

The Intersections of Racial, Gender and Orientation Harassment in School and Health Risk Behaviors Among Adolescents

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PURPOSE

To explore the prevalence of types of harassment in school, identify demographic patterns associated with victimization, and examine associated perceptions of safety, experiences of violence, and health risk behaviors among adolescents in Seattle.

DESIGN

Instrument: In 1995, all high school students in the Seattle School District [N= 8,406] completed the Seattle Teen Health Survey, developed from the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey with added items, including 3 questions about types of harassment experienced in school: racial slurs, sexual harassment, and harassment based on sexual orientation.

Sample: Half of the respondents were female; 34% were European-American, 26% Asian-American, 18% African-American, 1% American Indian, 14% multi-ethnic, and 3% other. Respondents were evenly distributed among grades 9 through 12. Almost all students (91%) self-identified as heterosexual, 4% as bisexual, 1% as gay or lesbian, and 4% unsure.

Analysis: Although an entire population was surveyed rather than a sample, data were analyzed using crosstabulations and Chi square tests of significance in order to generalize beyond Seattle. Selected risk variables focused on feeling unsafe at school, missing school, being threatened or injured in school, gang involvement, carrying weapons at school, pregnancy history, suicide attempts, and perceptions that no adult cares. Analysis was by gender, by ethnicity, by orientation, and by number of types of harassment.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Harassment in School

More than half of the youth surveyed (59.9%) experienced at least one form of harassment, regardless of age, sex, or ethnicity. There were gender differences for sexual and orientation harassment, but minor differences in racial harassment, as shown below:

| Type of Harassment | % of Boys | % of Girls |
|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Sexual harassment | 20.5% | 53.4% |
| Orientation harassment | 5.5% | 10.1% |
| Racial slurs | 42.5% | 45.2% |

RESULTS

Targets of Harassment in School

Those youth who identify as bisexual or multi-ethnic were at greatest risk for each type of harassment, and for experiencing more than one type of harassment.

- ◆ Bisexual and gay/lesbian respondents were more likely to report harassment than heterosexual youth for each type of harassment
- ◆ Multi-ethnic and American Indian adolescents were most likely to be targets of each type of harassment

However, majority status was not necessarily protective against harassment:

- ◆ 4 out of 5 students who were harassed on the basis of sexual orientation identified as heterosexual
- ◆ Half of European-American girls and nearly one-half of boys were targets of racial slurs, even in schools where they were the ethnic “majority”

Association of Harassment and Health Risk Factors

Overall, harassed students were more likely than non-harassed students to report increased prevalence of risk factors. The patterns varied somewhat by type of harassment, and there were distinct gender differences (shown below).

For Sexual Harassment

| Risks | Harassed? | | | |
|--|-----------|------|--------|-----|
| | Boys% | | Girls% | |
| | Y | N | Y | N |
| Missed school 2+ times because feel unsafe | 11.7 | 5.7 | 8.1 | 4.3 |
| Threatened/injured at school | 26.6 | 11.7 | 9.5 | 3.6 |
| Carried a weapon at school | 22.8 | 10.1 | 5.7 | 2.2 |
| Suicide attempt(s) in past year | 9.0 | 4.3 | 10.7 | 6.7 |
| Ever pregnant or got someone pregnant | 11.8 | 6.0 | 10.6 | 7.8 |
| High at school | 28.2 | 19.6 | 19.5 | 9.0 |

For Racial Harassment

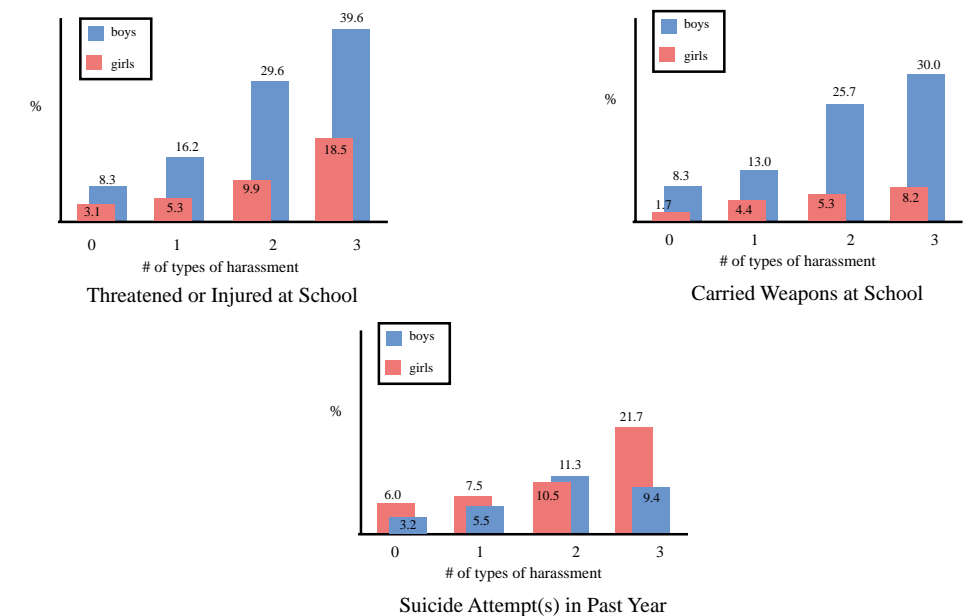
| Risks | Harassed? | | | |
|--|-----------|------|--------|------|
| | Boys% | | Girls% | |
| | Y | N | Y | N |
| Missed school 2+ times because feel unsafe | 9.2 | 5.7 | 8.8 | 4.3 |
| Threatened/injured at school | 21.8 | 10.0 | 9.6 | 4.7 |
| Carried a weapon at school | 17.0 | 9.6 | 5.2 | 3.2 |
| Suicide attempt(s) in past year | 6.9 | 4.1 | 10.5 | 7.4 |
| Ever pregnant or got someone pregnant | NS | | NS | |
| High at school | 25.9 | 18.1 | 17.1 | 12.8 |

RESULTS

For Orientation Harassment

| Risks | Harassed? | | | |
|--|-----------|------|--------|------|
| | Boys% | | Girls% | |
| | Y | N | Y | N |
| Missed school 2+ times because feel unsafe | 25.7 | 6.1 | 13.9 | 5.5 |
| Threatened/injured at school | 32.1 | 13.8 | 15.6 | 5.9 |
| Carried a weapon at school | 26.5 | 11.9 | 7.7 | 3.7 |
| Suicide attempt(s) in past year | 15.8 | 4.7 | 22.1 | 7.4 |
| Ever pregnant or got someone pregnant | 15.2 | 6.9 | 15.1 | 8.8 |
| High at school | 29.6 | 21.0 | 22.4 | 13.9 |

Cumulative Effects of Harassment Types and Select Health Risk Factors



CONCLUSIONS

Racial, sexual, and orientation harassment in school are inter-linked, widespread problems that affect the majority of high school students. Female, multi-ethnic and bisexual students are the common targets. Harassed youth are far more likely to experience risk factors that may compromise their health and futures. Schools and communities should make it a top priority to intervene to reduce all forms of harassment in school, beginning well before the high school years.

Dr. Saewyc and Dr. Singh have moved to the Schools of Nursing and Medicine, University of Minnesota. Preparation for this presentation was supported in part by their respective Schools.

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