UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCHOOLS
IN OVERALL LGBT SCHOOL SAFETY

Research has shown that school safety is associated with student well-being and academic achievement. Most of the focus of prior research has been on individual students and factors that predict individual student safety. Less is known about whether some schools are safer than others, and why. In this research brief, we draw from several data sources to examine differences across schools in safety for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students.

Background

The school environment is one of the most important contexts for children – it influences the academic and social skills of children during the early years of life. Youth spend a great proportion of their time in schools, and attendance is not voluntary – it is required. When victimization happens at school, students may not only experience physical harm, but also emotional harm.

Previous research from the California Safe Schools Coalition (CSSC) identified steps schools can take to make LGBT students – and all students – safer: be sure students know about the school's non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, be sure students know where to go for information or support; support Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs and other school clubs; support teachers to intervene when harassment happens; include attention to LGBT people and issues in the curriculum (see CSSC Research Brief #4, "LGBT Issues in the Curriculum Promotes School Safety"). Yet we know that not all schools use all of these safe school strategies (see CSSC Research Brief #1, "District Policies and Trainings").

Most of the focus on school safety has actually focused on student safety, namely individual students and their experiences at school. However, there may be differences across schools; some schools may be safer than others. In this research brief we illustrate factors that are associated with differences between schools in safety for LGBT students. We want to know: why are some schools safer than others?

Finding 1: There are important differences between schools in the amount of school safety students report; some schools are safer than others.

We used data from the CSSC School Climate Surveys, which were collected by students in seventeen (17) public schools between 2003 and 2006, yielding over 6,000 surveys. By averaging all of the students' responses within each school, we were able to develop school-level measures of school safety. We found variation across schools in their use of school safety strategies, as well as in overall school safety.

In terms of overall school safety, in some schools only 13% of students reported hearing derogatory comments like "that's so gay" at least once a week, compared to other schools where two-thirds (67%) of students reported hearing "that's so gay" or other remarks at least weekly. Safety for LGBT students, teachers, and staff ranged from a low of 15% in one school to a high of 85% in another.
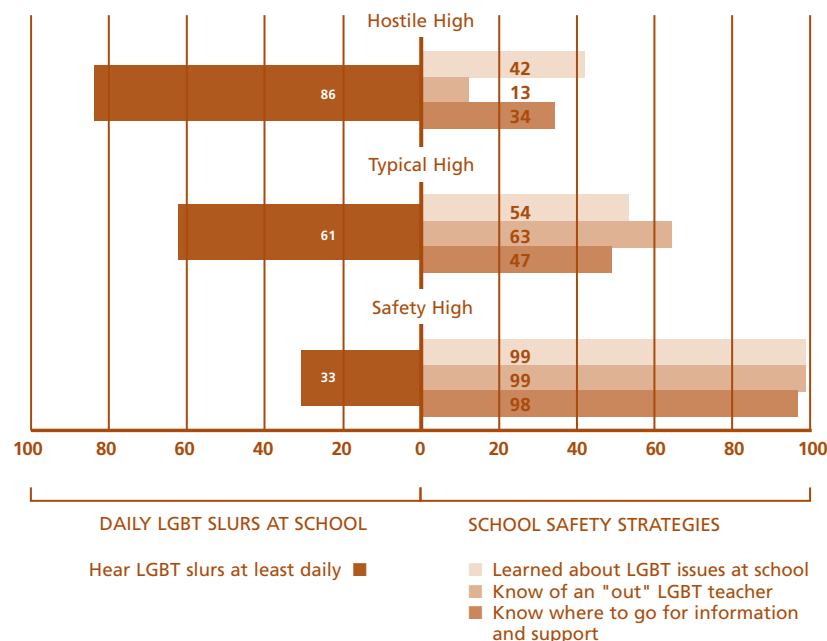
Teachers usually step in when harassment happens. The lowest percentage of students at a school who reported teacher intervention was 42%; in one school every student reported that their teachers step in. Learning about LGBT issues at school ranged from a low of 24% in one school to a high of 85% in another.

The results show wide variation in school safety strategies, and in overall school safety levels across these California schools. Figure 1 illustrates these differences by profiling three of the schools in our study (using fictitious names). At Hostile High, 86% of the students reported that they hear LGBT slurs such as "that's so gay" at least once a day. In terms of school safety strategies, only one-third (34%) of the students at Hostile High knew where to go for information and support about LGBT issues; only 13% knew of an "out" LGBT teacher or staff member; and less than half (42%) had learned about LGBT issues at school. On the positive side, nearly three-quarters (74%) said that teachers intervene when harassment takes place.

Contrast Hostile High to Typical High, where about half of all the students reported hearing LGBT slurs every day, and similarly about half said that they knew where to go for information, knew an "out" LGBT teacher, or had learned about LGBT issues at school.

At the other extreme, nearly all students at Safety High reported these school safety strategies, and many fewer (one-third: 33%) reported hearing slurs on a daily basis.

Figure 1
AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE LINK BETWEEN DAILY LGBT SLURS AT SCHOOL AND SCHOOL SAFETY STRATEGIES

Finding 2: Overall LGBT school safety is linked to school safety strategies.

In prior studies we have shown that school safety strategies are linked to individual student reports of personal safety, perceptions of safety for LGBT students, reduced levels of anti-LGBT harassment, and youth resilience (or indicators of youth development). For this study we examined this finding at the level of the school. We compared the percentage of students who reported LGBT school safety strategies and the percentage who reported overall school safety for LGBT students.

We also found lower percentages of students say that they hear derogatory comments like "that's so gay" in schools where higher percentages of students said that they knew where to go for information and support about sexual orientation, gender identity, or LGBT issues. In schools where 75% or more of the students reported daily derogatory comments, only one third of students (34%) knew where to go for information and support. Compare that to schools in which less than 75% of students reported derogatory comments, more than half (57%) said that they knew where to go for information and support.

These results show that strategies such as teacher intervention and having information and support about LGBT issues are important not only for individual students, but also these strategies influence the overall school safety climate and are linked to differences between schools in overall LGBT school safety.

Finding 3: Overall LGBT school safety is strongly linked to school-level academic performance.

Next we considered the characteristics of schools that were linked to overall LGBT school safety. We combined the data from the student responses to the School Climate Surveys with publicly-available data about school characteristics from the California Department of Education. We examined a range of factors to determine which, if any, might be associated with overall LGBT school safety:

• Size of school (total enrollment)
• Class size
• Ethnic make-up (percentage of students of color)
• Socio-economic status (percentage of students on free or reduced meals; percentage of students on CALWorks)
• Teacher characteristics (percentage of credentialed teachers; percentage of teachers of color)
• Academic achievement (Academic Performance Index; average SAT scores)

The results indicated that the factors that are most strongly linked to differences in overall LGBT school safety and frequency of anti-LGBT slurs are academic achievement of schools, as indicated by the state's Academic Performance Index (API) and the average SAT score.

This is a notable finding: some people may think that the economic status of a school or the ethnic make-up of a school would predict overall school safety. However, it is not true that schools with predominantly lower-income students and/or predominantly students of color are less safe. The most important factor is the overall academic performance of schools.

This finding is important, but does not necessarily mean that school safety causes a school to have higher academic performance. We cannot know the direction of influence: does high achievement promote safe school climates, or are schools that are safer better learning environments for achievement? Nevertheless, the results suggest that the strategies that make schools safer for LGBT students – and all students – may be an important way for schools and school districts to support overall school achievement.

Recommendations for teachers and administrators

- Be sure that your school and school district are implementing the well-documented school safety strategies:

    1. publicize and enforce anti-harassment policies,
    2. provide resources, information, and support to students,
    3. train teachers and other staff about bullying and how to intervene in harassment,
    4. measure and monitor bias-related harassment in the school and school district, and
    5. include LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

- Discuss the link between school safety, student academic achievement, and overall school academic performance with students, parents, and colleagues.

- Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, and ask to help publicize school policies on harassment.

- Set the climate in your classrooms early and as often as necessary, letting students know that bias-related harassment and slurs are not acceptable.

- Treat all forms of bias-related harassment and slurs as serious and preventable.

- Find out about community resources and information related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data are from the California Safe Schools Coalition School Climate Surveys, which were collected by students in seventeen public schools between 2003 and 2006, yielding over 6,000 surveys. The students who collected the data were typically GSA student leaders or members. The surveys were designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students and their straight allies, and the steps schools can take to make schools safer. The surveys were developed and administered by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network.

This research brief is based on the following publication:
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