

Bullying Experiences for Sexual Minorities

Full Reference

Williams, T., Connolly, J., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (2003). Questioning and sexual minority adolescents: High school experiences of bullying, sexual harassment and physical abuse. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health. Special Issue: Disrupting Normalcy: Lesbian, Gay, Queer Issues and Mental Health*, 22 (2), 47-58.

Key Words

Bullying, adolescence, sexual orientation, sexuality, harassment, abuse

Main Question

This paper investigated whether non-heterosexual youth experience more bullying, sexual harassment, and dating violence than heterosexual youth. The central interest was in the experiences of youth that identify themselves as bisexual or as questioning their sexuality since most research thus far has focused on those that identify themselves using the more definite categories of 'gay' or 'lesbian'.

Background

Adolescence is a time of identity development and questioning of various aspects of oneself. As many as 10% of youth experience some uncertainty about their sexual orientation. In addition to dealing with sexuality issues, previous studies demonstrate that these students are more likely to experience physical and verbal harassment than heterosexual youth. These types of negative experiences from being marginalized are also associated with mental health difficulties.

Previous research has focused solely on adolescents that identify themselves as being either 'gay' or 'lesbian'. Little is known about those youth that are less certain about their sexual identity and that might identify themselves as 'bisexual' or 'questioning their sexual orientation'. Yet, adolescence is a time of uncertainty about identity and sexuality. It is therefore reasonable to examine these adolescents in addition to those that identify within more concrete categories of sexual identity.

Who Was Involved

Of 3636 Canadian adolescents from a large-scale study, 130 (60 boys and 70 girls) identified themselves as non-heterosexual (i.e., either 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', or 'questioning'). These students were compared to 130 heterosexual adolescents from similar backgrounds, age groups, and socio-economic status. Adolescents were students in major urban and rural centers in Ontario.



What We Found

Students completed surveys about themselves and their experiences with dating, bullying, and sexual harassment. More adolescents identified themselves as 'questioning' (36 boys and 32 girls) or 'bisexual' (15 boys and 35 girls) than 'gay' or 'lesbian' (9 boys and 3 girls). Sexual minority and questioning adolescents reported more experiences of bullying, sexual harassment and physical abuse than heterosexual adolescents.

Students also completed surveys about their experiences with violence within their previous dating relationships. Sexual minority and questioning adolescents reported significantly more experiences of physical victimization by a romantic partner than heterosexual youth. Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine whether these experiences occurred more often in heterosexual or in homosexual romantic relationships (as minority youth are likely to have experiences with both types of relationships). Nonetheless, it is important to note that those that are part of the sexual minority experienced more physical violence in their past romantic relationships.

Implications

Youth are more likely to use fluid categories (e.g., 'questioning', 'bisexual') to identify their sexual orientation than to use definite categories. Such categorization reflects the level of change and exploration that occurs in adolescence.

Sexual minority youth of this sample reported more hostile peer contexts than their heterosexual peers. These experiences may occur as a result of homophobic attitudes, prejudice and discrimination within the peer environment or school context.

The results suggest that integration into a peer group may be problematic for sexual minority adolescents. Having to cope with both uncertain sexual identity and hostility from peers and romantic partners may lead to increasing mental health difficulties.

Given the increased risk of victimization these youth face day-to-day in their high school environments, it is recommended that schools review the effectiveness of their non-discrimination policies and practices. The promotion of increased protection for students against all forms of harassment and discrimination, including sexual identity, is essential.

