

## Bullying among lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in England

### Introduction

Bullying involves unequal power relationships between bullies and those who are bullied. It is widely believed that minority groups are more likely to be bullied. This is important because the adverse effects of bullying are well documented, and can include an increased risk of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and poorer overall health. For some, these problems persist into adulthood. In order to prevent these long-term negative effects, it is important to understand who is most at risk of being bullied.

There are few large scale studies of sexual minority groups' experiences of bullying. This briefing paper addresses this gap by looking at the lives of 7,220 young adults from across England who are being followed by Next Steps (previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England). It examines the relationship

between sexual identities and bullying, including how frequently lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people are bullied, the types of bullying they experience, and how this is related to their satisfaction with their lives as they get older.

At age 20<sup>1,2</sup> young adults were asked about their sexual identity

and whether they had been bullied in the previous 12 months. This information was compared to their experiences of bullying during compulsory secondary school (ages 14 to 16), and their individual and family characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, disability status, and family socioeconomic background.

### Key findings

- LGB young adults had a **52 per cent chance** of having ever been bullied in the previous 12 months at age 20, compared to heterosexual young adults who had a **38 per cent chance**.
- During their compulsory schooling, LGB young people had a **56 per cent chance** of having ever been bullied in the previous 12 months, compared to heterosexual young people who had a **45 per cent chance**.
- LGB young people had a **17 per cent chance** of being bullied frequently during compulsory schooling, while heterosexual young people had a **6 per cent chance**.
- LGB young people were **more than twice as likely** as their heterosexual classmates to be physically bullied and excluded from social groups during secondary school.
- LGB young adults were less likely to report being very satisfied with their lives than their heterosexual peers.
- All young adults – regardless of sexual identity – were less likely to be very satisfied with their lives if they had been bullied.

## What were participants asked about bullying?

Participants were asked about their experiences of being bullied in the previous 12 months at ages 14, 15, 16 and 20.

Participants who said they had been bullied were then asked how often they were bullied in the past 12 months, and what types of bullying they had experienced. All those who had been bullied at all in the past 12 months were classified as 'ever been bullied'. Those who responded that they experienced one or more types of bullying 'once every two weeks or more' were considered to be 'frequently bullied'.

## Types of bullying

### Physical bullying:

Physical attacks such as punching, kicking or theft

### Verbal bullying:

Verbal aggression, such as name calling or threatening behaviour

### Relational bullying:

Social exclusion, such as intentionally ignoring someone or leaving them out of activities

### Cyber bullying:

Any aggression through the internet and mobile phones

# Findings

## The risk of being bullied

Figure 1 shows that young adults who identified as LGB had a 52 per cent chance of ever being bullied in the previous year, compared to their heterosexual peers who had a 38 per cent chance. They also had a 1 in 10 chance of being bullied frequently at this age, compared to a 1 in 14 chance for heterosexual 20-year-olds, although the findings on frequent bullying at this age were statistically insignificant – meaning they could be due to chance.

Young adults' experiences of being bullied had improved slightly from their school years. During compulsory secondary schooling (Years 9 to 11, or ages 14 to 16), young people who went on to identify as LGB as adults were at even greater risk of being bullied – a 56 per cent chance, compared to 45 per cent for pupils who identified as heterosexual in early adulthood. LGB young people also had a just over 1 in 6 chance of being frequently bullied during compulsory schooling, compared to a roughly 1 in 16 chance for their heterosexual classmates.

FIGURE 1:  
Likelihood of being bullied at age 20 and between ages 14-16, by sexuality

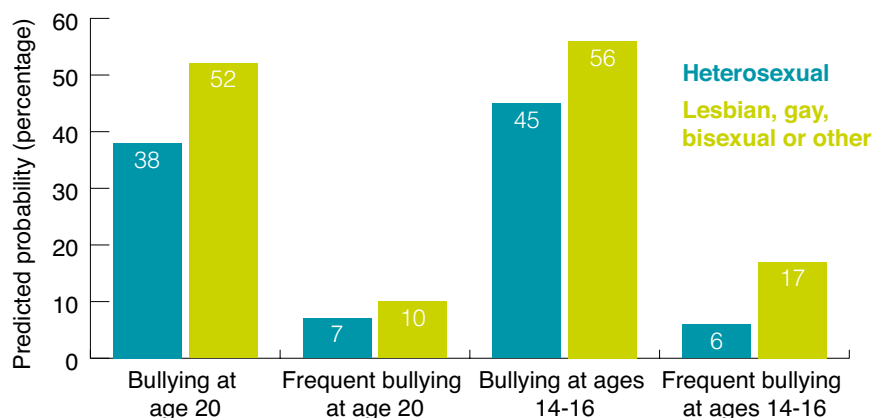
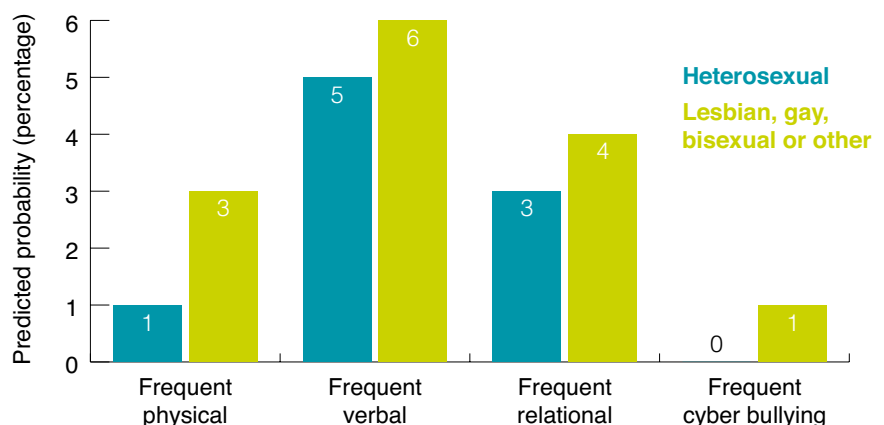


FIGURE 2:  
Likelihood of experiencing different types of bullying at age 20, by sexuality



## Types of bullying experienced frequently

Bullying can come in many forms. Figure 2 shows that young LGB adults were more likely to experience frequent physical, verbal, relational or cyber bullying than their heterosexual peers, but the differences were small and statistically insignificant at this age.

However, the differences between the experiences of heterosexual and LGB young adults were much stronger when they were at secondary school. Figure 3 shows that LGB youth were

significantly more likely to experience all types of frequent bullying than their classmates who were heterosexual, with the exception of cyber bullying, which was not significant. This was true even when taking into account other family or individual characteristics that may make someone more likely to be bullied, such as gender, ethnicity, disability, or family socioeconomic background.

Overall, bullying was less common among young adults than secondary school pupils, with the exception of verbal bullying, which increased at age 20 for heterosexual young adults.

## Bullying and life satisfaction

At age 20, participants were asked how dissatisfied or satisfied they were with how their lives had turned out so far. Figure 4 shows that young adults who identified as LGB were less likely to report being very satisfied with their lives than their heterosexual peers.

However, Figure 4 also shows that anyone who experienced frequent forms of bullying at any age was slightly less likely to report being 'very satisfied' with life, compared to those who were never bullied. This was true regardless of sexual identity.

There is some evidence that the effect of being bullied at age 20 has a stronger effect on life satisfaction at the same age than being bullied during school, although the difference is small.

FIGURE 3:  
Likelihood of experiencing different types of bullying between ages 14-16, by sexuality

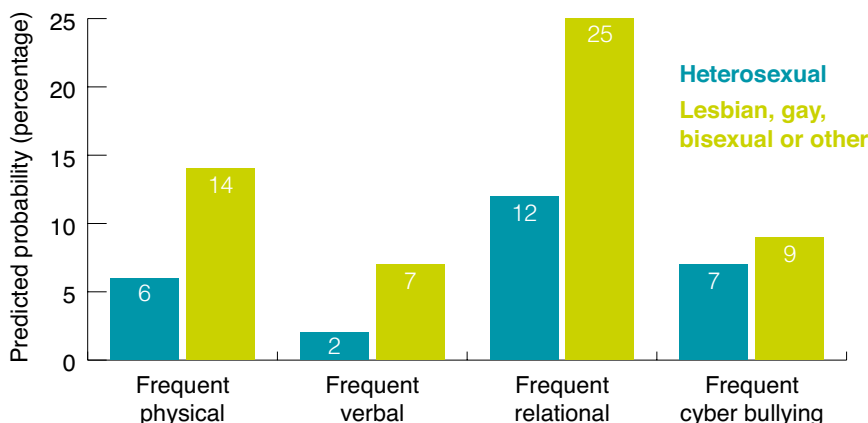
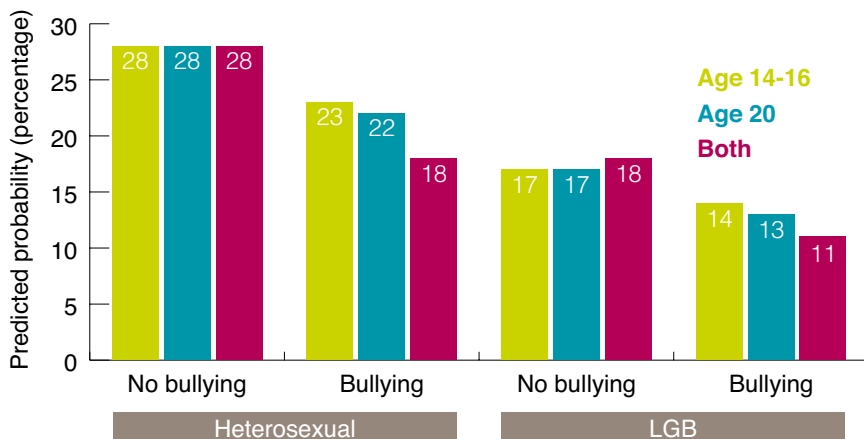


FIGURE 4:  
Likelihood of being 'very satisfied' with life at age 20



### Footnotes

- Next Steps interviews were conducted throughout the school year that study members turned 20, meaning not all participants had reached their 20th birthday at the time of interview. Similarly, earlier interviews were carried out in the years that participants turned 14 (actual age 13/14), 15 (actual age 14/15) and 16 (actual age 15/16).
- Participants were only asked about their sexual orientation at age 20, and not during their school years.

## Implications

A number of implications can be put forward to policymakers and practitioners based on this research. Most notable is that those who identify as being a sexual minority are more likely to experience being bullied both in early adulthood and during compulsory secondary schooling. Teachers should be aware of this vulnerability, and ensure that bullying behaviours are dealt with swiftly and appropriately. Schools must challenge homophobic behaviour at all levels, and encourage an understanding of alternative lifestyles and sexualities.

School counsellors and other professionals working with young people should be mindful of the effects of bullying on life satisfaction and

offer appropriate support to young people who experience it, with a particular focus on LGB youth. There is also an opportunity for peer support groups where LGB young people can discuss the issues they face in a safe space.

Although the risk of being bullied reduces as people age, young LGB adults remain more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual peers. This research suggests anti-bullying interventions should not be limited to schools, but instead calls for policymakers, employers, further educational institutions, and others working with young adults to help address inequality by challenging discrimination at all ages.

## Acknowledgements

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## Further information

The material in this briefing has been drawn from Henderson, M. (2015) *Understanding bullying experiences among sexual minority youths in England*. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

## About Next Steps

Next Steps (previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) has been following the lives of about 16,000 young people born in 1989-1990 who attended secondary school in England. The study began in 2004 when the participants were in Year 9 and turning 14 years old. Following the first survey, the participants were visited every year until 2010, when they turned 20. The next survey is taking place in 2015 at age 25. The study has collected a wide range of information across different areas of

the participants' lives, including education, employment, economic circumstances, family life, physical and emotional health, and social participation and attitudes. Next Steps is managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the UCL Institute of Education, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. From 2004-2012, the study was managed and funded by the Department for Education. Visit [www.cls.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk) for more information.

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