

## **Bullying and Suicidality among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth: Examining the Importance of Race and Ethnicity**

Recently, highly visible stories of gay adolescents committing suicide after being bullied have swept the United States. Although research on sexual minority youth, bullying, and suicide has grown concomitant to public attention, several important limitations in the existing literature have left a number of questions unanswered. First, because nationally-representative data on bullying *and* sexual orientation in adolescence are not, to our knowledge, currently available, studies have relied on small, regional samples, often from one city or state, leaving unknown the extent and prevalence of this problem among American youth. Second, this research has largely failed to examine the intersections of race, gender and sexuality in suicidality even though previous research has revealed both dramatic race and gender differences in risk for suicidal behaviors, as well as dramatic race and gender differences in the experience of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Kosciw, Joseph G., Emily A. Greytak, Mark J. Bartkiewicz, Madelyn J. Boesen 2012). As recent public health researchers have noted (Bowleg 2012), programs to address public health issues, like adolescent suicide, will only be effective if we understand how various aspects of adolescent identity, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, intersect to condition the development of health and risk behaviors.

With this study, we address, to the extent possible with existing data, these gaps in the current literature. We employ a large and regionally-diverse dataset compiled from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) 2009 & 2011 from 23 states and cities in the U.S. to gain a better understanding of (1) who is most likely to be bullied?; (2) are there gender and race/ethnic variations in the risk of suicide ideation among GLB youth?; and (3) does the role bullying plays in the increased risk of suicide ideation among GLB youth vary by gender and race/ethnicity? Although our study does not use nationally-representative data, we compile all available data in an unprecedented attempt to get as broad a view as possible on the role of bullying, GLB identity, and suicidality for adolescents from different gender, race and ethnic backgrounds. In fact, we find interesting differences in these processes once we consider multiple aspects of adolescents' intersectional identities. More information on our methodology is available in the complete paper.

### **RESULTS**

As a first step, we examined who was most likely to be bullied by gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality, which are presented in Table 2. Bisexual youth, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, are at significantly higher risk of being bullied than their same-race, same-sex heterosexual peers. On average, gay boys, regardless of race/ethnicity, are also significantly more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual counterparts. Interestingly, Black and Latina lesbian girls are not significantly more likely to be bullied than their same-race, same-sex heterosexual peers; however, white lesbians are significantly more likely than heterosexual white girls to report being bullied.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

With Table 3 (not included in this document), we investigate who is at risk of suicide ideation by sexual orientation for different race, ethnicity and gender groups. Here our results are consistent for all sexual minority youth, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender: GLB youth consistently have significantly higher odds of suicide ideation compared to their same-sex, same-race, heterosexual counterparts.

In our final table (Table 4, not included in this document), we investigate whether being bullied increases the risk of suicide ideation by race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. For

heterosexual youth, regardless of race/ethnicity or gender, being bullied significantly increases their likelihood of suicide ideation. Bisexual youth show a similar pattern; regardless of race/ethnicity, or gender, they have significantly higher odds of reporting suicide ideation when they report being bullied. The picture, however, is more complicated among gay and lesbian youth. Among lesbian girls, regardless of their race or ethnicity, being bullied is *not* associated with higher odds of suicide ideation. Black and Latino gay boys, on the other hand, are 3.91 times and 4.05 times (respectively) more likely to report suicide ideation when they are bullied than when they are not. White gay boys are similar to white lesbian girls, in that their likelihood of reporting suicide ideation is not associated with being bullied. This suggests that for some gay and lesbian youth, being bullied does not explain their higher risk for suicide ideation.

## **DISCUSSION**

In recent years, being bullied has been recognized as a major risk factor for suicide in American youth. Similarly, research has documented higher risk of suicide among gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. Though this research has provided important information to help promote healthy development for all youth, prior research (with the exception of one recent study(Levasseur, Kelvin, and Grosskopf 2013)) has failed to consider how adolescents' intersecting identities, particularly in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, condition the experience of bullying and suicide. Though this study finds that being a sexual minority is consistently associated with a higher risk of suicide ideation, regardless of an adolescent's gender or race/ethnic background, we also find that being bullied is not associated with suicide ideation among all youth. For example, white gay and lesbian youth who have been bullied are not at higher likelihood of suicide ideation compared to their gay or lesbian peers who have not been bullied. On the other hand, heterosexual, bisexual and gay Black and Latino boys were all at higher risk of suicide ideation when they were bullied. Perhaps part of this variation is due to the fact that not all sexual minority youth are at equal odds of being bullied. For example, Black and Latina lesbian girls are *not* significantly more likely to be bullied than Black and Latina heterosexual girls (respectively).

Thus, despite the fact that gay and lesbian youth experience suicide ideation more often than their heterosexual peers, being bullied may not be what distinguishes some suicidal gay/lesbian youth from non-suicidal gay/lesbian youth. These findings are consistent with other research(Shields et al. 2012) which finds that heterosexual youth's risk of suicide is more strongly associated with peer victimization than GLB youth's (Shields et al. 2012) and that there is variation by ethnicity in the association of bullying and suicide attempts (Levasseur et al. 2013). This suggests that something else about the experience of being gay or lesbian, perhaps relating to stigma associated with being a sexual minority, may be responsible for the increased risk of suicidal thoughts among GLB youth. In other words, though being GLB is associated with an increased risk of suicidal thoughts, for some groups, bullying may not fully explain why GLB youth are distressed.

## **REFERENCES**

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**Table 2: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Models Predicting Being Bullied Among Adolescents by Sexual Orientation by Gender and Race/Ethnicity with Age Controlled**

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI	
White, Heterosexual	---	---	---	---	---	---
White, Gay or Lesbian	4.055	2.567	6.406	2.649	1.451	4.836
White, Bisexual	2.297	1.544	3.416	2.579	1.947	3.417
Age	0.776	0.725	0.830	0.870	0.809	0.935
Subpopulation N	17,944			18,907		
Black, Heterosexual	---	---	---	---	---	---
Black, Gay or Lesbian	2.766	1.593	4.802	1.057	0.545	2.051
Black, Bisexual	3.449	1.893	6.283	1.691	1.157	2.470
Age	0.928	0.830	1.037	0.844	0.753	0.944
Subpopulation N	6,918			7,848		
Latino/a, Heterosexual	---	---	---	---	---	---
Latino/a, Gay or Lesbian	3.142	2.234	4.419	1.125	0.609	2.077
Latino/a, Bisexual	3.864	2.411	6.190	1.849	1.464	2.335
Age	0.782	0.722	0.848	0.871	0.811	0.936
Subpopulation N	10,867			12,106		

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

Source: *The Youth Risk Behavior Survey*

**Table 3: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Models Predicting Suicide Ideation Among Adolescents by Sexual Orientation by Gender by Race/Ethnicity with Age Controlled**

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI	
White, Heterosexual	---	---	---	---	---	---
White, Gay or Lesbian	2.872	1.773	4.654	4.619	2.933	7.274
White, Bisexual	4.484	3.077	6.533	5.806	4.318	7.808
Age	1.012	0.945	1.083	0.901	0.832	0.976
F Test Statistic	F(3,906) = 26.81***			F(3,906) = 60.33***		
Subpopulation N	17,944			18,907		
Black, Heterosexual	---	---	---	---	---	---
Black, Gay or Lesbian	2.330	1.286	4.223	2.980	1.744	5.090
Black, Bisexual	5.166	2.764	9.655	2.791	1.959	3.976
Age	0.975	0.865	1.099	0.979	0.871	1.100
F Test Statistic	F(3,906) = 12.34***			F(3,906) = 14.82***		
Subpopulation N	6,918			7,848		
Latino/a, Heterosexual	---	---	---	---	---	---
Latino/a, Gay or Lesbian	2.954	2.100	4.156	1.782	1.078	2.948
Latino/a, Bisexual	4.521	3.113	6.567	3.411	2.852	4.078
Age	1.045	0.944	1.156	0.851	0.802	0.904
F Test Statistic	F(3,906) = 32.13***			F(3,906) = 69.09***		
Subpopulation N	10,867			12,106		

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

Source: *The Youth Risk Behavior Survey*