

# Exploring the co-occurrence of bullying victimization, homophobic teasing and teen dating violence: Implications for prevention programs

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No longer viewed as a normal part of growing up, bullying is now recognized as a serious public health problem in the United States. At one time bullying was studied independently from other forms of interpersonal violence. Studies examining the nature of bullying have found that bullying perpetration often reflects social biases and prejudices targeting teens not conforming to perceived “in group” social/cultural norms,<sup>1</sup> as one way to demonstrate superiority over other students. In addition, research now suggests that bullying behavior is expressed as a function of teens’ changing social contexts and diversifies as teens get older. As adolescents move through puberty, exploring their sexuality, shifting from same-gender to mixed-gender peer groups and begin dating, there is substantial overlap in bullying, sexual harassment and teen dating violence within the context of peer relationships.<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup> Girls are more frequently targets of indirect bullying, such as rumors and gossip stemming from relationship issues like dating, break-ups, and jealousy,<sup>7</sup> as well as unwanted sexual attention or harassment.<sup>8</sup> Boys, on the other hand, are more frequently victims of physical forms of bullying and homophobic messages.<sup>7</sup>

This study examined overlapping forms of peer and dating abuse from a gendered perspective. The co-occurrence of bullying, homophobic teasing, and dating violence through a gendered lens highlights the need to better recognize and address the shared risk and protective factors for these interrelated behaviors.

## METHODS

Data were from the 2015 Rhode Island High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is conducted using a two-stage random sample design by schools and classrooms to produce a state-wide representative sample of students.

There were 3462 completed surveys for a 68% overall response rate in 2015 (unweighted sample). Participants who answered “yes” to one or more of the following questions were considered to have experienced peer and dating

**Table 1.** Characteristics of high school students experiencing peer and dating abuse in the past 12 months<sup>1,2</sup>

Characteristics	Experienced 1 form of abuse		Experienced 2 or more forms of abuse	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	3342	17.7	2198	12.4
Female	2968	17.2	2889	16.8
<b>Sexual orientation</b>				
Heterosexual	5166	15.7	3606	11.5
Gay/lesbian/Bisexual/Unsure	1025	39.9	1365	46.9
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>				
Non-Hispanic white	3813	17.4	3381	15.7
Hispanic/Latino or non-Hispanic Black or other non-Hispanic racial group	2171	16.6	1613	12.9
<b>Grade</b>				
9th grade	1738	19.0	1399	15.8
10th grade	1397	16.5	1290	15.4
11th grade	1786	18.9	1009	11.6
12th grade	1349	15.3	1179	13.6
<b>Physical or emotional disability</b>				
No	4601	15.6	3132	11.1
Yes	1462	23.9	1897	29.0
<b>Number of lifetime sexual partners</b>				
Never had sexual intercourse	3117	14.8	1962	9.8
1 partner	985	17.2	743	13.5
2 or more partners	1307	24.1	1404	25.4
<b>In physical fights on school property 1 or more times past 12 months</b>				
No	5237	15.6	4072	12.6
Yes	1153	42.6	985	38.8
Total sample	6390	15.4	5107	12.3

<sup>1</sup> Peer and dating abuse in the past 12 months includes bullying, homophobic teasing, and/or teen dating violence.

<sup>2</sup> Weighted n and percentages.

abuse during the 12 months before the survey: (1) bullied on school property; (2) electronically bullied through e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, websites, or texting; (3) victim of teasing or name calling because someone thought you were gay, lesbian, or bisexual; (4) someone you were dating or going out with physically hurt you on purpose, such as being hit, slammed into something, or injured with an object or weapon; (5) someone you were dating or going out with forced you to do sexual things that you did not want to do, such as kissing, touching, or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse.

Multivariate logistic regression models (total sample and stratified by gender) were conducted using SAS 9.4 software to examine the association between study variables (Table 1) and overlapping forms of peer and dating abuse (Table 2). Statistical significance for regression coefficients was tested using the Wald chi-square statistic ( $p < .05$ ).

## RESULTS

Of the students who reported peer and dating abuse victimization in the past 12 months (27.7%), 15.4% experienced one form of victimization. Almost half (12.3%) reported being the victim of two or more forms of violence. Bullying was the most prevalent form of abuse (97.1%), followed by homophobic teasing (52.7%) and teen dating violence (40.9%). Table 1 contains additional descriptive analyses.

Regardless of gender, teens who identified as a sexual minority, possessed a physical or emotional disability, and got into school fights were more likely to experience one or more forms of violence victimization. Having one or more lifetime sexual partners was associated with peer victimization for girls, but not for boys (Table 2).

## DISCUSSION

This brief advances public health knowledge in three important ways. We found that 12% of high school students had experienced two or more forms of violence victimization involving school and electronically bullying, homophobic name-calling and/or teen dating violence. This represents 5,107 students in grades 9–12, who were the target of interpersonal violence; a finding that has never before been examined in a large representative sample of Rhode Island public high school students. Our findings support prior research on the overlap of bullying, homophobic teasing and teen dating violence.<sup>5,6</sup>

There is now considerable evidence that bullying victimization can have pernicious effects on adolescent's health.<sup>9,10</sup> The links between bullying and other forms of peer and dating abuse suggest that the negative health consequences associated with bullying victimization, such as low self-esteem, problems at school, and depression, will be compounded for youth who are victims of overlapping forms of interpersonal violence. It is important that family physicians

**Table 2.** Logistic regression predicting peer and dating abuse<sup>1</sup> by overall sample and gender

	Overall sample	Girls	Boys
	AOR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	1.19 (0.87, 1.62)	--	--
<b>Sexual orientation</b>			
Gay/lesbian/ Bisexual/Unsure	3.81 (2.06, 7.02)	3.15 (1.55, 6.42)	5.11 (2.42, 10.81)
<b>Race/ethnic minority</b>			
Yes	0.66 (0.57, 0.76)	0.54 (0.37, 0.78)	0.83 (0.60, 1.15)
<b>Grade</b>			
9th grade	1.59 (1.29, 1.96)	2.15 (1.64, 2.81)	1.30 (0.84, 2.01)
10th grade	1.55 (1.10, 2.18)	1.88 (1.42, 2.49)	1.34 (0.79, 2.26)
11th grade	1.41 (0.96, 2.07)	1.43 (1.05, 1.95)	1.49 (0.83, 2.67)
<b>Physical and/or emotional disability</b>			
Yes	1.83 (1.47, 2.28)	2.03 (1.67, 2.46)	1.61 (0.94, 2.78)
<b>Number of lifetime sexual partners</b>			
1	1.34 (0.87, 2.07)	1.62 (1.02, 2.56)	1.15 (0.58, 2.30)
2 or more	2.25 (1.72, 2.95)	3.52 (2.53, 4.90)	1.47 (0.94, 2.29)
<b>In physical fights at school</b>			
Yes	2.77 (1.87, 4.09)	2.88 (1.65, 5.03)	2.78 (1.70, 4.56)

-- Not in model

<sup>1</sup> See Table 1 notes.

AOR = adjusted odds ratio

CI = confidence interval

Reference groups: Gender: Male (overall sample); Sexual orientation: heterosexual; Race/ethnicity: Non-Hispanic white; Disability: no; Sexual partners: Never had sexual intercourse; Physical fights at school: no.

provide a supportive environment in which adolescents feel comfortable disclosing issues of dating violence and other co-occurring forms of peer perpetrated abuse.<sup>11</sup> Results of our study and other research<sup>12</sup> suggest that poly-aggression perpetration and victimization should be a primary focus of clinical, community- and school-based bullying and dating violence prevention programs.

Our study found that sexual minority youth, sexually active girls, and adolescents possessing an emotional or physical disability were more likely to experience at least one form of peer victimization. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that youth who do not conform to normative expectations regarding sexuality, gender, and physical appearance are more likely to be rejected by

their peers.<sup>1</sup> This study provides some preliminary support for implementing prevention programs that target the underlying patriarchal and heteronormative social norms that may facilitate co-occurring forms of peer aggression.

Previously identified limitations of YRBS apply to this study.<sup>13</sup> Qualitative research is needed to determine the context within which adolescent dating violence occurs, often concurrently with bullying and gender-based harassment.

Findings from this study expand the empirical knowledge base on overlapping forms of peer and dating abuse by simultaneously examining bullying, homophobic name-calling and teen dating violence using a statewide representative sample of public high school students.

Mixed methods studies will augment our findings by examining individual and contextual predictors of the co-occurrence of bullying, homophobic teasing and dating violence in early and late adolescence.

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