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Characteristics of bias-based harassment incidents reported by a national sample of U.S. adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Using a national sample of youth from the U.S., this paper examines incidents of bias-based harassment by peers that include language about victims' perceived sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, weight or height, or intelligence. Telephone interviews were conducted with youth who were 10–20 years old ($n = 791$). One in six youth (17%) reported at least one experience with bias-based harassment in the past year. Bias language was a part of over half (52%) of all harassment incidents experienced by youth. Perpetrators of bias-based harassment were similar demographically to perpetrators of non-biased harassment. However, bias-based incidents were more likely to involve multiple perpetrators, longer timeframes and multiple harassment episodes. Even controlling for these related characteristics, the use of bias language in incidents of peer harassment resulted in significantly greater odds that youth felt sad as a result of the victimization, skipped school, avoided school activities, and lost friends, compared to non-biased harassment incidents.

A growing body of research has identified that bias-based victimization is experienced by large numbers of youth (Bucchianeri, Gower, McMorris, & Eisenberg, 2016; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014; Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016), with emotional outcomes that can include depression, anxiety, and self-esteem problems (Potet & Espelage, 2007; Puhl et al., 2017; Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, 2015). However, most research has focused on certain types of bias-based victimization (e.g., weight-based harassment) or the experiences of particular subgroups of youth (e.g., sexual and gender minority youth). Larger studies looking at multiple types of bias-based victimization typically rely on a few questions included in national or school-based surveys, with limited details about the context or nature of the victimization incidents (Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2016). Research is needed that examines a range of bias-based harassment experiences with enough detail to better understand the similarities and differences between these incidents and non-biased harassment incidents. The current study addresses this gap using nationally representative survey data from a sample of youth, ages 10–20 years old.

1. Prevalence of bias-based harassment

Bias-based harassment is defined in the current study as physical, verbal or relational aggression in which youth are targeted or demeaned because of their perceived race, ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, sexual or gender identity, disability, or weight. With this definition, bias-based harassment incorporates a more comprehensive range of victimization experiences than bullying, which is

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typically defined as harassment perpetrated multiple times by another youth more powerful than the victim (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). A number of surveys provide evidence that youth bias-based harassment experiences are relatively common. The *Indicators of School Crime and Safety Survey*, for example, found that, in 2015, 7% of surveyed youth, 12–18 years old, had been targeted by hate-related words in the previous year (Zhang et al., 2016). The *National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence (NatSCEV)* found 3% of children ages 3–17 had suffered a bias-based physical assault (i.e., being hit or attacked) in their lifetime (Saito, Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2017). Additionally, data from the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) found that 22% of youth reported weight or appearance-based victimization, and 5–10% of students reported race-, sexual orientation-, disability-, or gender-based harassment in the previous year (Bucchianeri et al., 2016).

Research also has established that rates of bias-based harassment and other types of victimization are higher among some vulnerable groups of youth compared to the general population. Research has documented, for example, that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth experience higher rates of bullying victimization than other youth (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Eisenberg, Gower, McMorris, & Bucchianeri, 2015). A national survey of youth found that 44% of gay males reported past year bullying experiences compared to 26% of heterosexual males (Berlan et al., 2010). LGBTQ youth also report high rates of verbal harassment, physical harassment, and sexual harassment (Kosciw et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2014).

Weight- or appearance-based teasing and bullying is regularly noted to be one of the most common forms of bias-based harassment (Bucchianeri, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2015; Puhl et al., 2017). Most studies find youth who are overweight report teasing and bullying at higher rates than other youth (Bucchianeri et al., 2013; Lumeng et al., 2010). Research has also documented that youth with physical or intellectual disabilities are at higher risk for peer harassment and bullying (Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, & Benz, 2012; Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2015; Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009; Sterzing, Shattuck, Narendorf, Wagner, & Cooper, 2012; Turner, Vanderminden, Finkelhor, Hamby, & Shattuck, 2011). Youth with disabilities involving interpersonal and behavioral components such as autism spectrum disorders and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders are at particularly high risk (Blake et al., 2012; Sterzing et al., 2012; Turner, Finkelhor, et al., 2015).

While some research has found that youth in racial and ethnic minority groups report higher rates of racially-motivated bullying (Larochette, Murphy, & Craig, 2010; Mendez, Bauman, Sulkowski, Davis, & Nixon, 2016), other research has been less conclusive (Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2015). Some have suggested that experiences with racially-motivated bias harassment are heavily influenced by contextual factors such as school and community racial diversity, composition and climates (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Larochette et al., 2010; Peguero & Popp, 2012; Peguero, 2009; Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006; Schumann, Craig, & Rosu, 2013; Vervoort, Scholte, & Overbeek, 2010). It may also be that the groups of youth who are at greatest risk for this kind of harassment are not identified through large national surveys. For example, some emerging research suggests that bullying is suffered disproportionately by immigrant versus non-immigrant youth (Maynard, Vaughn, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2016; Peguero, 2009; Shively et al., 2014) and there is research documenting bullying and discrimination of religious minority youth, and Muslim American youth in particular (Aroian, 2012; Khanlou, Koh, & Mill, 2008).

2. Impact of bias-based victimization

Given the proportions of youth experiencing bias-based victimization, it is concerning that research finds significant negative social and emotional outcomes. Homophobic teasing has been found to increase risk for depression, anxiety, health problems, drinking, self-harm and suicidal ideation for sexual minority youth (Almeida et al., 2009; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012; Tucker et al., 2016). Additionally, youth who are harassed about weight experience higher rates of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation than those not experiencing such harassment (Bucchianeri, Eisenberg, Wall, Piran, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2003). Research has also found that the number of types of bias-based harassment experienced by youth has a positive linear correlation with self-esteem problems, self-harm, substance use, and depressive symptoms (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003; Bucchianeri et al., 2013, 2014, 2016). However, substantial research has also documented that harassment and bullying in general has significant negative impact on youth (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015) and it is important to distinguish if bias measurably increases the negative impact the incident for victims.

There are a number of theories to suggest that the use of biased language will add to the distress that youth already experience as a result of a peer harassment incident. Early theories on stigma, prejudice, and discrimination emphasized the psychological and sociological harms caused when individuals are negatively targeted by peer groups for characteristics that mark them as different or outsiders in some way (Allport, 1954; Duckitt, 1992; Major & O'Brien, 2005). These foundational understandings contributed to the development of minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), highlighting ways in which discrimination and victimization can manifest in a range of negative psychological and health outcomes for minority subgroups (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013). Minority stress theory would suggest that when a harassment incident involves derogatory language, it contributes to an existing burden of stress for vulnerable youth, heightening the negative experience of the incident.

3. Current study

The current study analyzes information from a large, national sample of youth ($n = 791$; ages 10–20), examining the following research questions: 1) At what rates do youth report bias-based harassment targeting different personal characteristics (sexual

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