

Harassment Among California Students, 2006–08

The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) asks students in grades 7, 9, and 11 a series of questions to ascertain the frequency they experienced harassment or bullying at school in the past 12 months, as well as another series asking whether they experienced specific types of physical or verbal harassment. CHKS Factsheet #4 summarized an analysis of 2001–02 data for secondary students as a group across five types of bias-related harassment (BRH) — race/ethnicity/national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation (“Because you are gay or lesbian or someone thought you were”), or physical or mental disability. This new factsheet updates this analysis using the much larger 2006–08 dataset and extends it to include data on grade-level differences, the type of harassment, and the relationship of harassment to a wider range of CHKS indicators.

The current results suggest we have made little if no progress in reducing harassment among California secondary students, especially for race/ethnicity. Thirty-seven percent of secondary students *self-reported* being harassed at least once. Even higher rates resulted when students were asked about types of verbal harassment. Victims of harassment are more likely than the non-harassed to be characterized by school-related health-risks, feelings, and experiences that compromise learning and well-being. They are more likely to not feel safe at, and connected to, school; to have higher truancy; and to experience lower developmental supports at school (caring adult relations, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation). Further, harassed youth reported higher rates of fighting and weapons possession at school, as well as risk of depression. All five groups of BRH had poorer well-being than students who were only harassed for other reasons. Victims of harassment based on disability and, to a lesser extent, sexual

orientation had particularly high levels of these negative behaviors, feelings, and experiences.

Prevalence & Frequency of Harassment by Reason

Overall Prevalence. Table 1 provides the rates of harassment by reason reported by secondary students overall in 2006–08. Some bias-related or other harassment was self-reported by 37%. About half or more of harassed students (depending on grade and category) reported more than one experience (not shown in tables). However, when asked about specific types of harassment, students report higher rates (see below).

Reasons for Harassment. At least one bias-related harassment (BRH) was reported by 29% of secondary students; they constitute over three-quarters of students experiencing any harassment. The most frequently cited BRH was for race, ethnicity, or national origin, at 18%. Next was a grouping of gender, religion, and sexual orientation at around 10%, with the percentage for disability half that.

In addition, 23% indicated some other reason (non-specified) for harassment. Almost two-thirds of these ORH also reported BRH; only 8% of secondary students reported that they were harassed *only* for a non-BRH reason. Although students are not asked to specify the non-BRH reasons, another question sheds some light on this: 39% of secondary students were made fun of because of the way they looked or talked (see Table 2), which makes this the most common specific reason.

Trends. As Table 1 also shows, these results are very consistent with those in 2001–02, indicating little progress in reducing harassment among California students. The

Table 1. Prevalence of Harassment by Reason

Type of Harassment	2006–08				
	2001–02 Total (%)	Total (%)	7 th Grade (%)	9 th Grade (%)	11 th Grade (%)
Experienced any harassment	37	37	43	37	31
Experienced any bias-related harassment (BRH):	27	29	33	29	25
• Race, ethnicity, or national origin	14	18	19	18	16
• Religion	9	10	10	10	9
• Gender (male or female)	10	10	12	9	8
• Sexual orientation (gay or lesbian, or perceived to be)	8	10	11	10	7
• Physical or mental disability	5	5	6	6	4
• Two or more of five BRH reasons	n/a	13	15	13	11
Harassed for some other reason (not bias-related)	23	23	28	23	17
Harassed only for some other reason	10	8	11	8	6

percentage for any harassment remained level. Moreover, there was a four-point increase in harassment for race/ethnicity, contributing to an overall increase of two-points in BRH. In contrast, the percentage for experiencing only non-biased harassment declined two points.

Grade-level Differences. The percentage of secondary students reporting harassment generally declines across grades. Any harassment declined 12 points, from 43% in 7th grade to 31% in 11th. The percentage reporting non-biased (other) harassment declined more than the biased-related, so that by 11th grade 81% of the harassed population cited BRH, compared to 77% in 7th grade. There were variations in regard to type of BRH: whereas the percentages for race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation also declined across grades (each by 3–4 percentage points), the percentages for religion and disability remained relatively stable.

Characteristics of Harassed Students by Group

Table 3 compares harassed and non-harassed students across a wide range of twelve other CHKS well-being indicators. Data are presented for each of the five BRH groups, for the BRH group overall, and for the students who were harassed *only* for other reasons (ORH). With the exception of the depression-risk indicator of incapacitating sadness or hopelessness, all well-being indicators

are school-based.

BRH students as a group consistently have markedly *lower well-being* across indicators than students who were not harassed. In the biggest differences, the BRH were over twice as likely to report incapacitating sadness/hopelessness (46% vs. 23%), carrying a weapon at school (21% vs. 8%), and being in a physical fight at school (20% vs. 9%). They were about 1.5 times more likely to not feel safe at school (54% vs. 36%) and almost four times more likely to fear a beating at school (44% vs. 12%). Reflecting these results, they were also more likely to be *not* high in school connectedness (66% s. 53%).

Differences were smaller between the ORH and non-harassed students, with rough equivalence in grades, truancy, high expectations, and current marijuana use and binge drinking. The biggest differences were higher percentages among ORH for incapacitating sadness, almost twice as high (40%); fearing a beating at school, three times as high (35%); poor sense of school safety (49%); and poor school connectedness (61%). *All victims of harassment were more likely than non-harassed to experience poor mental health and to feel less safe at and connected to school.*

Group Differences among BRH. Among the BRH, percentages for some groups were notably higher compared

Table 2. Type of Harassment or Victimization Experienced, 2006–08

<i>Type of Harassment or Victimization</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>	<i>7th Grade (%)</i>	<i>9th Grade (%)</i>	<i>11th Grade (%)</i>
Been pushed, shoved, hit	34	44	34	24
Been threatened or injured with a weapon	9	11	9	7
Had mean rumors/lies spread about you	43	49	42	40
Had sexual jokes/comments/gestures made to you	46	43	48	49
Been made fun of because of your looks/way talk	39	43	38	34

to the non-harassed than for the BRH as a whole. This is because youth could select as many reasons for harassment as possible, and there was considerable overlap.

Students who are harassed because of a *physical or mental disability* had the poorest results, exceeding the mean percentages for any BRH by considerable margins. Their biggest differences from other BRH were in higher percentages for carrying weapons (39% vs. 24–29%), being threatened by a weapon (36% vs. 22%–27%), and being in a physical fight (31% vs. 23–25%), results likely inter-related. Compared to the non-harassed, their percentage for being threatened by weapon is nine times higher; for carrying a weapon, almost five times higher. Other notable differences were higher truancy, binge drinking, and marijuana use; lower expectations from staff.

Overall, youth harassed for *sexual orientation* had the next highest percentages. They particularly stand out for their relatively high rates for experiencing poor grades and depression risk. They also had higher percentages for each type of physical and verbal harassment than did the race/ethnicity and religion groups. The *gender-harassed* stand out (along with sexual orientation and disability) with elevated rates for depression risk. Those harassed for *race/ethnicity* and *religion* tended to have similar percentages.

Harassment and Academic Achievement. One area in which differences between harassed and non-harassed students were relatively small was for reporting usually receiving classroom grades of C's or lower. Still, the BRH-group percentage is two-points higher than the non-harassed, and for the sexual orientation and disability

categories, they are 4–5 points higher. For grades of mostly D's or lower (not shown in table), the percentages for students harassed for their sexual orientation and disability were twice as great as non-harassed students (14% and 15%, respectively, vs. 7%), and BRH was 3 points higher.

Type of Harassment (Physical/Verbal)

Prevalence Rates by Type. Table 2 provides results for five different types of physical and verbal harassment on school property. Most public concerns about harassment are focused on physical violence. However, prevalence rates were much higher for the three verbal harassment indicators (mean rumors/lies, sexual jokes/comments/gestures, made fun of because of looks or speech), ranging from 39% to 46%, than for being pushed/shoved (34%) or threatened with a weapon (9%).

The percentages for verbal harassment are higher by two to nine points than the percentage for any harassment that resulted from student self-identification, as shown in Table 1. This suggests that not all students view these experiences as harassment, although they are typically defined by such in research and school practice. Supportive of this, Table 3 shows that from about one-quarter to one-third of the non-harassed students reported some form of verbal harassment. Moreover, one-fifth of the non-harassed reported that they had been pushed, shoved, and kicked when the aggressor was not kidding around. If we take verbal harassment into consideration, the prevalence of harassed youth in California may be over 40%.

Group Differences. All BRH exceeded the ORH in each type of harassment, by a factor of almost two for being threatened/injured by a weapon, which may be related to why they report higher rates for carrying weapons. Verbal harassment was reported by 66%–70% of BRH. The disability–harassed exceed all other BRH by a wide margin for being threatened by a weapon (36%). Along with those harassed for gender and sexual orientation, they had the higher rates for being made fun for their looks/speech (range 74%–76%). The harassed for gender and sexual orientation had the highest percentages for sexual jokes (81% and 79%, respectively), as did sexual orientation for mean rumors (76%). These group differences in type of harassment are consistent with the reason for harassment. The race/ethnicity and religion groups generally had the lowest (and similar) prevalence rates across types.

Conclusion

In summary, from 37% to 46% of California secondary students, depending on the measure, appear to have been the victims of harassment in the year prior to their taking the CHKS. For three–quarters of the self–reported harassed population this was because of some bias–related reason, with race/ethnicity being the most common reason. Among this BRH group, half reported being pushed, shoved, or kicked, and about sixty percent experienced verbal harassment, with percentages even higher among specific groups.

Harassed students are at greater risk than non–harassed students of a wide range of detrimental behaviors, emotions, and experiences, including poorer school attendance, lower levels of school connectedness and safety, and feelings related to depression. Such problems were particularly common among students exposed to biased–related harassment, especially related to disability and sexual orientation.

The BRH also had lower self–reported grades. In some cases, the differences were relatively small, but this may be related to the limitations of self–report. A recent meta–analysis of 33 separate studies concluded that students who are bullied are more likely to earn lower grades and score lower on standardized achievement tests. More–

over, the small number of longitudinal studies that have been undertaken indicate being the victim of bullying is a precursor to academic difficulties. The main theoretical framework argues that victimization, particularly at school, can lead to significant emotional and physical distress in multiple domains that can compromise academic achievement. While CHKS data cannot shed light on causal factors, these results are consistent with this framework. The fear they experience is reflected in their higher rates of carrying weapons to school, affecting the safety of all students.

These results underscore the importance of school policies and programs for preventing and responding to harassment, particularly when it is bias–related. Efforts to turn–around low–performing schools and under–achieving students should take into consideration the potential role of harassment of students on campus may play. Schools will have to address multiple problem behaviors when responding to the needs of harassment victims. Although youth harassed because of disability are the smallest bias–related harassment group, they also experienced the most adverse effects, indicating that special education programs need to pay attention to how harassment may be affecting their students. That self–reported harassment has not declined over the past five years and way have even increased in regard to race/ethnicity is especially troubling.

About the Data

The data used in this analysis were provide by approximately 254,000 students in 7th grade, 240,000 in 9th grade, and 206,000 in 11th grade in 4,000 elementary schools and 3,000 secondary schools in 800 school districts throughout the state.

Endnotes

1 These are the five protected classes covered by California Penal Code 628 for determination of whether a hate crime has occurred.

2 Nakamoto, J., & Schwartz, D. (2010). Is peer victimization associated with academic achievement? A meta–analytic review. *Social Development*, 19, 221–242.

Table 3. Characteristics of Harassed Secondary Students, by Category, 2006–08

	Bias-related Harassment (BRH)						Only Other Reason Harassed (ORH) (%)	Not Harassed (%)
	Race, Ethnicity, National Origin (%)	Religion (%)	Gender (%)	Sexual Orientation (Actual or Perceived) (%)	Physical or Mental Disability (%)	Any Bias Related Harassed (%)		
School Performance and Engagement								
Grades usually C's or below ^c	22	20	21	24	25	22	20	20
Skipped school/classes more than two times ^c	24	24	26	26	30	23	17	18
Not high in school connectedness	69	68	69	70	72	66	61	53
School Developmental Supports (Not High)								
Caring Adult Relationships	71	69	70	71	73	69	68	65
High Expectations	56	56	55	56	60	54	50	50
Opportunities Meaningful Participation	87	85	85	87	87	87	88	85
Mental Health Indicators								
Incapacitating sadness (depression risk) <small>c,d</small>	47	49	54	55	56	46	40	23
Binge drinking ^a	17	19	20	21	26	16	11	12
Used marijuana ^a	14	16	17	18	23	14	9	10
School Safety and Violence								
Did not feel safe/very safe/school	57	53	56	55	56	54	49	36
Been afraid of being beaten ^c	41	44	47	50	53	44	35	12
Carried weapon/school ^c	24	28	28	29	39	21	11	8
Been in a physical fight/school ^c	23	25	24	25	31	20	14	9
Type of Harassment at School^c								
Threatened/injured with weapon ^c	22	26	26	27	36	19	10	4
Pushed, shoved, kicked ^c	58	59	62	63	68	55	51	22
Had mean rumors/lies spread ^c	66	68	74	76	73	66	61	30
Made fun of for looks/talking ^c	68	68	74	75	76	66	62	24
Sexual joke/comment, gesture ^c	71	71	81	79	76	70	60	34

Source: California Department of Education, California Healthy Kids Survey.

^a In the past 30 days.

^b Lifetime (ever).

^c In the past 12 months.

^d For at least 2 weeks during the previous 12 months, felt so sad or hopeless that they stopped doing usual activities.

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