



The 2009 National School Climate Survey Executive Summary



**Key Findings on the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools**

Methods

GLSEN used two methods to locate survey participants in an effort to obtain a representative national sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth: outreach through community-based groups serving LGBT youth and outreach via the Internet. With our first method, we randomly selected 50 community-based groups from a list of over 300 groups nationwide and asked their youth participants to complete a paper version of the survey. Our second method utilized GLSEN's web presence, e-communications and online advertising to obtain participants. We posted notices of the survey on LGBT-youth oriented listservs and websites and emailed notices to GLSEN chapters and youth advocacy organizations. To ensure representation of transgender youth, youth of color and youth in rural communities, we made special efforts to reach out to organizations that serve these populations. We also conducted targeted advertising on the MySpace and Facebook social networking sites. The advertisements targeted users between 13 and 18 years of age who gave some indication on their profile that they were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

The sample consisted of a total of 7,261 students between the ages of 13 and 21. Students were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and from 2,783 unique school districts. About two-thirds of the sample (67.4%) was White, over half (57.1%) was female and over half identified as gay or lesbian (61.0%). Students were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers in grades 11 and 12.

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About the Survey

For 20 years, GLSEN has worked to ensure safe schools for all students, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. For 10 of those years, GLSEN has been documenting the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth: the prevalence of anti-LGBT language and victimization, the effect that these experiences have on LGBT students' achievement and the utility of interventions to both lessen the negative effects of a hostile climate and promote a positive educational experience. In 1999, GLSEN identified the need for national data on the experiences of LGBT students and launched the first National School Climate Survey (NSCS). At the time, the school experiences of LGBT youth were under-documented and nearly absent from national studies on adolescents. The NSCS remains one of the few studies to examine the school experiences of LGB students nationally and is the only national study to include transgender students. The results of the survey have been vital to GLSEN's understanding of the issues that LGBT students face, thereby informing our ongoing work to ensure safe and affirming schools for all.

In our 2009 survey, we examine the experiences of LGBT students with regard to indicators of negative school climate:

- hearing biased remarks, including homophobic remarks, in school;
- feeling unsafe in school because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation, gender expression or race/ethnicity;
- missing classes or days of school because of safety reasons; and
- experiences of harassment and assault in school.

We also examine the possible negative effects of a hostile school climate on LGBT students' academic achievement, educational aspirations and psychological well-being. We explore the diverse nature of LGBT students' experiences by reporting on how these differ by students' personal and community characteristics. We also examine whether or not students report experiences of victimization to school officials or to family members and how these adults address the problem. In addition, we demonstrate the degree to which LGBT students have access to supportive resources in school, and we explore the possible benefits of these resources, including Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), school harassment/assault policies, supportive school staff and curriculum that is inclusive of LGBT-related topics.

Given that we now have 10 years of data, we examine changes over the past decade on both indicators of negative school climate and levels of access to LGBT-related resources in schools.

A photograph of a school hallway with blue lockers on the right and a person sitting on the floor in the foreground. The person is wearing a white and black striped shirt, dark pants, and black sneakers with white laces. The hallway is lit with fluorescent lights, and the floor is polished and reflective. The person is sitting with their back to the camera, looking down.

Problem

Hostile School Climate

Schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBT students—almost all of whom commonly hear homophobic remarks and face verbal and physical harassment and even physical assault because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

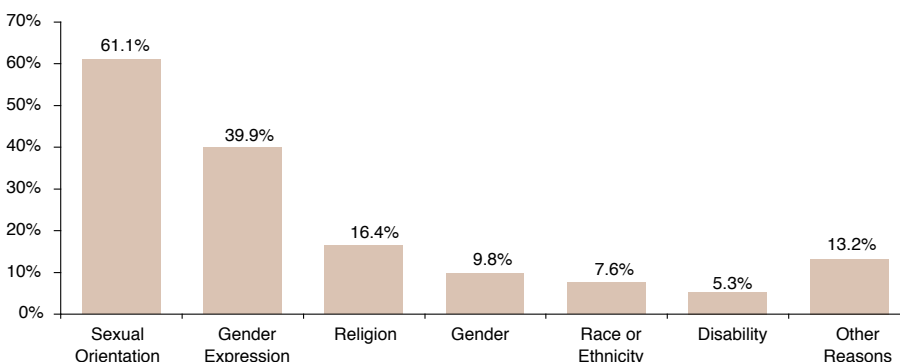
- 88.9% of students heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “that’s so gay”) frequently or often at school, and 86.5% reported that they felt distressed to some degree by this language.
- 72.4% heard other homophobic remarks (e.g., “dyke” or “faggot”) frequently or often at school.
- 62.6% heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough”) frequently or often at school.
- 61.1% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 39.9% because of how they expressed their gender.
- 84.6% were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation and 63.7% because of their gender expression.
- 40.1% were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 27.2% because of their gender expression.

- 18.8% were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation and 12.5% because of their gender expression.
- 52.9% of LGBT students were harassed or threatened by their peers via electronic mediums (e.g., text messages, emails, instant messages or postings on Internet sites such as Facebook), often known as cyberbullying.

This high incidence of harassment and assault is exacerbated by school staff rarely, if ever, intervening on behalf of LGBT students.

- 62.4% of students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, believing little to no action would be taken or the situation could become worse if reported.
- 33.8% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response.

Percentage of Students Who Felt Unsafe at School Because of a Personal Characteristic





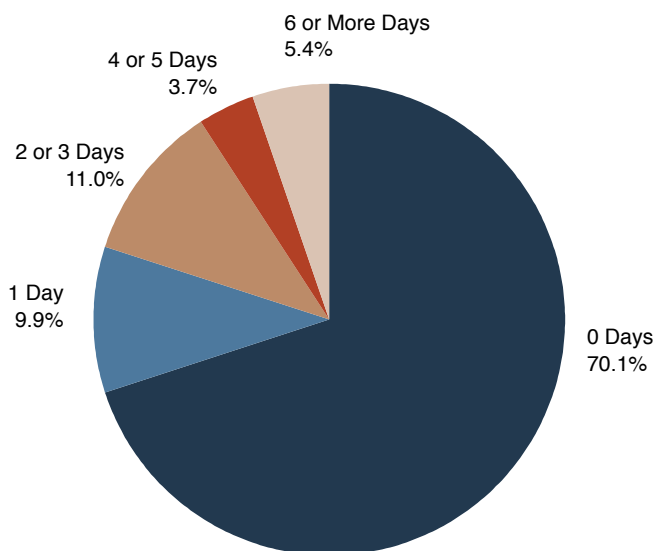
Problem

Absenteeism

Many LGBT students feel forced to miss classes or entire days of school rather than face a hostile environment where they experience continual harassment. School-based victimization denies these students their right to an education.

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- 29.1% of students skipped a class at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
 - 30.0% missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
 - Students were 3+ times likelier to have missed classes (29.1% vs. 8.0%) and 4+ times likelier to have missed at least one day of school (30.0% vs. 6.7%) in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, when compared to the general population of secondary school students.
 - Students were 3 times as likely to have missed school in the past month if they had experienced high levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation (57.7% vs. 18.0%) or gender expression (54.3% vs. 19.9%).

Frequency of Missing Days of School in the Past Month Because of Feeling Unsafe or Uncomfortable



The background of the slide is a close-up photograph of a wooden pencil sharpener. A pencil is being sharpened, with shavings visible. The sharpener is made of light-colored wood, and the pencil is dark. The lighting is warm, highlighting the textures of the wood and the pencil.

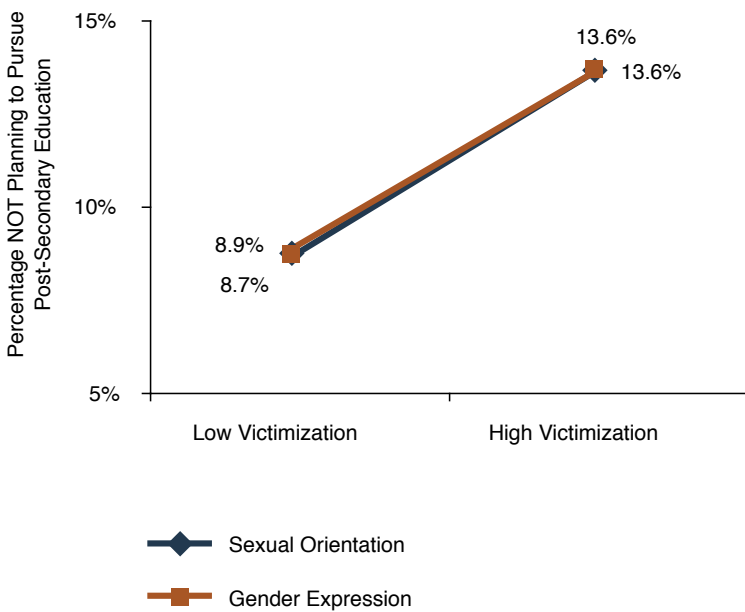
Problem

Lowered Educational Aspirations and Academic Achievement

Students cannot succeed in school when they do not feel safe. The incidence of in-school victimization experienced by LGBT students hinders their academic success and educational aspirations.

- LGBT students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression had grade point averages almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed (2.7 vs. 3.1).
- LGBT students were more likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any type of post-secondary education (obtaining a high school diploma only or not finishing high school) than a national sample of students (9.9% vs. 6.6%).
- Students who experienced high levels of in-school victimization because of their sexual orientation or gender expression were more likely than other students to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (college, vocational-technical or trade school): about 14% of students who experienced high levels of victimization because of their gender expression or their sexual orientation did not plan to continue their education, compared to about 9% of those who had experienced low levels of victimization.

Lowered Educational Aspirations and Severity of Victimization





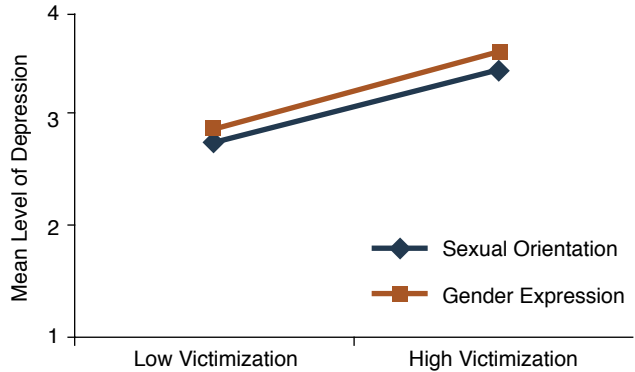
Problem

Poorer Psychological Well-Being

In-school experiences of harassment and assault were related to poorer psychological well-being for LGBT students.

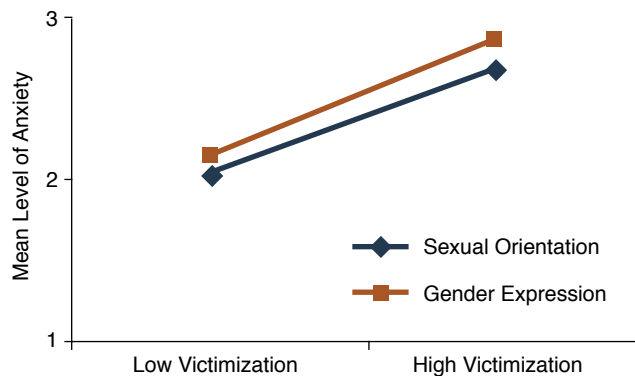
Relationship between Depression and Victimization

Increased levels of victimization were related to increased levels of depression.



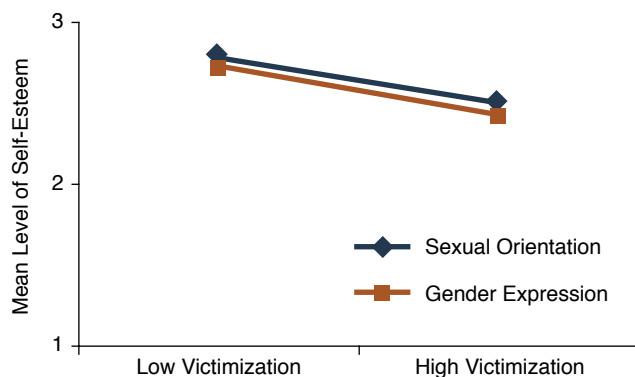
Relationship between Anxiety and Victimization

Increased levels of victimization were related to increased levels of anxiety.



Relationship between Self-Esteem and Victimization

Increased levels of victimization were related to decreased levels of self-esteem.





Solution

Gay-Straight Alliances

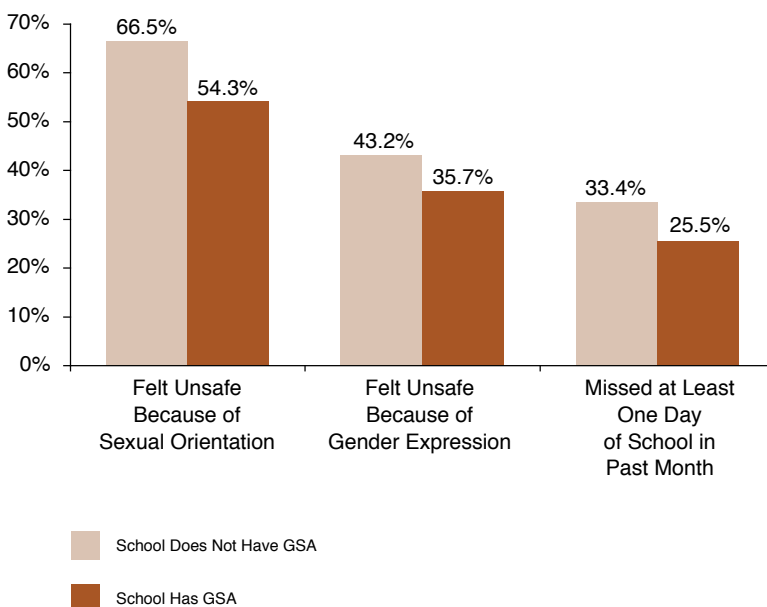
Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) can provide safe, affirming spaces and critical support for LGBT students and also contribute to creating a more welcoming school environment.

- Students in schools with a GSA heard fewer homophobic remarks, such as “faggot” or “dyke,” and fewer expressions where “gay” was used in a negative way than students in schools without GSAs.
- Students with a GSA in their school were more likely to report that school personnel intervened when hearing homophobic remarks compared to students without a GSA – 19.0% vs. 12.3% said that staff intervened “most of the time” or “always” when hearing homophobic remarks.
- Students with a GSA were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation than those without a GSA (54.3% vs. 66.5%).

- Students in schools with a GSA experienced less victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression. For example, 24.2% of students with a GSA experienced high levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation compared to 34.7% of those without a GSA.
- Students with a GSA had a greater sense of connectedness to their school community than students without a GSA.

Yet, less than half (44.6%) of students said that their school had a GSA or similar student club.

Presence of Gay-Straight Alliances and Feelings of Safety and Missing School





Solution

Inclusive Curriculum

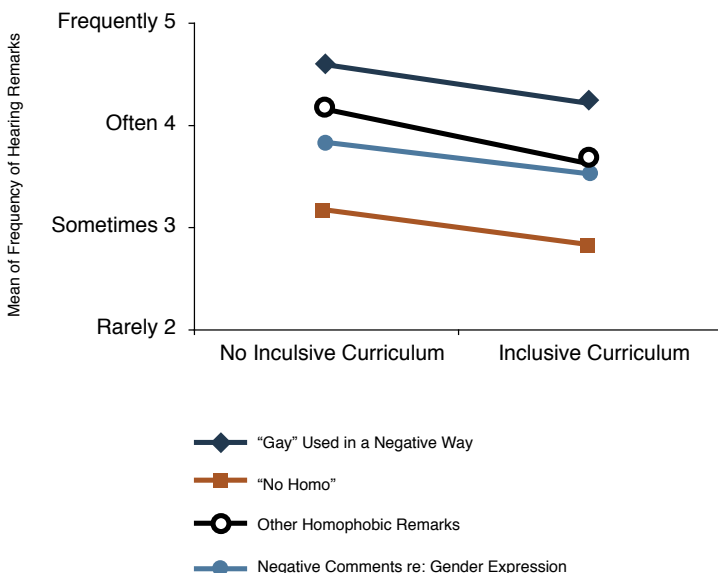
Curriculum that includes positive representations of LGBT people, history and events helps promote respect for all and can improve an individual LGBT student's school experiences and increase their sense of school connectedness.

- Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum heard fewer homophobic remarks, including negative use of the word “gay,” the phrase “no homo” and homophobic epithets (e.g., “faggot” or “dyke”), and negative comments about someone’s gender expression than those without an inclusive curriculum.
- Less than half (42.1%) of students in schools with inclusive curriculum felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, compared to almost two-thirds (63.6%) of students in schools without.
- Less than a fifth (17.1%) of LGBT students with inclusive curriculum had missed school in the past month compared to almost a third (31.6%) of other students.

- Students in schools with inclusive curriculum were more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBT people than students in schools without (61.2% vs. 37.3%).
- Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum had a greater sense of connectedness to their school community than other students.

However, only a small percentage of students were taught positive representations about LGBT people, history or events in their schools (11.7%).

Inclusive Curriculum and Frequency of Hearing Biased Remarks





Solution

Supportive Educators

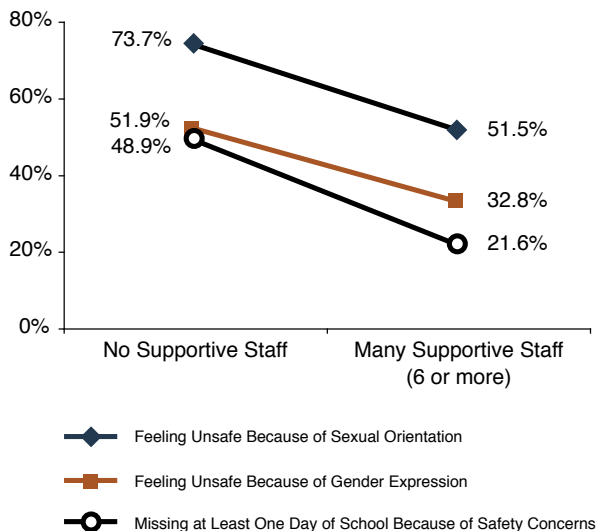
The presence of supportive educators can have a significant positive impact on LGBT students' academic achievement, as well as on their psychological well-being and longer-term educational aspirations.

- About half (51.5%) of students who had many (six or more) supportive staff at their school felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, compared to nearly three-fourths (73.7%) of those with no supportive staff.
- Less than a quarter (21.6%) of students with many supportive staff had missed school in the past month compared to nearly half (48.9%) with no supportive staff.
- Students with greater numbers of supportive staff had a greater sense of being a part of their school community than other students.
- Students with many supportive staff reported higher grade point averages than other students (3.1 vs. 2.7).

- A greater number of educators supportive of students was also associated with higher educational aspirations — students with many supportive educators were half as likely to say they were not planning on attending college compared to students with no supportive educators (8.0% vs. 19.5%).

Although almost all students (94.5%) could identify at least one school staff member supportive of LGBT students at their school, only about half (53.4%) could identify six or more supportive school staff.

Feelings of Safety and Missing School and Number of Supportive School Staff





Solution

Comprehensive Bullying/ Harassment Policies and Laws

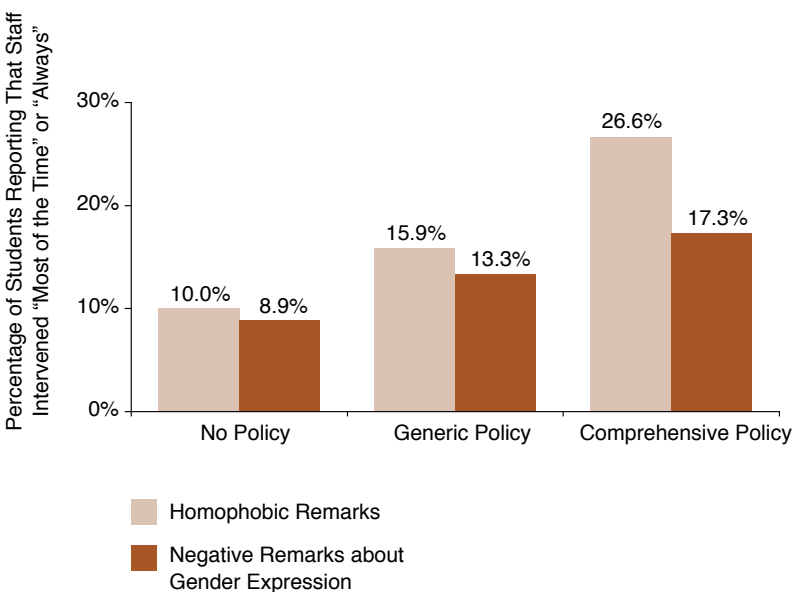
Policies and laws that explicitly address bias-based bullying and harassment can reduce the prevalence of bias behaviors and encourage staff intervention. Comprehensive policies and laws that specifically enumerate personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression among others, are the most effective at combating anti-LGBT bullying and harassment.

- About two-thirds (65.7%) of students in schools with comprehensive policies heard homophobic remarks (e.g., “faggot” or “dyke”) often or frequently, compared to almost three-quarters of students in schools with generic, non-enumerated policies (73.7%) or no policy whatsoever (74.1%).
- Students in schools with comprehensive policies were more likely than students in schools with a generic policy or no policy to report that staff intervened when homophobic remarks (26.6% vs. 15.9% vs. 10.0%) or negative remarks about gender expression (17.3% vs. 13.3% vs. 8.9%) were made.

However, only 18.2% of all LGBT students in our study reported that their school had a comprehensive policy that specifically mentioned sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression.

Results from the NSCS provide evidence that students who live in states with comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment laws compared to student in other states experience less victimization because of their sexual orientation and were more likely to have supportive resources, including a comprehensive school policy. Yet, only 15 states plus the District of Columbia have comprehensive laws that include sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression.

Staff Intervention with Biased Remarks by Type of School Harassment/Assault Policy

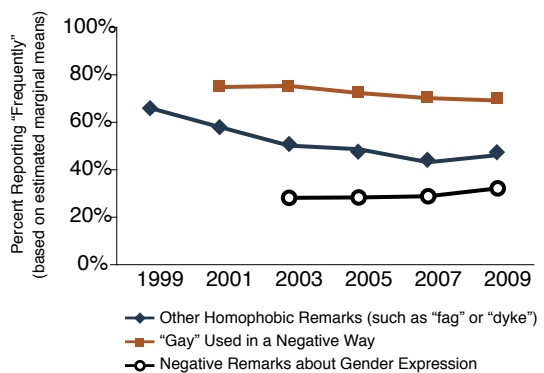


School Climate Over Time: 1999-2009

Since 1999, when GLSEN first conducted the National School Climate Survey, the NSCS remains the only study that has consistently documented the school experiences of LGBT students nationally. We examine changes over time from 1999 to 2009 on both indicators of a hostile school climate, such as hearing homophobic remarks and experiences of harassment and assault, and on the availability of supportive resources for LGBT students in their schools.

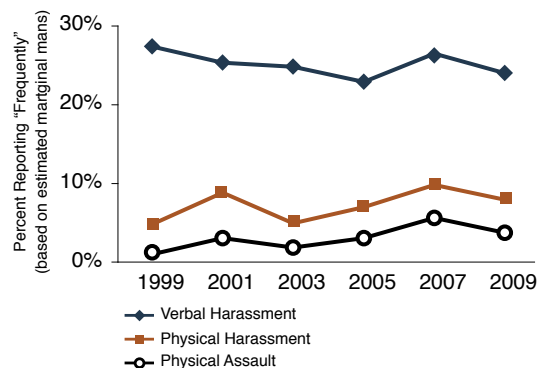
Since 1999, there has been a decreasing trend in the frequency of hearing homophobic epithets; however, LGBT students' experiences with more severe forms of bullying and harassment have remained relatively constant.

Homophobic Remarks There was a steady decline in the frequency of hearing homophobic remarks from 1999 to 2003: two-thirds of students in 1999 and more than half of students in 2001 reported hearing these remarks frequently in their schools, in contrast to less than half in 2003, 2005 and 2007. In recent years, between 2005 and 2009, students' reports of hearing these types of remarks have not decreased significantly. Using the word "gay" in a negative way has remained the most common form of biased language heard in schools by LGBT students.



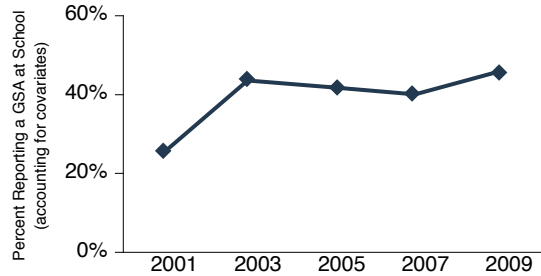
School-Based Harassment and Assault

LGBT students' experiences of harassment and assault have remained relatively constant over time. For example, reports of frequent verbal harassment based on sexual orientation have hovered around 25%. However, there were small but significant decreases in frequencies of verbal harassment, physical harassment and physical assault from 2007 to 2009.

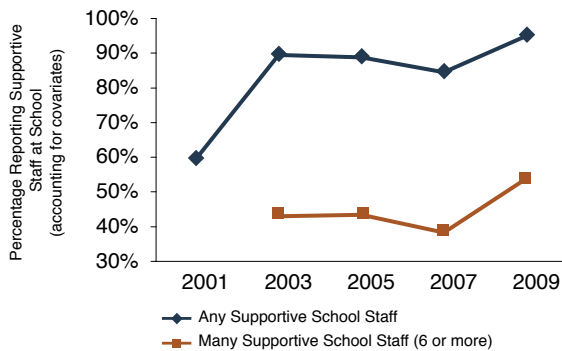


While the data on school-based harassment and assault have remained fairly constant over the last 10 years, there have been significant increases in the availability of LGBT-related resources and supports.

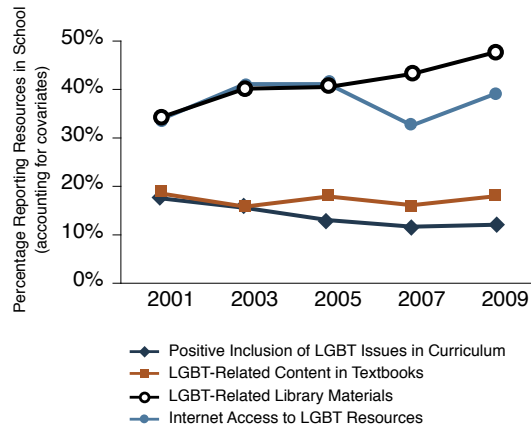
Gay-Straight Alliances After a tremendous increase in the percentage of students who had a GSA in their school from 2001 to 2003, there was a downward trend from 2003 to 2007. However, comparisons from 2007 to 2009 show a significant increase in the number of students with a GSA.



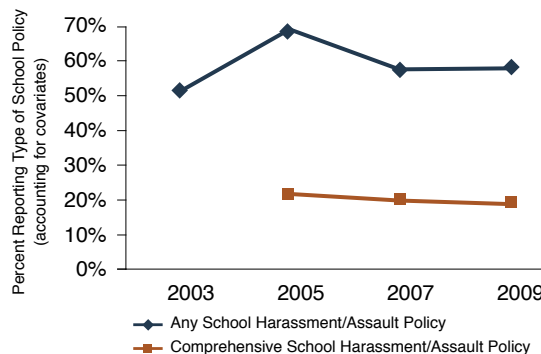
Supportive Educators There were also significant increases in the number of school staff who were supportive of LGBT students. A significant increase from 2001 to 2003 was followed by little change from 2003 to 2007. However, in 2009, the average number of supportive staff was higher than in all previous years.



Curricular Resources Overall, the percentage of students with access to LGBT-related information in school has not changed dramatically since we began asking about it in 2001. The one exception is the percentage of students who had LGBT-related resources in their school library, which has continually increased over time, reaching the highest levels in 2009.



School Harassment/Assault Policies The percentage of students who reported having any type of school harassment/assault policy in their school has fluctuated since 2003, though there was no change between 2007 and 2009. There have been no substantive changes since 2005 regarding comprehensive policies that include protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression – only about 20% of students from 2005 onward reported having such a policy in their school.



Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear that there is an urgent need for action to create safe and affirming schools for LGBT students. Results from the 2009 National School Climate Survey demonstrate the ways in which school-based supports, such as supportive staff, school harassment/assault policies and GSAs can positively affect LGBT students' school experiences. Furthermore, results show how comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment state laws can positively affect school climate for these students. Therefore, we recommend the following measures:

- Advocate for comprehensive bullying/harassment legislation at the state and federal levels that specifically enumerates sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as protected categories alongside others such as race, religion and disability;
- Adopt and implement comprehensive bullying/harassment policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in individual schools and districts, with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience;
- Support student clubs, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, that provide support for LGBT students and address LGBT issues in education;
- Provide training for school staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive teachers and other staff available to students; and
- Increase student access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history and events through inclusive curriculum and library and Internet resources.

Taken together, such measures can move us towards a future in which all students will have the opportunity to learn and succeed in school, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

Learn More

The full 2009 National School Climate Survey report goes into greater depth on the issues highlighted in this Executive Summary and explores a number of other topics, including:

- Frequency of hearing biased remarks, experiences of harassment and assault and feelings of safety based on race/ethnicity, religion and disability;
- Frequency of sexual harassment, relational aggression and property damage;
- Comparisons of indicators of a negative school climate for LGBT students by demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity);
- Comparisons of negative school climate and the availability of LGBT-related resources by school district characteristics (region, locale, grade level, school type);
- Relationship between being out (i.e., open about one's sexual orientation or gender identity) and students' school experiences;
- "Parental permission" policies for participating in Gay-Straight Alliances; and
- The effect of anti-LGBT legislation on school climate.

The full 2009 National School Climate Survey is available for purchase at www.GLSENSTORE.org or for download at www.GLSEN.org/research.



GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. Established in 1990, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. GLSEN seeks to develop school climates where difference is valued for the positive contribution it makes to creating a more vibrant and diverse community.

For more information on our educator resources, research, public policy agenda, student leadership programs or development initiatives, visit www.glsen.org.

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