

Friendly teasing or traumatic bullying? Homophobic name-calling leaves scars

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A new study reveals the extent of homophobic name-calling among teenagers, and the damaging impact it has on mental health, regardless of whether the name-calling is from rivals, strangers or friends.

Study co-author Dr. Kai Lin, a sociologist and criminologist from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), said there was a belief that homophobic name-calling, particularly "teasing" among friends, was relatively harmless, however the study findings show that is not the case.

"Those who experienced homophobic name-calling, regardless of intention, reported a range of negative psychological and behavioral outcomes," Dr. Lin said. "These included [depressive symptoms](#) and a decreased sense of belonging at school."

More than 44% of teenagers in the study reported being called names such as "homo" or "gay" over the previous month. Around 17% of homophobic name-calling was from a friend, and while this was not as damaging as from a rival or stranger, it still had an impact on [mental health](#).

The data was drawn from a large sample of students in 36 midwestern middle schools in the United States, with the results recently published in the *Journal of School Violence*.

"We found that the mental health impact of homophobic name-calling was stronger for girls than for boys. This suggests that while homophobic name-calling may be more common among boys, girls may be more vulnerable to this type of victimization," Dr. Lin said.

"Boys who are seen as 'unmasculine', regardless of their sexual orientation, were more often the target of homophobic name-calling. We also found adverse mental health impacts were more pronounced among racial and ethnic minorities," he said.

The research confirms previous findings on the potent and enduring impact of homophobic bullying on mental health, including increased risk of anxiety, depression and suicide, and highlights the fine line

between bullying and teasing.

The study has important implications for bullying prevention and intervention practice and policymaking, and it offers three key policy and practice recommendations:

"First, at the school and school-district level, anti-bullying policies that provide clear definitions and examples of homophobic bullying and specify that these behaviors are not accepted, are strongly recommended, along with clear procedures for dealing with such behaviors."

"Second, at the classroom level, teachers should be educated on the detriments of homophobic name-calling and be trained to carry out timely interventions (including referrals to counseling and communicating with parents) as per school policies."

"Finally, regarding rehabilitation, supportive interventions involving communication are preferred over punitive measures such as suspension and expulsion. Tolerance and inclusion education, along with mental [health](#) counseling, should be the main focus."

Dr. Lin and Associate Professor Philip Birch, also a criminologist at UTS, are currently working with [quantitative data](#) from a [longitudinal study](#) managed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies called 'Tend to Men' that focuses on boys' and men's development, including topics like violence, [sexual orientation](#) development, and bullying.

Dr. Lin warns that leaving the socialization of youth primarily to [social media platforms](#) could exacerbate homophobic bullying and [antisocial behavior](#) and emphasizes the need for educators to develop strategies that encourage prosocial behavior.

"These findings are relevant for all educators and policymakers looking

at bullying prevention and intervention during adolescence, which is a critical developmental stage where gender socialization takes place and interpersonal skills are developed."

More information: Kai Lin et al, Friendly Teasing or Traumatic Bullying? Examining the Conditioning Effect of Social Distance on the Negative Psychological Outcomes of Homophobic Name-Calling, *Journal of School Violence* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/15388220.2023.2211769](https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2023.2211769)

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