

Bias-related Harassment among California Students

Harassment in the form of bullying, threats, rumor-spreading, and ostracism can instill a sense of vulnerability, isolation, and fear among youthful victims. It can adversely affect their schooling and lead them to engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, or in avoidance behaviors such as missing school and social isolation. The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) asks students how often they had been *harassed or bullied* during the past 12 months on school property for each of five hate-crime related reasons — race, ethnicity, or national origin; gender; religion; sexual orientation (“Because you are gay or lesbian or someone thought you were”); or physical or mental disability — as well as for any other reason.¹ These are the five protected classes covered by California *Penal Code 628* for determination of whether a hate crime has occurred. The CHKS data were analyzed to examine the extent to which middle and high school students experience bias-related harassment (BRH) due to these five classes and the characteristics of these students.

The CHKS data were collected during the 2001-02 school year from 237,544 students in grades 7, 9 and 11 in 1,208 California schools throughout the state. The data from all three grades were combined for the analyses. The results indicate that victims of bias-related harassment are more likely than other students to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and use illicit drugs. BRH victims are more likely to report feeling sadness and hopelessness; lower grades, school attendance, and connectedness to adults and peers; and higher levels of victimization such as having property stolen or being threatened with a weapon at school as well as experiencing relationship violence. They were also more likely to carry a weapon to school. Victims of harassment based on sexual orientation (actual or perceived) or disability reported particularly high levels of these negative behaviors, feelings, and experiences.

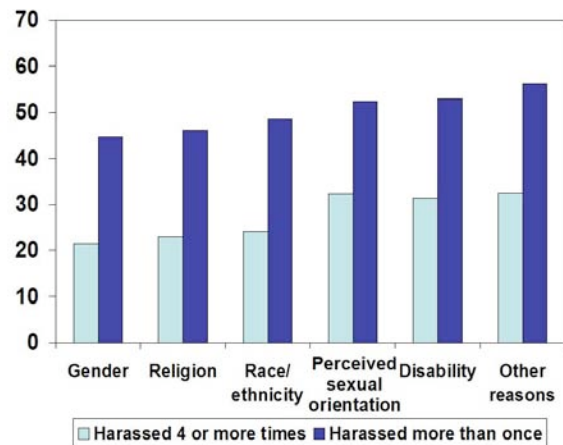
Results

Prevalence and Frequency of Bias-related Harassment

As Table 1 shows, 37% of middle and high school students reported some harassment, and about three quarters of these experiences were bias-related. Of the reasons for harassment, the most frequently cited was race, ethnicity, or national origin at 14%. Next was a grouping of gender, religion, and sexual orientation (actual or perceived) at around 8-10%.

Among those who experienced any harassment, Figure 1 shows that about half or more of each type reported more than one experience, but the frequency of harassment varied. Students who were harassed because of a disability or actual or perceived sexual orientation were the most likely to report being harassed four or more times during the past year.

Figure 1. Frequency of bias-related harassment in the past year among harassed students, by reason



¹ Students were told, “You were bullied if repeatedly shoved, hit, threatened, called mean names, teased in a way you don’t like, or had other unpleasant things done to you. It is not bullying when two students of about the same strength quarrel or fight.” Because of the lack of clarity in common use in the difference between harassment and bullying, the term Bias-related Harassment as used in this report was defined as including harassment or bullying.

Differences by gender and by race/ethnicity were relatively small. Male and female students were equally likely to report bias-related harassment. More than one-third of students who were Pacific Islander, American Indian, or African American, and slightly less than one-third of Asian, white, or Latino students, reported it.

Correlates of Bias-related Harassment

Table 2 shows that BRH students were much more likely than their non-harassed peers to report depression; cigarette, alcohol, and illicit drug use; poor grades; missing school; and carrying a weapon to school. The differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Reports of victimization also tended to be particularly common among students who had experienced bias-related harassment. For example:

- **Grades.** Whereas 16.5% of the non-harassed reported usually receiving grades of C's or below, the range among the BRH was 19%-24%.
- **Substance Abuse.** Around one fifth of BRH students were current smokers and binge drinkers; three out of ten or more were current drinkers and marijuana users. Their prevalence rates were generally around 1.5 to two times as high as the non-harassed, with the differences greater for the more serious forms of substance use involvement, such as binge drinking and marijuana and other drug use. For binge drinking the range was 19-27% vs. 13% for the non-harassed.
- **Weapons Possession.** Differences for carrying a weapon on school property were particularly large, with the BRH generally around three times higher or more (14-19% vs. 5%), excluding the 28% of youth who reported a physical or mental disability.
- **Depression.** About half of students who experienced any BRH (range 48% to 55%) reported that for at least two weeks during the previous year they felt so sad and hopeless that they stopped doing usual activities, compared to just over one-fifth of students reporting no harassment. This was the most common problem reported.
- **Victimization.** Not surprisingly, BRH youth were much more likely to report all the indicators of victimization. They were over twice as likely to have had their property stolen or damaged, over three times as likely to have experienced relationship violence, and over four times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon.

In addition, on another module of the CHKS taken by about 21 percent of students (not every school chose to administer that module) asked whether students had **missed school** in the past 30 days because they felt unsafe at school or traveling to or from school. About 19% of students who reported BRH said they had missed school because of safety concerns, compared with 7% of students who were not harassed.

Students who experienced harassment related to actual or perceived sexual orientation or disability had particularly high rates of reported negative behaviors and experiences, the highest across categories. For example:

- **Sexual Orientation, Actual or Perceived.** Students harassed because of they were, or were perceived to be, gay or lesbian were about 1.5 times more likely than students who were not harassed to report their usual grades were C or below and that they smoked marijuana, about twice as likely to have engaged in binge drinking, 2.5 times more likely to have used amphetamines, and 3.5 times more likely to have been hurt by a girlfriend or boyfriend during the previous 12 months.²
- **Disability.** Students who were harassed because of a physical or mental disability were 2.4 times more likely than non-harassed students to have smoked cigarettes during the previous 30 days, 2.6 times more likely to have ever used inhalants, and 6.0 times more likely to have carried a weapon to school.

² The CHKS asks students whether they were harassed because they were *or were perceived to be gay or lesbian* because the concern is on the experience of being harassed based on sexual orientation bias, not the reality of being gay or lesbian.

Social Connections

BRH students tended to report lower levels of connections to, and support from, adults in their school, home, and community, as well as their peers (Table 3). These connections are external assets that have been linked to the development of resiliency among youth, which is a protective factor against risk behaviors.³

- About 32% of BRH students said it was “pretty much true” or “very much true” that a teacher or other adult at school was mean to them, compared with 26% of students experiencing harassment for “other” (non-bias) reasons and 21% of the non-harassed.
- BRH students were also about twice as likely as the non-harassed to agree with the statement “A friend teases me too much” (22% vs. 11%).
- BRH students were less likely to report that a parent or adult in the home talked with them about their problems (56% vs. 65%).

Conclusion/Recommendations

Bias-related harassment affects thousands of students in California schools. In addition to the negative physical and mental effects of harassment itself, students who are harassed are at greater risk of a wide range of detrimental behaviors and experiences, including poorer grades, school attendance, feelings related to depression, and substance abuse. These problem behaviors were particularly common among the students who were exposed to harassment related to disability and sexual harassment. These results underscore the importance of school policies and programs for preventing and responding to bias-motivated harassment, and that in responding to the needs of victims schools will have to address multiple problem behaviors.

About the CHKS and the Data Analysis

The CHKS is a voluntary, confidential, modular health risk and resilience data collection system supported by the California Department of Education and available for use by all California schools since 1998. Through spring 2002, it had been administered by 75% of school districts throughout the state. (Starting in the fall of 2003, the state mandates that every school district receiving federal Safe and Drug Free Schools funding administer it biennially.) The 2001-02 CHKS dataset is not drawn from a randomly-selected, representative statewide sample, but rather from the 416 school districts that administered the survey that school year. The survey is designed to produce data representative of all students in each district, and not necessarily all students in the state.

Nevertheless, the results of the survey overall were very consistent by grade with those from the biennial statewide California Student Survey for 2001. In the 2001 CSS, 30-35% of students across grades 7, 9, and 11 reported some harassment or bullying and 24-25% some bias-related harassment. For purposes of this analysis of specific types of harassment experienced, the larger CHKS dataset (1544 schools vs. 133 in the CSS sample) was more appropriate.

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³ Bonnie Benard. (2003). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

Table 1. Prevalence of Bias-related Harassment

Type of Harassment	Percentage (%)
Experienced any harassment	37.4
Experienced any bias-related harassment:	27.4
Race, ethnicity, or national origin	14.3
Religion	9.1
Gender (male or female)	10.3
Sexual orientation (gay or lesbian, or perceived to be)	7.5
Physical or mental disability	4.9
Harassed for some other reason	23.1
Harassed for some other reason only (not bias-related)	10.0
Not harassed	62.6

Source: California Department of Education, California Healthy Kids Survey.

Table 2. Reports of Negative Behaviors and Experiences, by Type of Harassment

	Harassment Reason						
	Race Ethnicity National Origin (%)	Religion (%)	Gender (%)	Sexual orientation (Actual or Perceived) (%)	Physical or Mental Disability (%)	Other Harassed (not bias- related) (%)	Not Harassed (%)
Grades usually C's or below	21.4	19.1	19.5	23.6	24.3	18.4	16.5
Missed school in past 30 days because felt unsafe	21.9	24.0	23.9	26.6	32.1	11.1	6.7
Smoking ^a	17.1*	17.4	18.1	22.3	24.4	10.0	9.9
Alcohol use ^a	33.2	30.4	35.7	37.2	39.0	25.4	24.0
Binge drinking ^a	19.1	18.4	20.9	23.2	26.6	12.3	12.7
Drove after drinking, or passenger in car with drinking driver	37.1	33.6	41.0	41.9	43.6	31.3	26.8
Marijuana use ^b	29.8	27.0	30.0	34.6	36.1	22.3	23.5
Inhalant use ^b	18.9	19.1	20.6	25.1	26.8	12.4	9.5
Methamphetamine use ^b	12.4	13.4	14.3	19.4	20.8	7.7	7.3
Carried weapon on school property ^c	13.7	15.7	14.1	18.6	28.0	5.6	4.7
Threatened/injured with weapon ^c	22.6	24.3	23.2	28.0	34.5	10.4	4.8
Had property stolen / damaged ^c	51.6	51.7	53.2	55.8	59.9	39.3	20.1
Hurt by girlfriend / boyfriend ^c	18.6	21.4	21.6	26.2	29.9	9.9	6.4
Depression ^{d,c}	47.8	48.2	53.2	55.2	55.0	38.0	22.5

Source: California Department of Education, California Healthy Kids Survey. ^a In the past 30 days. ^b Lifetime (ever).

^c In the past 12 months. ^d For at least 2 weeks during the previous 12 months, felt so sad and hopeless that they stopped doing usual activities.

Table 3. External Assets Related to Social Connections and Resilience, by Type of Harassment

	Type of Harassment Experienced	Not at all true/ A little true (%)	Pretty much true/ Very much true (%)
	I have a friend about my own age who teases me too much.	Bias-related harassment	77.7
	No harassment	89.0	11.0
A parent or other adult in my home believes I will be a success.	Bias-related harassment	20.1	79.9
	No harassment	12.5	87.5
A parent or other adult in my home talks with me about my problems.	Bias-related harassment	43.5	56.5
	No harassment	34.8	65.2
A parent or other adult in my home listens to me when I have something to say.	Bias-related harassment	32.0	68.0
	No harassment	20.4	79.6
An adult outside of home or school really cares about me.	Bias-related harassment	24.0	76.0
	No harassment	18.1	81.9
A teacher or adult at school is mean to me.	Bias-related harassment	68.5	31.5
	No harassment	78.6	21.4
A teacher or adult at school listens to me when I have something to say.	Bias-related harassment	38.1	61.9
	No harassment	31.0	69.0