Bullying and Victimization among Out of Home and LGBT Youth

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Abstract. Bullying and victimization among youth in out-of-home placement (OOH) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth were investigated. Participants were 16,766 high school students, with 560 (3%) identifying as OOH, 1,539 (9%) as LGBT, and 113 (1%) as OOH+LGBT. Independent samples t-tests and structural equation modeling were used to assess group differences. Results indicated higher levels of 30 day victimization and 30 day bullying for OOH youth compared to non-OOH youth, LGBT youth compared to non-LGBT youth, and OOH+LGBT youth compared to OOH only/LGBT only youth. Positive parenting, peer relationships, and school support mitigated bullying and victimization for all groups; however OOH, LGBT, and OOH+LGBT youth reported significantly lower mean levels of support from these sources than non-OOH/non-LGBT youth.

1. Introduction

Professionals and researchers agree that bullying is a serious problem among youth [1,2]. School can provide challenging social situations for a child and aggressive peer relationships can make these years even more difficult. Bullying and victimization have been linked to several negative outcomes, including problematic behaviors (i.e. smoking, drinking, and criminal behavior) and poor school adjustment for bullies, and depression, low self-esteem, poor social and emotional adjustment, greater difficulty making friends, poor peer relationships, and loneliness for victims [1,2]. Researchers define bullying as repeated negative actions against another that intend to harm and in which there is an imbalance of power with a more powerful person attacking a less powerful individual [3,1,2]. These attacks can be physical, verbal, or psychological. Reported rates of bullying and victimization among middle and high school students vary from 11% to 81% [4,5,1].

Little is known about the rates of bullying and victimization among youth in out of home (OOH) placement (i.e. youth residing in foster homes, group homes, or residential facilities) as much of the research has focused on youth who may have harsh or neglectful parents but who still reside in their parents’ home [6]. Additionally, what little information is known about bullying and victimization among lesbian, gay, bisexual youth or youth questioning their sexual orientation (LGBT) has come from retrospective reports of adults [7]. This study focused on both of these groups of youth.

Three hypotheses about rates of bullying and victimization were tested. First, it was hypothesized that OOH youth would report higher rates of bullying and victimization than non-OOH youth. Second, it was hypothesized that LGBT youth would report higher rates of victimization but similar rates of bullying as compared to non-LGBT youth. Third, it was hypothesized that youth who experience both OOH placement and LGBT identification would report higher rates of victimization than youth who experienced only OOH placement or who only endorse LGBT status. These hypotheses emerged from a review of the existing literature and the work experience of the researcher. As a second goal, this research examined how support from adults at school, negative parenting, positive peer support, and deviant peer involvement affected risk for peer bullying and victimization. It was hypothesized that the quality of these social relationships would mitigate or exacerbate rates of youth bullying or victimization.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Data for this study were collected in the 2009 Dane County Youth Assessment in Dane County, Wisconsin. Participants were students enrolled in Dane County schools during the 2008-2009 school year. Fourteen of the sixteen school districts in Dane County agreed to participate in the study and all of these schools attempted to survey every student in grades 7 through 12. Response rates between 85% and 92%. District survey results were aggregated to create the data set. The sample consisted of 24,394 youth and was representative to Dane County youth with regard to age, gender, and race. Questionnaires were administered electronically and consisted of 117 questions about a variety of topics including demographic information, home life, school life, community life, risky behaviors, and emotional health.
Data used for this research only included youth in grades 9 through 12. Survey questions used for this research included sexual orientation, past and current out of home living situations (i.e. foster home, group home, residential facility), relationships with parents, peers, and adults at school, and bullying and victimization in school. Parenting questions inquired about skillful parenting, abusive parenting, and negative parent modeling. Peer questions assessed for deviant peer involvement and the presence of positive peer support. Adult support at school inquired about school belongingness and the presence of positive, trustworthy adults at school. Bullying and victimization questions assessed for physical and relational bullying. The resulting sample size was 16,766 with 560 (3%) identifying as having spent time in out of home (OOH) placement, 1539 (9%) identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexual orientation (LGBT), and 113 (1%) identifying as both (OOH+LGBT).

Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and structural equation modeling were used to assess group differences. Results indicated higher levels of 30 day victimization and 30 day bullying for OOH youth as compared to non-OOH youth, LGBT youth as compared to non-LGBT youth, and OOH+LGBT youth as compared to OOH only or LGBT only youth. Furthermore, OOH youth reported more victimization through the internet or text messaging than non-OOH youth, more victimization for being perceived as LGBT than non-OOH youth, and more victimization for physical appearance than non-OOH in the last 12 months. This was also true for LGBT youth when compared to non-LGBT youth. OOH+LGBT youth reported more victimization than OOH only or LGBT only youth with regard to internet or text messaging and for being perceived as LGBT. The impact of parenting, peer relationships, and school support on bullying and victimization was similar for all youth; however OOH, LGBT, and OOH+LGBT youth reported significantly lower mean levels of positive support from each of these sources compared to their non-OOH and non-LGBT counterparts.

3. Conclusions

Results from this study suggest the risk and protective social-relationship factors associated with bullying and victimization are the same for all groups of youth, and may serve as potential targets for universal anti-bullying programs. From a prevention perspective, programs focused on creating healthy family and parenting environments may be a particularly powerful strategy in that patterned, high rate bullying and victimization may reflect a failure in socialization that begins early in the home and continues into adolescence. If abusive parenting and negative modeling by parents can be reduced and replaced with healthy, positive parenting practices, the child is more likely to develop the social and self-regulatory skills to relate to peers in more constructive ways. This is true for all youth, but perhaps even more so for OOH youth, LGBT youth and OOH+LGBT youth who on average experience less supportive home environments and whose risk for bullying and victimization is greater than the more general population of youth.

References