

The Prevalence of Bullying & Harassment among LGBT Adolescents in Rural Schools of Southern Illinois and Directions for Intervention

Mary Louise Cashel, Ph.D., Daryl Kroner, Ph.D. Chelsea Vanderwoude, M.A. & Danielle Chambers, B.A.



Contact Info:

Mary Louise Cashel, Ph.D

Department of Psychology

(618) 453-3553/ mcashel@siu.edu

Abstract

This study assessed the prevalence rates of various forms of bullying among Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) students in rural middle and high schools throughout 20 school districts in the Southern Illinois region. The support they perceive from teachers and administrators and the strategies they endorsed for intervention are examined. We addressed the following research questions:

1. What percentages of rural youth report feeling unwelcome, uncomfortable and experiencing bullying and harassment due to sexual orientation or gender?
2. To what extent do they perceive support from school teachers/staff/administration? Do they seek assistance and from whom?
3. What strategies do they endorse as potentially effective for addressing prevention and intervention efforts?

Introduction

Bullying victimization is a significant problem with serious behavioral health consequences for youth. These experiences have been associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm and suicidal behaviors (Arseneault, Bowes & Shakoor, 2010). Although most studies are based on urban or metropolitan samples, this is also a significant issue for youth in rural settings, with equally deleterious effects. A study of rural third through eighth grade students indicated that as many as 82% reported experiencing bullying over a three month period (Dulmus, Theroit, Sowers & Blackburn, 2004). Smokowski, Evans & Cotter (2014) observed that rural middle school youth in the Southeastern US reporting chronic victimization had the highest levels of peer rejection, anxiety, depression and externalizing behaviors.

LGBT students disproportionately represent victims of bullying. Nearly 80% of students endorsed verbal provocation about their sexual orientation in a survey of LGBT elementary and middle school children (Rivers, 1996). Swearer, Turner, Givens and Pollack (2008) observed that males who were bullied because they were called gay experienced greater psychological distress, greater verbal and physical bullying, and more negative perceptions of their school experiences than boys who were bullied for other reasons. Rivers (2004) conducted a series of interviews with 119 gay and bisexual adolescents and adults and observed that 17% met criteria for PTSD specifically related to their bullying experiences.

This study sought to evaluate the experience of bullying among LGBT youth in rural schools located in Southern Illinois.

Method

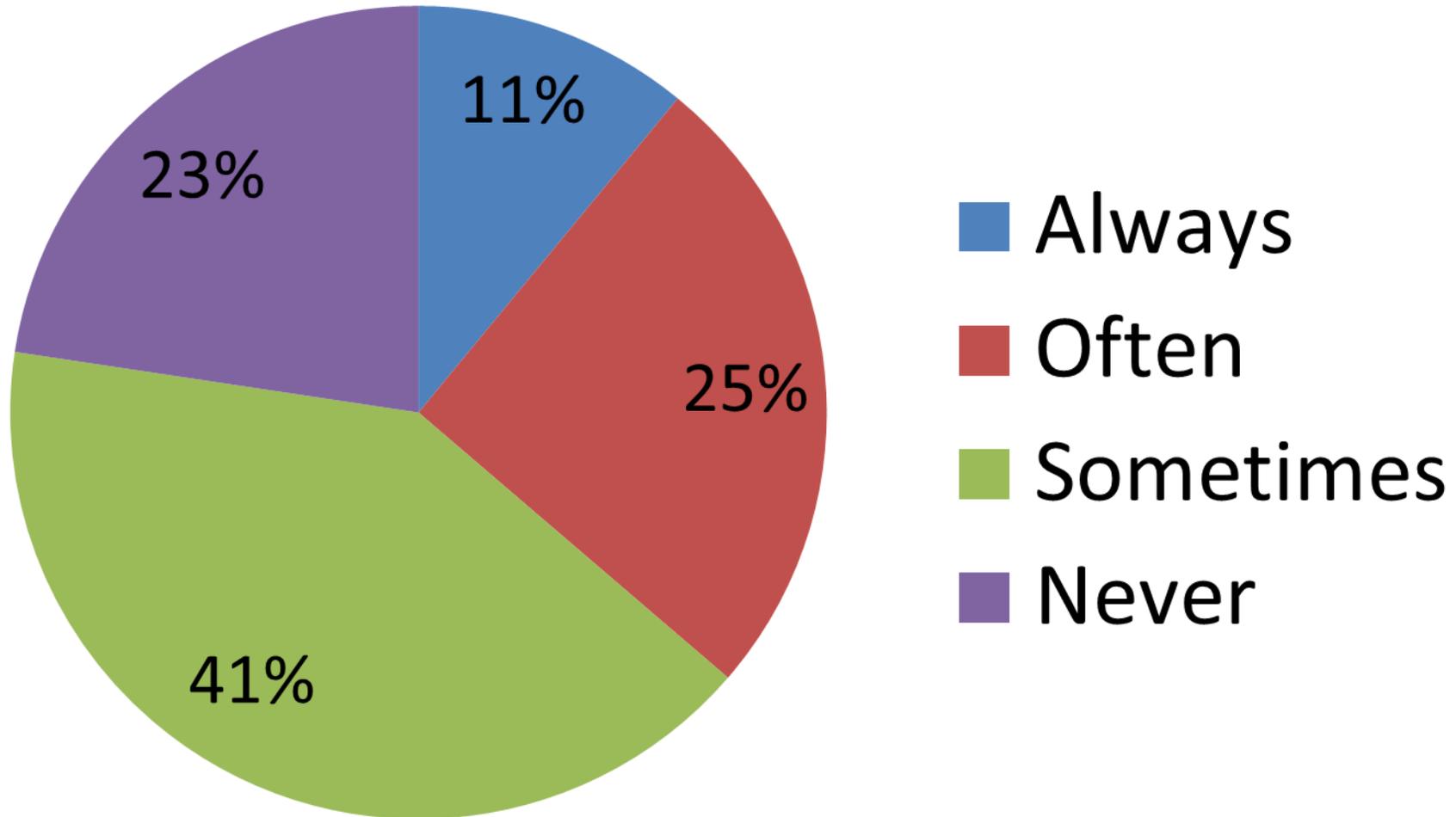
Students in grades 7-12 (n= 3042) from 20 school districts across Southern Illinois completed a School Climate Survey developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education assessing their experience of bullying and harassment and perceptions of school safety, prevention and intervention efforts. All districts were classified as Rural (Fringe/Distant/Remote, n= 12) or Town (Remote, n= 8) according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Surveys were completed in classrooms at dates/times designated by each school district. Time to complete the survey was approximately 30 – 45 min.

Results

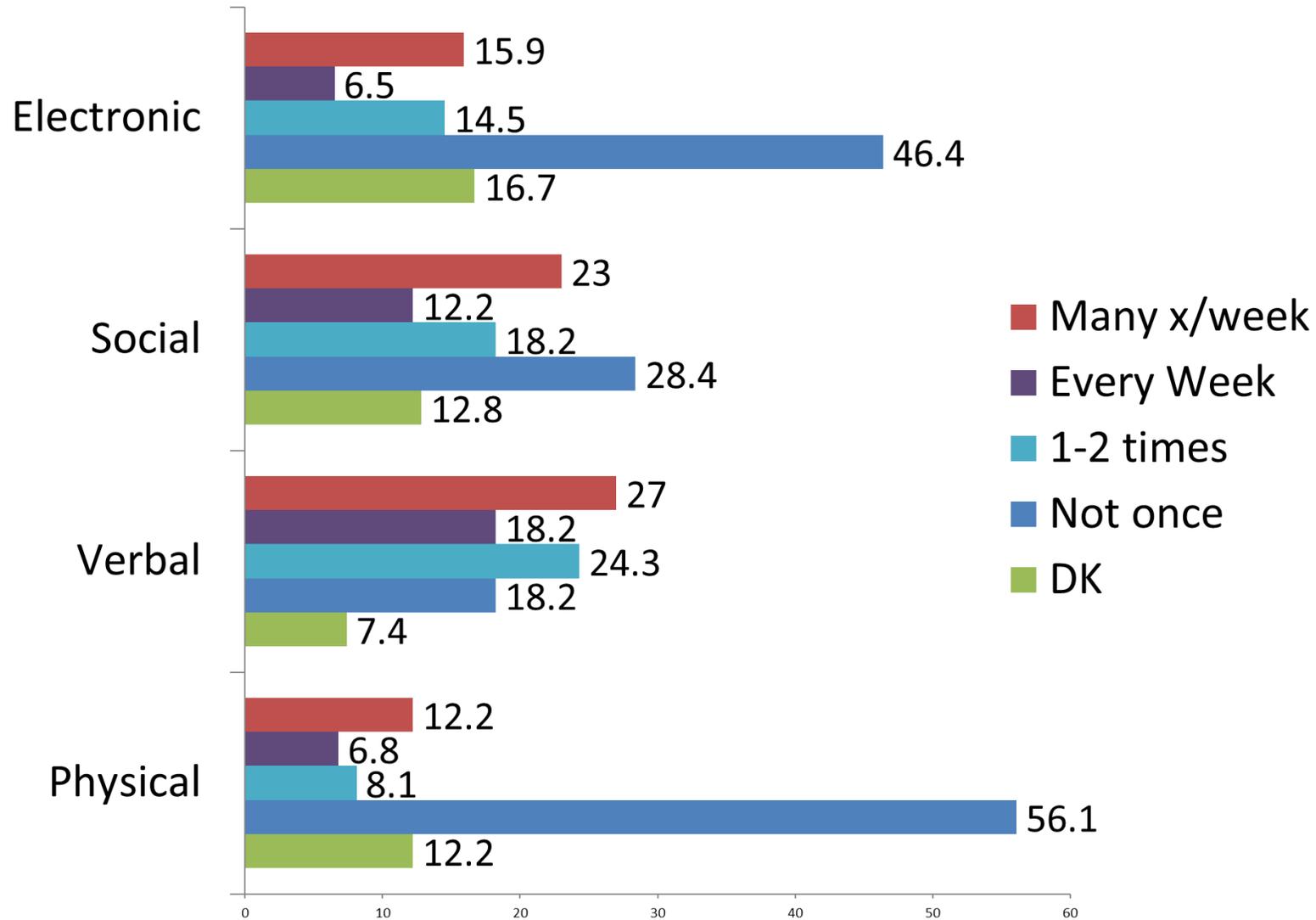
A total of 148 youth (4.9%) indicated they felt unwelcome or uncomfortable at school due to their sexual orientation. Of these youth, 22.75 specifically described their gender as male (n= 41), 49.3% (n= 73) as female , and 22.3% (n= 33) Other.

A small but significant number of youth (n= 33) never feel safe at school, and as many as 20- 45% report experiencing various forms of bullying at least once or many times per week.

Student Perceptions of Safety at School



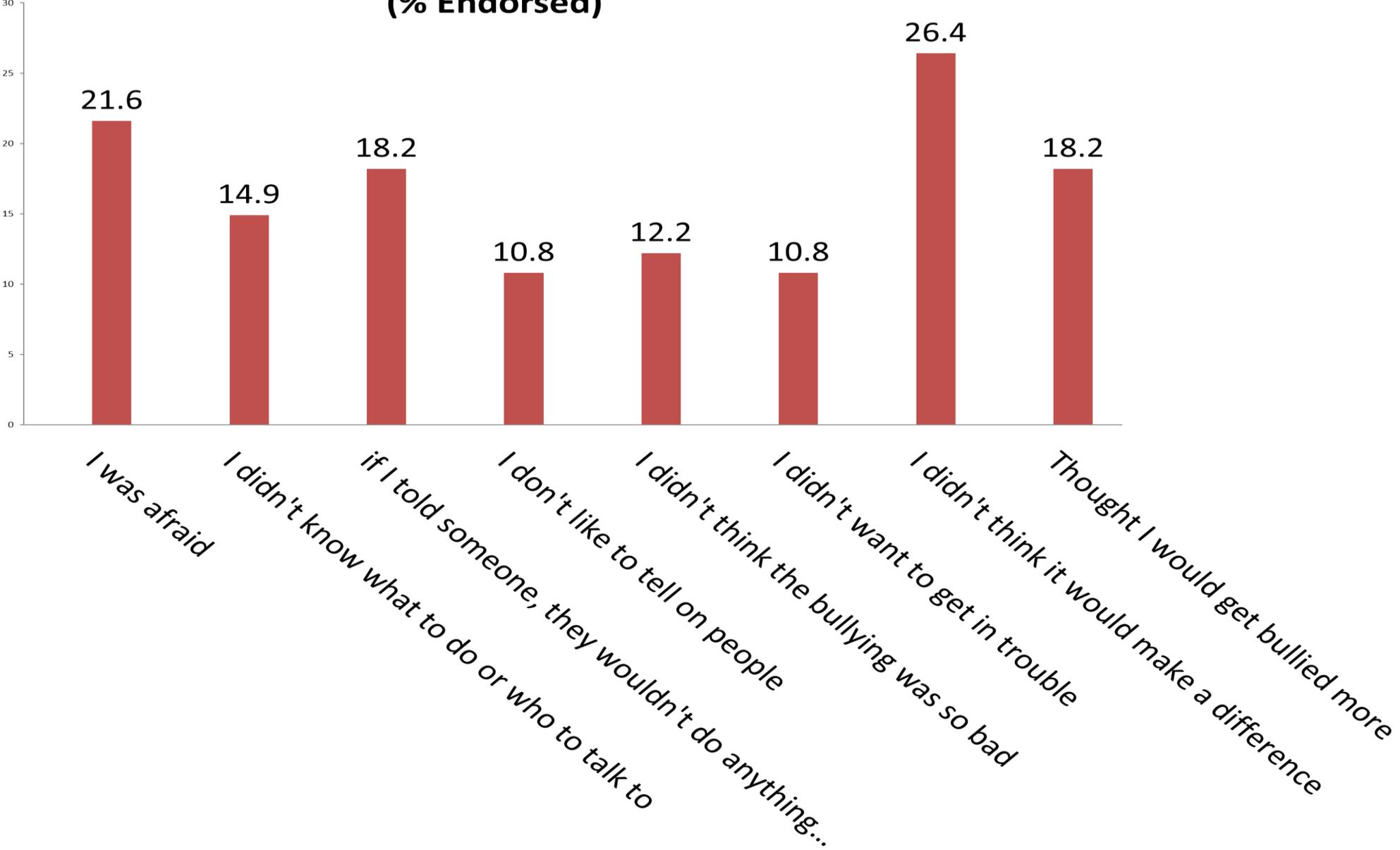
Percent Youth Who Experienced Bullying by Type/Frequency over Past Month



Results (continued)

Although the majority (70%) were aware of how to report bullying/harassment, notably only 16.9% (n = 25) told a teacher, 14.9% (n=22) told a principle/vice-principle, and 15.5% (n= 23) told any other adult at the school about experiences of bullying or harassment. Approximately 29% (n=43) told another student.

Reasons for Not Reporting (% Endorsed)



The following strategies were endorsed as potentially effective for addressing and preventing bullying by the percentages of students indicated.

Things School Should Do	% Recommended
Provide students w/info about bullying	41.2
Provide students w/info about how to report	35.8
Hold info meetings for parents/guardians	24.3
Provide training to teachers/staff	42.6
Have group/class discussions	48.6
Invite a guest speaker	34.5
Show films on topic	36.5
Have staff/students read books	22.3
Run programs	30.4
Do a school/class project	32.4
Hold an assembly	33.8
Involve students in prevention planning	40.5

Discussion

This is part of a larger project on school climate and bullying prevention funded by a grant from the National Institute of Justice, through their Comprehensive School Safety Initiative. Clearly much remains to be done with respect to assisting youth in our schools, most notably LGBT youth, with bullying and harassment. Simple solutions (i.e., conducting single assemblies or inviting guest speakers) were rated less favorably than holding class/group discussions and involving students in prevention planning. Interestingly, students did not perceive having parent meetings as likely to be helpful. The need for developing safe and effective mechanisms for reporting incidents appears to be a priority. More work is generally needed on the development and implementation of interventions to promote tolerance, equity and inclusiveness in education.

References

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