



The 2015 National School Climate Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools



ABOUT THE SURVEY

In 1999, GLSEN identified that little was known about the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth and that LGBTQ youth were nearly absent from national studies of adolescents. We responded to this national need for data by launching the first National School Climate Survey, and we continue to meet this need for current data by conducting the study every two years. Since then, the biennial National School Climate Survey has documented the unique challenges LGBTQ students face and identified interventions that can improve school climate. The survey documents the prevalence of anti-LGBT language and victimization, such as experiences of harassment and assault in school. In addition, the survey examines school policies and practices that may contribute to negative experiences for LGBTQ students and make them feel as if they are not valued by their school communities. The survey also explores the effects that a hostile school climate may have on LGBTQ students' educational outcomes and well-being. Finally, the survey reports on the availability and the utility of LGBT-related school resources and supports that may offset the negative effects of a hostile school climate and promote a positive learning experience. In addition to collecting this critical data every two years, we also add and adapt survey questions to respond to the changing world for LGBTQ youth. For example, in the 2015 survey we expanded upon the types of discriminatory practices we explore by including questions related to extracurricular activities, school athletics, and gender segregation in school activities. The National School Climate Survey remains one of the few studies to examine the school experiences of LGBTQ students nationally, and its results have been vital to GLSEN's understanding of the issues that LGBTQ students face, thereby informing our ongoing work to ensure safe and affirming schools for all.

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Quotes throughout are from students' responses to open-ended questions in the survey.
Visit glsen.org/nscs for the full 2015 National School Climate Survey.

In our 2015 survey, we examine the experiences of LGBTQ 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;
- Experiencing harassment and assault in school; and
- Experiencing discriminatory policies and practices at school.

We also examine:

- The possible negative effects of a hostile school climate on LGBTQ students' academic achievement, educational aspirations, and psychological well-being;

- Whether or not students report experiences of victimization to school officials or to family members and how these adults address the problem; and
- How the school experiences of LGBTQ students differ by personal and community characteristics.

In addition, we demonstrate the degree to which LGBTQ students have access to supportive resources in school, and we explore the possible benefits of these resources:

- Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) or similar clubs;
- School anti-bullying/harassment policies;
- Supportive school staff; and
- Curricular resources that are inclusive of LGBT-related topics.

Given that GLSEN has been conducting the survey for over a decade, we also examine changes over time on indicators of negative school climate and levels of access to LGBT-related resources in schools.

METHODS

The 2015 National School Climate Survey was conducted online. To obtain a representative national sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, we conducted outreach through national, regional, and local organizations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBTQ youth, and advertised and promoted on social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr. To ensure representation of transgender youth, youth of color, and youth in rural communities, we made special efforts to notify groups and organizations that work predominantly with these populations.

The final sample consisted of a total of 10,528 students between the ages of 13 and 21. Students were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and from 3,095 unique school districts. About two-thirds (68.6%) of the sample was White, a third (34.9%) was cisgender female, and about half (49.2%) identified as gay or lesbian. Students were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers in grades 10 and 11.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

HOSTILE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBT language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. As a result, many LGBTQ students avoid school activities or miss school entirely.

SCHOOL SAFETY

- 57.6% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43.3% because of their gender expression.
- 31.8% of LGBTQ students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and a tenth (10.0%) missed four or more days in the past month.
- Over a third avoided gender-segregated spaces in school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (bathrooms: 39.4%; locker rooms: 37.9%).
- Most reported avoiding school functions and extracurricular activities (71.5% and 65.7%, respectively) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT AT SCHOOL

- 27.0% of LGBTQ students were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 20.3% because of their gender expression.
- 13.0% of LGBTQ students were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 9.4% because of their gender expression.
- 48.6% of LGBTQ students experienced electronic harassment in the past year (via text messages or postings on Facebook), often known as cyberbullying.
- 59.6% of LGBTQ students were sexually harassed (e.g., unwanted touching or sexual remarks) in the past year at school.
- 57.6% of LGBTQ students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or the situation could become worse if reported.
- 63.5% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response or told the student to ignore it.
- The vast majority of LGBTQ students (85.2%) experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened) at school based on a personal characteristic, most commonly sexual orientation (70.8%) and gender expression (54.5%).

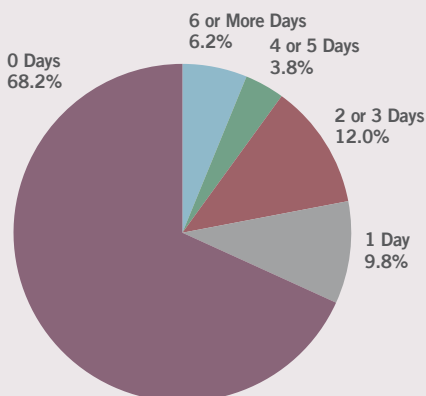
ANTI-LGBT REMARKS AT SCHOOL

- Almost all of LGBTQ students (98.1%) heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “that’s so gay”) at school; 67.4% heard these remarks frequently or often, and 93.4% reported that they felt distressed because of this language.
- 95.8% of LGBTQ students heard other types of homophobic remarks (e.g., “dyke” or “faggot”); 58.8% heard this type of language frequently or often.
- 95.7% of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough”); 62.9% heard these remarks frequently or often.
- 85.7% of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks specifically about transgender people, like “tranny” or “he/she;” 40.5% heard them frequently or often.
- 56.2% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 63.5% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff.

DISCRIMINATORY SCHOOL POLICIES AND PRACTICES

- 66.2% of LGBTQ students reported personally experiencing any LGBT-related discriminatory policies or practices at school (see below), and almost three-fourths (74.0%) said other students had experienced these policies and practices at school.
- 29.8% of students reported being disciplined for public displays of affection that were not disciplined among non-LGBTQ students.
- 22.2% of students had been prevented from wearing clothes considered inappropriate based on their legal sex.
- 16.7% of students were prohibited from discussing or writing about LGBT topics in school assignments, and 16.3% were prohibited from doing so in school extracurricular activities.
- 15.6% of students were prevented from attending a dance or function with someone of the same gender.
- 14.1% of students were restricted from forming or promoting a GSA.
- 13.2% of students were prevented from wearing clothing or items supporting LGBT issues.
- 10.8% were prevented or discouraged from participating in school sports because they were LGBTQ.
- Some policies particularly targeted transgender students:
 - 50.9% of transgender students had been prevented from using their preferred name or pronoun (19.9% of LGBTQ students overall), and
 - 60.0% of transgender students had been required to use a bathroom or locker room of their legal sex (22.6% of students overall).
- 71.2% of LGBTQ students reported that their schools engaged in some form of gendered practice in school activities (e.g., graduation attire, homecoming courts, school photographs).

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



EFFECTS OF A HOSTILE SCHOOL CLIMATE

A hostile school climate affects students' academic success and mental health. LGBTQ students who experience victimization and discrimination at school have worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being.

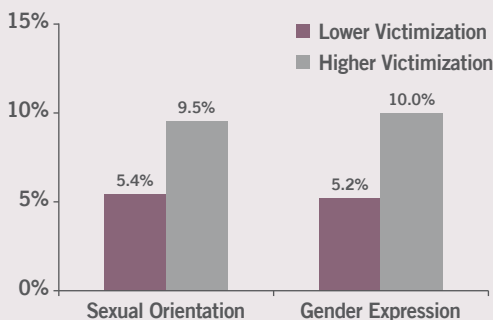
EFFECTS OF VICTIMIZATION

- LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation:
 - Were more than three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (62.2% vs. 20.1%);
 - Had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than students who were less often harassed (2.9 vs. 3.3);
 - Were twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school) than those who experienced lower levels (10.0% vs. 5.2%);
 - Were more likely to have been disciplined at school (54.9% vs. 32.1%); and
 - Had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression.
- LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their gender expression:
 - Were almost three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (59.6% vs. 20.8%);
 - Had lower GPAs than students who were less often harassed (2.9 vs. 3.3);
 - Were twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school; 9.5% vs. 5.4%);
 - Were more likely to have been disciplined at school (52.1% vs. 32.7%); and
 - Had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression.
- 42.5% of LGBTQ students who reported that they did not plan to finish high school, or were not sure if they would finish, indicated that they were considering dropping out because of the harassment they faced at school.

EFFECTS OF DISCRIMINATION

- LGBTQ students who experienced LGBT-related discrimination at school were:
 - More than three times as likely to have missed school in the past month as those who had not (44.3% vs. 12.3%);
 - Had lower GPAs than their peers (3.1 vs. 3.4); and
 - Had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression.
- 32.0% of LGBTQ students who reported that they did not plan to finish high school, or were not sure if they would finish, indicated that they were considering dropping out because of the hostile climate created by gendered school policies and practices.

Educational Aspirations and Severity of Victimization (Percentage of LGBTQ Students Not Planning to Pursue Post-Secondary Education)



LGBT-RELATED SCHOOL RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

Students who feel safe and affirmed have better educational outcomes. LGBTQ students who have LGBT-related school resources report better school experiences and academic success. Unfortunately, all too many schools fail to provide these critical resources.

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

AVAILABILITY AND PARTICIPATION

- A little over half (54.0%) of students said that their school had a GSA or similar student club.
- Although most LGBTQ students reported participating in their GSA at some level, a little more than a third (34.0%) had not.

UTILITY

- Compared to LGBTQ students who did not have a GSA in their school, students who had a GSA in their school:
 - Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (59.3% compared to 77.1% of other students);

–Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently (51.0% vs. 68.0%);

–Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression and transgender people often or frequently (gender expression: 59.6% vs. 66.8%; transgender people: 35.9% vs. 46.0%);

–Were more likely to report that school personnel intervened when hearing homophobic remarks—20.6% vs. 12.0% said that staff intervene most of the time or always;

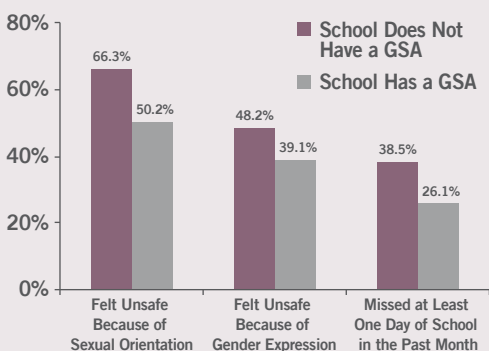
–Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation than those without a GSA;

–Experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression;

–Reported a greater number of supportive school staff and more accepting peers; and

–Felt more connected to their school community than students without a GSA.

Presence of Gay-Straight Alliances and LGBTQ Students' Feelings of Safety and Missing School





75.2% OF LGBTQ STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS WITH AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM SAID THEIR PEERS WERE ACCEPTING OF LGBTQ PEOPLE, COMPARED TO 39.6% OF THOSE WITHOUT AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM.

INCLUSIVE CURRICULAR RESOURCES

AVAILABILITY

- Only 22.4% of LGBTQ students were taught positive representations about LGBT people, history, or events in their schools; 17.9% had been taught negative content about LGBT topics.
- Less than half (42.4%) of students reported that they could find information about LGBT-related issues in their school library.
- About half (49.1%) of students with Internet access at school reported being able to access LGBT-related information online via school computers.

UTILITY

- LGBTQ students in schools with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum:
 - Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (49.7% vs. to 72.6%);
 - Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently (40.6% vs. 64.1%);

- Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression and transgender people often or frequently (gender expression: 50.7% vs. 66.6%; transgender people: 26.8% vs. 44.5%);
- Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (40.4% vs. 62.6%);
- Were less likely to miss school in the past month (18.6% of students with an inclusive curriculum missed school in past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable compared to 35.6% of other students);
- Were less likely say they might not graduate high school (1.4% vs. 4.1%) and less likely to not plan on pursuing post-secondary education (5.1% vs. 7.0%);
- Were more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBTQ people than other students (75.8% vs. 41.6%); and
- Felt more connected to their school community than other students.

SUPPORTIVE EDUCATORS

AVAILABILITY

- Almost all LGBTQ students (97.0%) could identify at least one staff member supportive of LGBTQ students at their school.
- Less than two-thirds of students (63.7%) could identify at least six supportive school staff.
- Only 41.2% of students could identify 11 or more supportive staff.
- 36.8% of students reported that their school administration was supportive of LGBTQ students.
- Over a quarter (29.1%) of students had seen at least one Safe Space sticker or poster at their school (these stickers or posters often serve to identify supportive educators).

UTILITY

- Compared to LGBTQ students with no supportive school staff, students with many (11 or more) supportive staff at their school:
 - Were less likely to feel unsafe (40.6% vs. 78.7%);
 - Were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (16.9% vs. 47.2%);
 - Had higher GPAs (3.3 vs. 2.8);
 - Were less likely to say they might not graduate high school (1.7% vs. 9.5%) and were less likely to not plan on pursuing post-secondary education (4.5% vs. 14.7%); and
 - Felt more connected to their school community.
- Students who had seen a Safe Space sticker or poster in their school were more likely to identify school staff who were supportive of LGBTQ students and more likely to feel comfortable talking with school staff about LGBTQ issues.

COMPREHENSIVE BULLYING/HARASSMENT POLICIES

AVAILABILITY

- Although a majority (83.6%) of students had an anti-bullying policy at their school, only 10.2% of students reported that their school had a comprehensive policy (i.e., that specifically enumerate both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression).

UTILITY

- Students in schools with a comprehensive policy:
 - Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (51.7% compared to 73.6% of students with a generic policy and 80.2% of students with no policy);
 - Were less likely to hear other homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently (44.4% compared to 60.5% of students with a generic policy and 67.9% of students with no policy);
 - Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently (52.9% compared to 63.5% of students with a generic policy and 69.1% of students with no policy);
 - Were more likely to report that staff intervene when hearing anti-LGBT remarks;
 - Experienced less anti-LGBT victimization; and
 - Were more likely to report victimization incidents to school staff and were more likely to rate school staff’s response to such incidents as effective.

“My school is a very accepting environment overall, and things have only been getting better since our Queer Alliance (GSA-like club) has begun to reach out to staff and administration regarding LGBT issues.”

CHANGES IN SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR LGBTQ YOUTH OVER TIME

School climate for LGBTQ students has improved somewhat over the years, yet remains quite hostile for many. Increases in the availability of many LGBT-related school resources may be having a positive effect on the school environment.

CHANGES IN INDICATORS OF HOSTILE SCHOOL CLIMATE

ANTI-LGBT REMARKS

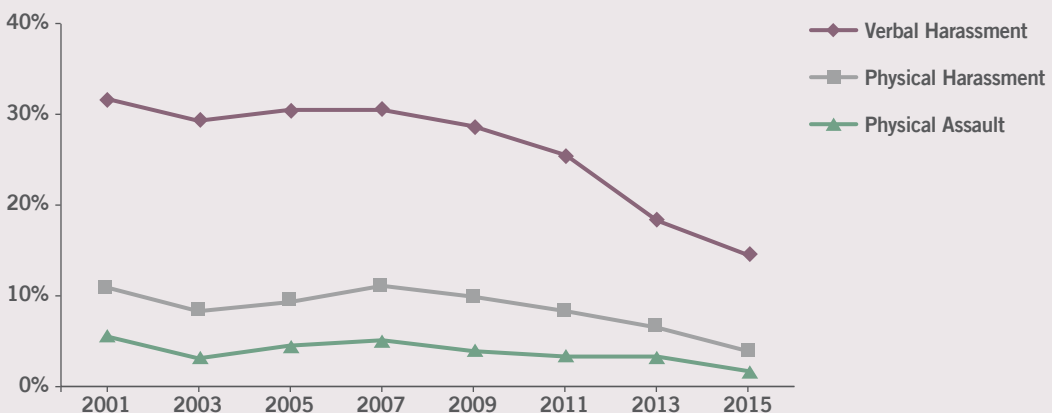
- LGBTQ students in 2015 reported a decrease in homophobic remarks compared to all prior years. The percentage of students hearing homophobic remarks like “fag” or “dyke” frequently or often has dropped from over 80% in 2001 to less than 60% in 2015.
- Although the expression “that’s so gay” remains the most common form of anti-LGBT language heard by LGBTQ students, its prevalence has declined consistently since 2001.

- In 2015, there was a slight increase in negative remarks about gender expression.

HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT

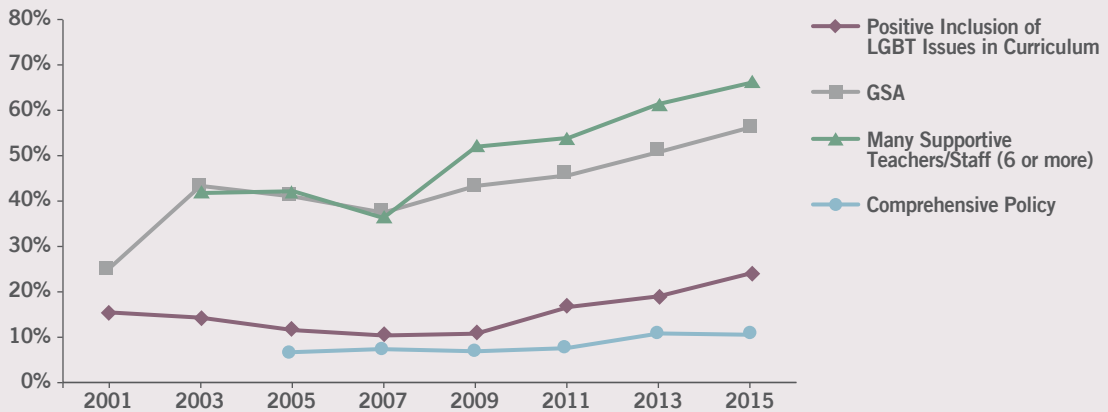
- In 2015, the incidence of verbal and physical harassment and physical assault regarding sexual orientation was lower than all prior years.
- Changes in harassment and assault based on gender expression were similar to those for sexual orientation—verbal and physical harassment were lower in 2015 than all prior years and physical assault was also its lowest since 2007.

Frequency of Victimization Based on Gender Expression Over Time
(Percentage of LGBTQ Students Reporting Event Frequently or Often, Based on Estimated Marginal Means)



Availability of School Resources Over Time

(Percentage of LGBTQ Students Reporting Resource in School, Accounting for Covariates)



CHANGES IN AVAILABILITY OF LGBT-RELATED SCHOOL RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

- The percentage of LGBTQ students reporting that they have a GSA in their school was higher in 2015 than in all prior survey years.

CURRICULAR RESOURCES

- The percentage of LGBTQ students reporting positive representations of LGBT people, history, or events in their curriculum was higher in 2015 than in all prior survey years.
- The percentage of students with access to LGBT-related Internet resources was higher in 2015 than in all prior survey years.

- Students' access to LGBT-related content in their textbooks and LGBT-related resources in their school library were not different in 2015 from 2013.

SUPPORTIVE EDUCATORS

- A higher percentage of LGBTQ students reported having supportive school staff in 2015 than in all prior survey years.

ANTI-BULLYING/HARASSMENT POLICIES

- More LGBTQ students reported having an anti-bullying/harassment policy at their school in 2015 than in all prior survey years, but there was no increase in comprehensive policies, i.e., one that included protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, from 2013 to 2015.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SCHOOL CHARACTERISTIC DIFFERENCES IN LGBTQ STUDENTS' SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

LGBTQ students are a diverse population, and although they share many similar experiences, their experiences in school vary based on their personal demographics, the kind of school they attend, and where they live.

DIFFERENCES IN LGBTQ STUDENTS' SCHOOL EXPERIENCES BY PERSONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

RACE OR ETHNICITY

- Overall, Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander LGBTQ students experienced the lowest frequencies of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression.
- White/European American LGBTQ students experienced lower frequencies of victimization based on race/ethnicity than all LGBTQ students of color groups.
- Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander LGBTQ students were less likely to experience anti-LGBT discrimination at school resulting from school policies and practices than Multiracial students, White LGBTQ students, and Hispanic/Latino LGBTQ students.

GENDER IDENTITY

- Compared to LGBTQ cisgender students, transgender, genderqueer, and other non-cisgender students faced more hostile school climates.
- Cisgender female students were less likely to be victimized or feel unsafe based on their sexual orientation or their gender expression compared to other LGBTQ students.
- Compared to cisgender male students, cisgender female students experienced a more hostile school climate regarding their gender and were more likely to have experienced anti-LGBT discrimination at school.

GENDER NONCONFORMITY

- Gender nonconforming cisgender students (students whose gender expression did not align to traditional gender norms) experienced worse school climates compared to gender conforming cisgender students.

“At my last school I felt miserable and got called ‘freak’ and ‘weirdo’ as if those were my name instead of the name I had asked them to call me. They called me by my birth name as well and She/Her/Hers pronouns. They had no respect for me despite how kind I had acted towards them. Freshman year was horrid. I felt like I didn’t belong, and I felt like a failure. I felt like there was no place there for someone like me.”

DIFFERENCES IN LGBTQ STUDENTS' SCHOOL EXPERIENCES BY SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

SCHOOL LEVEL

- LGBTQ students in middle school were more likely than students in high school to hear homophobic language and negative remarks about gender expression in school.
- Students in middle school reported slightly higher frequencies of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression than students in high school.
- Students in middle school were less likely to have access to each LGBT-related school resource: GSAs, supportive educators, inclusive curriculum, and comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies; the disparity between middle and high school students was greatest for GSAs.

SCHOOL TYPE

- LGBTQ public school students heard all types of homophobic language most often, as compared to both students in religious schools and private non-religious schools.

- Overall, students in public schools experienced higher frequencies of anti-LGBT victimization compared to other students.
- Students in religious schools reported more anti-LGBT related discrimination compared to students in public schools and private, non-religious schools.
- Overall, students in private, non-religious schools had greater access to LGBT-related resources and supports in school than students in other schools, whereas students in religious schools had less access to most LGBT-related resources.

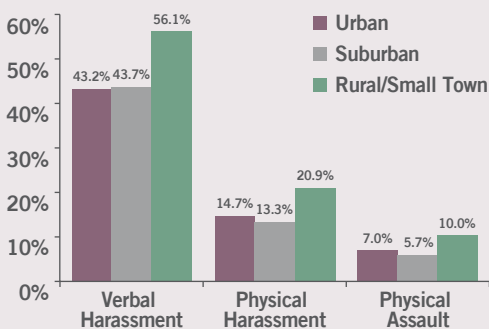
REGION

- LGBTQ students attending schools in the Northeast and the West reported less anti-LGBT remarks than students attending schools in the South and Midwest.
- Students from schools in the Northeast and the West reported less victimization both based on sexual orientation and based on gender expression than students in schools in the South and the Midwest.
- Students in the South were most likely to experience anti-LGBT discrimination at school.
- Students in the Northeast were most likely to report having LGBT-related resources at school.

SCHOOL LOCALE

- LGBTQ students in rural/small town schools reported hearing anti-LGBT remarks most often.
- Students in schools in rural/small town areas experienced the highest levels of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression.
- Students in schools in rural/small town areas were more likely to experience anti-LGBT discrimination at school than students in suburban and urban schools.
- Students in rural/small town schools were least likely to have LGBT-related school resources or supports, particularly GSAs and supportive school personnel.

Experiences of Harassment and Assault Based on Sexual Orientation By School Locale
(Percentage of LGBTQ Students Who Experienced Event Sometimes, Often, or Frequently)





CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that there is an urgent need for action to create safe and affirming learning environments for LGBTQ students. Results from the 2015 National School Climate Survey demonstrate the ways in which school-based supports—such as supportive staff, anti-bullying/harassment policies, curricular resources inclusive of LGBT topics, and GSAs—can positively affect LGBTQ students’ school experiences. Based on these findings, we recommend:

- Increasing student access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history, and events through inclusive curricula and library and Internet resources;
- Supporting student clubs, such as GSAs, that provide support for LGBTQ students and address LGBT issues in education;
- Providing professional development for school staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive teachers and other staff available to students;
- Ensuring that school policies and practices, such as those related to dress codes and school dances, do not discriminate against LGBTQ students; and
- Adopting and implementing 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.

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

“For every student I know who is out, there are more in the closet who think they are alone, or fear for their safety. Nobody should fear for themselves while they’re just trying to get an education. LGBT kids need support, and we need a voice.”

LEARN MORE

The full 2015 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:

- Experiences of bias and school safety based on race/ethnicity, religion, body type, citizenship, and disability;
- Frequency of sexual harassment, relational aggression, cyberbullying, and property damage;
- Inclusion of LGBT issues in anti-bullying education and the benefits of inclusive bullying programs;
- Specific school experiences of bisexual students, including victimization and being out in school; and
- Prevalence of school/district policies or guidelines for transgender and gender nonconforming students.

Visit gsen.org/nscs for the full 2015 National School Climate Survey.



GLSEN is the leading national education organization championing LGBTQ issues in K–12 education. Established in 1990, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender 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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