle school students to miss classes and entire days of school because they felt unsafe, and students who experienced high levels of harassment or assault were at risk of increased absenteeism. Students who were frequently harassed reported lower grade point averages, suggesting that a negative school climate may hinder students' ability to succeed academically. Unfortunately, incidents of harassment and assault often went unreported to school authorities and when staff were notified, few students said they effectively intervened. Not only did middle school students experience more hostile school environments than those in high school, they also had much less access to school-based resources and supports that can help to create safer and more affirming schools, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, supportive school personnel, and inclusive curricular resources.

It is clear that there is a need for action to create safer school environments for LGBT middle school students. As discussed above, findings from GLSEN's *2007 National School Climate Survey* highlight the important role that educators and institutional supports can play in remedying the situation. However, few middle school students reported that they had access to these institutional supports in school. GLSEN's work is devoted to addressing the urgent need to create safer and more affirming schools for all students. To this end, we recommend the following measures for middle school administrators, educators, education policymakers and others concerned with school safety and students' experiences in our nation's middle schools:

- Implement comprehensive anti-harassment policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as protected categories, and with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience;
- Support Gay-Straight Alliances and similar student-led clubs that address LGBT students' issues and work to improve school climate;
- Provide training for middle school staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive staff available to students; and
- Increase middle school students' access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history, and events through inclusive curricula, library resources, and access to Internet resources through school computers.

About the Research

In 2007, GLSEN conducted the fifth National School Climate Survey (NSCS), a biennial survey of LGBT secondary school students. The NSCS examines the experiences of LGBT youth in U.S. middle and high schools, documenting bias and behaviors that make schools unsafe. The national sample consisted of 6,209 LGBT students, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 626 respondents reported that they were in middle school. The majority of the sample of middle school students was female (63%), 25% was male and 6% was transgender. More than half of middle school students were bisexual (57%) and 40% were gay or lesbian. Two-thirds of middle school students were White, 10% Latino/a, 5% Black or African American, 6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 5% Native American, and 7% were multiracial. Almost all of the middle school students were in public schools (99%), and in suburban (45%) or urban (37%) communities. The mean age of the sample of middle school students was 13.8 years. For the national NSCS report, state research briefs, or for any other GLSEN research, go to www.glsen.org/research. Note that comparisons in this brief between middle and high school students compared those students reporting they attended a middle school or junior high school and those saying they attended a high school. Thus, students who were in other types of schools, such as a K-12 school, were not included in the comparison.

Suggested citation: GLSEN (2009). The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender middle school students (GLSEN Research Brief). New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

© 2009 GLSEN

The 2007 National School Climate Survey was made possible by a grant from:

