

Bullying hinders positive youth development for sexual-minority youth

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When compared with their heterosexual peers, sexual-minority youth score lower on key indicators of positive youth development—and those disparities may be due in part to more bullying of these adolescents, University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health researchers have found.

The findings, funded partly by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), are published online and scheduled for an upcoming issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

"This research quantifies how bullying hinders sexual-minority youths' access to the essential building blocks of health and well-being," said lead author Robert W.S. Coulter, M.P.H., a doctoral student in Pitt Public Health's Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences. "Anti-bullying policies at schools are necessary but insufficient. Multifaceted interventions in all arenas, including schools, families and communities, should focus on building more accepting and supportive environments for sexual-minority youth."

Mr. Coulter and his colleagues used data from a survey of 1,870 adolescents at U.S. schools and after-school programs in 45 states that measured positive youth development using the "Five Cs" model, which assesses competence, confidence, connection, character and caring/compassion. Higher levels of the Five Cs are associated with positive contributions to society, and lower levels are linked to myriad risky behaviors, including cigarette smoking, alcohol use and younger

sexual initiation. The survey also asked participants whether they had been bullied several times in the past several months.

Of the participants, 127 - or 6.8 percent - were identified as sexual-minority youth, meaning they reported having both-gender attractions or same-gender attractions only. Nearly 24 percent of them reported being a victim of bullying, compared with 12 percent of the heterosexual youths.

The sexual-minority youths scored significantly lower than their heterosexual counterparts in three of the Five Cs: competence, defined as having a positive view of one's actions in social, academic, cognitive and vocational arenas; confidence, defined as an internal sense of overall positive self-worth; and connection, defined as having supportive and positive bonds with peers, family, school and community.

"However, when we adjusted our models to control for the effects of bullying victimization, the differences in scores between sexual-minority and heterosexual youths reduced," said Mr. Coulter. "This suggests that bullying partly explains why sexual-minority youth had lower competence, confidence and connection."

Mr. Coulter went on to emphasize that [bullying](#) is not the only factor causing lower positive youth development scores for sexual-minority youths, but that other factors are likely contributing.

"Bullying is only one part of the story. It is one manifestation of more pervasive problems, such as stigma and discrimination," he said. "We need to take a holistic approach to positive [youth development](#) and create evidence-based programs that bring about a cultural change, allowing all youths, regardless of their sexual orientation, the same opportunity to thrive."

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

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