

## SCHOOL SUPPORT GROUPS, OTHER SCHOOL FACTORS, AND THE SAFETY OF SEXUAL MINORITY ADOLESCENTS

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Sexual minority adolescents—those self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) or with same-sex desires or sexual experiences—report higher rates of victimization and suicidality than their heterosexual peers, yet little empirical research has examined school factors associated with these risks. This study used data from the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000), matched with school-level data from state records and school principals, to compare the safety of 202 sexual minority adolescents in 52 schools with and without support groups for LGB students, to investigate the relationship between perceived staff support and safety, and to explore other school factors associated with victimization and suicidality among these youth. As hypothesized, sexual minority adolescents in schools with LGB support groups reported lower rates of victimization and suicide attempts than those in other schools. Victimization and perceived staff support predicted suicidality. Several additional school factors were associated with the safety of sexual minority students. © 2006 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Sexual minority youth—adolescents who self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), who have same-sex romantic attractions, or who engage in same-sex sexual relationships—appear to be a subset of young people at especially high risk of negative outcomes from their interactions within school contexts; however, at present, few topics generate as much controversy as the ways that schools deal with concerns related to sexual orientation (Janofsky, 2005; Savage, Prout, & Chard, 2004). Unfortunately, discussions about school support groups for LGB students and about other school efforts to address sexual orientation have generally been conducted in the absence of valid information. As Chesir-Teran (2003) noted, few studies to date have investigated the effects of interventions or approaches intended to create supportive environments for sexual minority students, and little is known about differences between schools in their influence on these adolescents.

To address this issue, this study analyzed data from a large, statewide, representative sample of high-school students matched with school-level data to examine victimization and suicidality among sexual minority youth and to investigate the relationship between these risks and school LGB support groups, perceived availability of staff support, other school programs, and school characteristics.

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*Sexual Minority Adolescents and the School Context*

Several recent studies have suggested that for young people who are—or are perceived to be—LGB, schools are all too often the sites of victimization. Antigay epithets and other forms of antigay verbal harassment have been found to be pervasive in many secondary schools (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Smith & Smith, 1998; Szalacha, 2003; Thurlow, 2001). Over half of LGB young adults in one study reported being verbally harassed in high school (D’Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). Additionally, Fineran (2001) found that sexual minority youth were more likely than other students to be sexually harassed in school, for example, by having rumors spread about them or being grabbed or touched in sexual ways. At worst, harassment can escalate to physical assault. In a landmark Wisconsin case, an openly gay student was repeatedly attacked, kicked in the stomach, and urinated on by several other students in a school restroom (*Nabozny v. Podlesny*, 1996). Eleven percent of the 350 LGB youth surveyed by D’Augelli et al. (2002) reported being physically attacked in school. Recent population-based surveys of high-school students have found sexual minority youth more likely than heterosexual peers to be threatened or injured with a weapon at school and to skip school because they felt unsafe (DuRant, Krowchuk, & Sinal, 1998; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Garafalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Robin et al., 2002).

The effects of school victimization or marginalization may spill over into life outside of school. For example, adolescents who feel unable to risk being open about their emerging sexual identities at school are unlikely to view schoolmates as safe sources for socializing and dating and may instead look for companionship in other, potentially more dangerous, settings. The significantly higher rates of dating violence reported by sexual minority adolescents than by their heterosexual peers (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2002) may be partially due to sexual orientation differences in the social context of socializing and dating.

As Ayyash-Abdo (2002) noted, hostile school social environment may lead to emotional distress, depression, anxiety, and even suicidality. School bullying and harassment have been linked to suicidality among sexual minority youth (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002), as they have been among general-population youth (Olweus, 1993; Rigby & Slee, 1999). The high rates of suicidal ideation and attempts frequently reported among youth who self-identify as LGB, who report same-sex attractions, or who have same-sex sexual partners or relationships (DuRant et al., 1998; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Garafalo et al., 1999; O’Donnell, O’Donnell, Wardlaw, & Stueve, 2004; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Robin et al., 2002; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Udry & Chantala, 2002; Wichstrom & Hegna, 2003) may be at least partially influenced by higher rates of victimization.

On the other hand, several studies have suggested that social support and school connectedness may protect against suicidality among both sexual minority and general-population adolescents (O’Donnell et al., 2004; Rigby & Slee, 1999). In one major national study, unadjusted suicide attempt rates were higher for same-sex attracted youth than for other adolescents, but this sexual orientation difference disappeared when school connectedness and other factors were taken into account (Resnick et al., 1997).

*School Factors Related to Safety and Supportiveness*

*General school characteristics.* Research on the association between the demographic characteristics of schools and school safety is limited, but one characteristic that has been linked to school safety is size of the student population. In general, larger rather than smaller schools have been associated with higher rates of behavioral problems (Cotton, 1997; Haller, 1992) and student victimization (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997). Anderson and Kimweli (1997) also found that youth

attending urban schools were more likely to be victimized and to feel unsafe than those in suburban schools. The relationships among victimization and other school characteristics such as poverty level, ethnic composition, or type (e.g., vocational vs. academic) have been less well documented. We know of no empirical studies examining the association between general school characteristics and the safety of sexual minority youth.

*Efforts to improve the school environment.* Good schools make deliberate attempts to shape school culture in positive directions and to foster health-enhancing behaviors, healthy relationships, and social responsibility in their students, usually with the hope that patterns of behavior learned in school will carry over into nonschool life. Some of these attempts involve provision of services for adolescents believed to be at risk of poor academic or personal outcomes. Other efforts take a universal approach, aiming to reach the whole student population; that is, they aim to create “competent school communities in which all members accept responsibility for the safety of each other” (Kalafat, 2003, p. 1214). Such efforts can take the form of policy development (e.g., against sexual harassment); staff training; curriculum units focused on suicide, violence prevention, or healthy relationships (e.g., lessons addressing teen dating violence); and restructuring the school environment to ensure that all students are well-known by at least one school adult (e.g., by adopting advisor–advisee systems or dividing large schools into smaller “houses” or “teams”). Schools also may attempt to foster student empowerment and engagement through programs such as peer tutoring or community-service learning programs in which students link participation in “real-world” community-service projects to their academic work (O’Donnell et al., 1999). None of these approaches, however, has been studied specifically for its effects on sexual minority youth.

*Approaches focused on sexual minority adolescents.* In recent years, some efforts have focused specifically on making schools more supportive environments for sexual minority youth. These approaches have included training for school staff to increase sensitivity and awareness (Bauman & Sachs-Kapp, 1998; Sawyer, 2001), adding materials related to gay and lesbian issues in the curriculum (Blake et al., 2001; Lipkin, 1993–1994, 1999), and attempting systemic change of the school culture to increase acceptance of diversity (Lipkin, 1999; Ouellet, 1996). Evidence of effectiveness has been found for some of these approaches. Blake et al. (2001), for example, found that in schools where health teachers reported delivering HIV education they believed to be appropriate for LGB youth, sexual minority students reported lower rates of many health risk behaviors, including high-risk sexual behaviors, skipping school due to fear, and planning suicide attempts. Szalacha (2003) found a significant association between staff training on sexual diversity and an improved school climate for sexual minority students; however, most efforts to improve the school environment for sexual minority youth have not been carefully evaluated.

The most widely known approach to making schools safer and more supportive for LGB students has been the establishment of school-based support groups. Some, like the original Project 10 begun in 1984 by Los Angeles teacher Virginia Uribe, take the form of small, adult-facilitated counseling/discussion groups for youth struggling with issues related to sexual orientation (Lipkin, 1999; Uribe, 1993–1994). A more recent formation, gay/straight alliances (GSAs), are student-led clubs open to youth of all sexual orientations with the purpose of supporting LGB students and their heterosexual allies and also reducing prejudice, discrimination, and harassment within the school (Lipkin, 1999; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001). GSAs have been established in high schools across the country, and they are especially prevalent in Massachusetts. As a result of a study of suicidality and victimization among gay and lesbian adolescents (Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993), from 1993 to 2002 the Massachusetts Department of Education (MDOE) fostered development of GSAs through small seed grants to schools interested in forming such

groups. Consequently, over half of the public high schools in the state have a GSA, though the groups' size, focus, and activity levels have been found to vary widely (Doppler, 2000; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001; Szalacha, 2003). Some sponsor social events, some work to educate the school about sexual orientation, some press for changes in school policies, and others do none of these. Despite this variability, Szalacha (2003), conducting surveys in 35 randomly chosen Massachusetts high schools, found that schools with GSAs were rated by both students and staff as having a significantly less hostile, more supportive psychosocial climate for LGB students than was true in schools without GSAs. We can hypothesize that sexual minority youth in schools with GSAs would be less likely to be victimized or suicidal than those in non-GSA schools.

### *Focus of the Study*

The present study used data from a large, statewide survey of high-school students, matched with information about the schools they attended, to investigate school factors that might be associated with greater safety (e.g., lower rates of victimization and suicidality) among sexual minority adolescents. We hypothesized that the presence of a support group for LGB students would be associated with lower rates of school victimization, dating violence, and suicide attempts among sexual minority students. The study also hypothesized that perceived availability of staff support would serve as a protective factor and that victimization, in or out of school, would be a significant predictor of suicidality. Finally, to extend the very limited research in this area, we explored potential relationships of general school characteristics and other school programs to the safety of sexual minority adolescents.

## METHOD

Outcome data for this study were drawn from the 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (MYRBS; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2002), a population-based survey of adolescents from 64 public high schools. Schools and classrooms within schools were chosen by stratified random sampling. The MYRBS, a voluntary and anonymous survey with questions about a variety of risk behaviors, was administered by trained MDOE staff in Spring 1999. MYRBS data are weighted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and are considered representative of public high-school students in the state as a whole.

Two data sources provided predictors for the study. First, a 1998 survey of high-school principals included questions about a number of school programs intended to support student achievement and well-being. Matching principal surveys were available for 56 of the 64 high schools participating in the MYRBS. Additional school-level information matched to MYRBS schools was drawn from MDOE records.

### *Participants*

Of the 56 schools with principal data, 52 included at least 1 MYRBS participant who could be categorized as "sexual minority" on the basis of two MYRBS questions. The first question asked youth which term best described them: heterosexual (straight), gay or lesbian, bisexual, or not sure. The second asked "With whom have you had sexual contact?": no one, female(s), male(s), both female(s) and male(s). The 202 adolescents who self-identified as LGB and/or reported any same-sex sexual contact were considered "sexual minority" for the purposes of this study.

### *Measures*

Victimization and suicidality were the two interrelated outcomes of this study. Two MYRBS questions assessed school victimization: (a) How often in the past year the student had been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property? (b) How often in the past month he/she

had not gone to school “because you felt you would be unsafe?” A third question, asking whether the student had ever experienced dating violence, tapped patterns of interpersonal violence that might potentially be influenced by school climate, school programs, or social opportunities within the school community. A fourth question on forced/coerced sexual contact (“Has anyone ever had sexual contact with you against your will?”) was not assumed to have any relationship to school factors, but was included here as a control variable because sexual abuse has been found to be strongly predictive of adolescent suicidality (Bensley, Van Eenwyk, Speiker, & Schoder, 1999). All questions were coded as *Yes/No*. The first two questions were combined as a measure of “school victimization;” the latter two were combined as “personal victimization.”

Suicidality was measured by questions asking respondents whether they had made any suicide attempts in the past 12 months (coded both as any past-year attempt and as multiple attempts) and whether they had made a past-year suicide attempt requiring medical attention. In response to criticisms of suicide research based on single-item outcomes (Savin-Williams, 2001), we included all three suicide measures in this study. The MYRBS also included a question asking youth whether they had felt so sad or hopeless for 2 weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities, which we used as a single-item measure of distress/depression. Finally, students were asked whether they believed there was a teacher or other school adult “you can talk to if you have a problem.” A *No* answer, as opposed to “*Yes*” or “*Not Sure*,” was interpreted as indicating low perceived availability of support from school staff.

Some school-level predictor variables were drawn from MDOE records for MYRBS schools. These included data on student-population size, percent of low-income (i.e., eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and ethnic minority (i.e., Black, Hispanic, or Asian) students, location of school (i.e., urban, suburban, or rural) and school type (i.e., vocational or comprehensive). Also drawn from MDOE records were the schools’ average student rating for the question “On an average day, how safe do you feel at school?” This question, scored as percent “*not too safe*” or “*very unsafe*,” was included with the 1999 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), the state academic testing program required of all 10th graders. The percent of sophomores rating school unsafe is used here as a school-level indicator of the average perceived safety rating for the school.

The principal survey was the major source of information about school policies and programs potentially related to victimization and suicidality of sexual minority youth. Principals indicated whether “a support group for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students” existed in their school and also indicated the presence or absence of a number of other programs, areas of staff training, and policies designed to support students.<sup>1</sup>

### *Analytic Approach*

As a preliminary step, we compared the 202 sexual minority and 3,435 other adolescents in the 52 schools with regard to demographics, school characteristics, and risk experiences. In addition, schools with and without groups for LGB youth were compared. Second, to investigate the

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<sup>1</sup>Policies included those to prevent bullying, to ensure the safety of gay and lesbian students, to notify parents about sexuality curricula, and to ensure an adult presence at school-sponsored events. Principals indicated whether staff had been trained in the previous year regarding alcohol and drugs, violence and weapons, bullying, sexual harassment, adult supervision of school events, and safety for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. Finally, principals indicated whether their school had support groups for youth with drug/alcohol problems, counseling for psychological problems, referrals for outside counseling, programs to monitor and to support at-risk students, other peer-support groups, peer tutoring, other tutoring, a student-run drop-in center, a student court or judiciary, a community-service learning program, other opportunities for volunteer work, an advisor-advisee system, and a school structure divided into smaller “teams” or “houses.”

relationships of school factors to the risk experiences of sexual minority adolescents, individual logistic regression analyses were conducted, testing the association between general school characteristics (e.g., size, student demographics, location, etc.) and each of the outcomes among these youth, controlling for age, ethnicity, and gender. School characteristics found to be significant predictors of sexual minority adolescents' victimization or suicidality were retained as controls in subsequent analyses. Third, controlling for participant demographics and for significant school characteristics, logistic regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses that victimization and suicidality would be lower for sexual minority youth in schools with support groups for LGB students and lower for those who believed there was some school staff member that they could talk to about a problem. Regression analyses also explored associations between other school policies and programs and sexual minority victimization/suicidality outcomes. Finally, the presence or absence of an LGB support group, perceived staff support, other school programs and policies identified as significant, and the two indices of victimization were entered simultaneously in logistic regression analyses to predict suicide-attempt outcomes among sexual minority students; youth demographics, distress/depression, and school characteristics were included as control variables. Data analyses were conducted in SUDAAN (Research Triangle Institute, 2001), a software program designed to account for the multistage sampling used by the MYRBS and for the subsequent "nesting" of students within schools.

## RESULTS

### *Sample Characteristics*

Of the 202 sexual minority youth of this study, 42 (21%) self-identified as LGB, but reported no same-sex sexual contact; 100 (49.5%) reported same-sex experience, but did not identify as LGB; 56 (28%) reported both LGB identity and same-sex contact; and 4 (2%) answered one question, but not both. Ninety-nine (49%) were female, and 133 (66%) were White, Non-Hispanic. Differences among these subsets of sexual minority adolescents are not explored in this article.

### *Sexual Minority and Other Students*

Compared with other students, sexual minority adolescents were less likely to be White (Non-Hispanic), but were not significantly different in age or gender (see Table 1). A similar proportion of sexual minority and other youth attended urban schools, vocational schools, and schools with support groups for LGB students. Schools attended by sexual minority students were somewhat smaller and were more likely to be generally perceived as safe, but were similar in their proportion of low-income and ethnic minority students.

Despite demographic and school similarities, sexual minority youth differed from their peers on all assessed risk experiences. Sexual minority students were significantly more likely than others to report being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, skip school because they felt unsafe, believe that there was no school adult they could talk to about a problem, experience dating violence, experience forced/coerced sexual contact, feel sad or hopeless for an extended period of time, make one or more past-year suicide attempts, and make a suicide attempt requiring medical attention.

Schools with and without support groups for LGB youth did not differ in kind of community, school size, or percent of minority or low-income youth. Those with support groups were more likely than other schools to have a written policy on safety for sexual minority youth (100 vs. 78%,  $p < .05$ ) and to have trained staff on the policy (78 vs. 48%,  $p < .05$ ). They also were more likely to have other peer-support groups (96 vs. 57%,  $p < .05$ ) and to be divided into "teams" or "houses"

Table 1  
*Demographic, School, and Risk Characteristics of Sexual Minority and Other Students*

Number (Total = 3,637) (unweighted)	Sexual Minority Youth <i>n</i> = 202	Other Youth <i>n</i> = 3,435	Test Statistic
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>			
Percent Female	49.0	48.8	<i>ns</i>
Age:			
14 years or under % ( <i>n</i> = 392)	12.5	10.7	
15 years % ( <i>n</i> = 856)	23.0	23.6	
16 years % ( <i>n</i> = 920)	24.0	25.4	
17 years % ( <i>n</i> = 877)	22.5	24.2	
18 years or over % ( <i>n</i> = 587)	18.0	16.0	<i>ns</i>
Ethnicity			
%White ( <i>n</i> = 2,562)	65.9	72.1	
%Black ( <i>n</i> = 211)	4.1	6.0	
%Hispanic ( <i>n</i> = 424)	13.2	11.8	
%Asian ( <i>n</i> = 244)	10.2	6.6	
%Other/Mixed Ethnicity ( <i>n</i> = 130)	6.6	3.5	$\chi^2 (df = 4) = 10.9^*$
<b>School Characteristics</b>			
School District:			
%Urban ( <i>n</i> = 1,485)	35.1	41.1	
%Suburban ( <i>n</i> = 1,471)	39.6	40.5	
%Rural ( <i>n</i> = 681)	25.3	18.3	$\chi^2 (df = 2) = 6.6^*$
In a school with a support group for LGB students	53.9	54.5	<i>ns</i>
In a vocational school	17.3	14.4	<i>ns</i>
Average student population of school	1,080	1,245	$t = 3.55^{***}$
Average school score: percent of students who feel unsafe	15.2	16.3	$t = 1.96^*$
Average percent of low-income students in school	15.7	18.2	<i>ns</i>
Average percent of ethnic minority students in school	19.7	22.2	<i>ns</i>
<b>Risk Experiences</b>			
Threatened/injured with weapon at school, past year	25.4	7.8	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 73.4^{***}$
Skipped school because felt unsafe, past month	18.9	5.3	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 62.7^{***}$
No school staff I could talk to about a problem	42.6	35.8	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 7.3^{**}$
Felt sad or hopeless for 2+ weeks or more, past year	54.6	29.4	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 54.7^{***}$
Any suicide attempt, past year	28.5	6.9	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 98.8^{***}$
Two or more suicide attempts, past year	18.2	3.2	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 90.3^{***}$
Suicide attempt with injury, past year	17.8	3.4	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 86.7^{***}$
Ever experienced dating violence	36.2	11.1	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 109.2^{***}$
Ever experienced sex against will	35.7	9.8	$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 125.7^{***}$

Note. Only youth from the 52 schools in the final analytic sample are included here.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

(48 vs. 13%,  $p < .05$ ). They were statistically similar, however, with regard to other programs, policies, and areas of staff training.

### *School Characteristics*

General school characteristics were investigated individually as predictors of victimization and suicide attempts; some significant associations were found for most outcome measures. As

shown in Table 2, sexual minority youth were more likely to have experienced dating violence if they attended smaller schools, suburban schools, schools with few ethnic minority or low-income students, and, paradoxically, schools generally perceived as safe. They were more likely to have skipped school out of fear if they attended schools with fewer ethnic minority or low-income students. Suicide attempts were more commonly reported in less ethnically diverse schools. Finally, injurious suicide attempts were more common among sexual minority youth who were in schools that were perceived as safe by most youth.

### *LGB Support Groups, Perceived Staff Support, and Other School Programs*

As hypothesized, after controlling for student demographics and school characteristics, the presence of a GSA or other support group for LGB students was significantly associated with greater safety (see Table 3). Sexual minority youth in schools with such groups were less than half as likely as those in other schools to report dating violence, being threatened/injured at school, or skipping school due to fear [Odds Ratios (OR) = .48, .47, and .43, respectively], and were less than one third as likely to report making multiple past-year suicide attempts (OR = .29). Sexual minority adolescents who believed that there was a school staff member they could talk to about a problem were only about one third as likely as those without such perceived support to report being threatened or injured with a weapon at school (OR = .36) or making multiple past-year suicide attempts (OR = .34).

Additional programs associated with lower rates of victimization or suicidality among sexual minority students were other peer-support groups, the availability of nonacademic counseling, school antibullying policies, the presence of a student court or other student judiciary, staff training on sexual harassment, and peer-tutoring systems. Conversely, sexual minority students in schools with monitoring systems for at-risk students were over five times more likely to skip school (OR = 5.16), and those in schools with community-service learning programs were more likely to be threatened at school or to have made past-year suicide attempts (ORs = 2.45, 3.37).

*Predictors of suicidality.* Table 4 presents the results of logistic regression analyses for suicidality using the combination of school victimization, personal victimization, perceived availability of staff support, and school programs found previously to be significant as predictors, while controlling for student demographics, school characteristics, and emotional/depression distress. Personal victimization (i.e., dating violence or any coerced/forced sexual contact) predicted an injurious suicide attempt in the past year. Recent school victimization was significantly related to every suicidality measure among sexual minority youth. On the other hand, the perception that there was a school staff member who could be approached about a problem was related to a lower probability of multiple suicide attempts. The presence of a school community-service learning program was associated with a greater probability of a past-year suicide attempt, but school antibullying policies significantly predicted a lower probability of single or multiple suicide attempts. Although the presence of an LGB support group had been significantly associated with a reduced probability of multiple suicide attempts when considered as a single predictor, that relationship became nonsignificant once victimization measures, perceived staff support, and antibullying policies were included in the regression analysis. Together, the variables included as predictors in these regression analyses accounted for over one third of the variance in single and multiple past-year suicide attempts among sexual minority adolescents and over one fifth of the variance in attempts requiring medical attention.

Table 2  
School Characteristics Associated With Victimization and Suicidality for Sexual Minority Youth, Controlling for Age, Gender, and Ethnicity of Students

	Dating Violence OR (95% CI)	Threatened With Weapon at School OR (95% CI)	Skipped School Because Unsafe OR (95% CI)	Suicide Attempt in Past Year OR (95% CI)	2 + Suicide Attempts, Past Year OR (95% CI)	Suicide Attempt With Injury OR (95% CI)
Student population <sup>a</sup>	<b>1.0**</b> (1.0-1.0)	1.0 (1.0-1.0)	1.0 (1.0-1.0)	1.0 (1.0-1.0)	<b>1.0*</b> (1.0-1.0)	1.0 (1.0-1.0)
Suburban (vs. urban)	<b>3.21*</b> (1.24-8.30)	2.62 (0.77-8.96)	2.93 (0.88-9.73)	1.61 (0.46-5.63)	2.65 (0.52-8.13)	1.99 (0.62-6.37)
Rural (vs. urban)	2.28 (0.87-5.95)	2.21 (0.74-6.57)	1.95 (0.65-5.84)	1.53 (0.61-3.85)	0.99 (0.32-3.04)	0.65 (0.24-1.80)
Vocational (vs. Comprehensive)	1.31 (0.49-3.48)	0.77 (0.26-2.23)	1.13 (0.31-4.17)	1.50 (0.64-3.48)	1.42 (0.52-3.85)	1.13 (0.43-2.97)
%Low income	<b>0.96***</b> (0.94-0.98)	0.97 (0.94-1.01)	<b>0.97*</b> (0.94-1.0)	0.99 (0.96-1.01)	<b>0.97*</b> (0.95-1.00)	0.99 (0.96-1.02)
%Ethnic minority	<b>0.97***</b> (0.95-0.98)	0.98 (0.96-1.01)	<b>0.98*</b> (0.96-1.00)	<b>0.98*</b> (0.97-1.00)	<b>0.98*</b> (0.96-1.00)	0.99 (0.97-1.01)
MCAS Average: Felt Unsafe	<b>0.93*</b> (0.88-0.99)	0.95 (0.85-1.06)	0.93 (0.83-1.04)	0.94 (0.87-1.01)	0.95 (0.87-1.04)	<b>0.92*</b> (0.85-0.99)

<sup>a</sup>Both dating violence and multiple suicide attempts are more common among sexual minority youth in smaller rather than larger schools. School population is measured in increments of one student. Changes per student, though significant, are too small to show up in Odds Ratios as expressed here. MCAS = Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3  
*Programs and Policies Associated With Outcomes for Sexual Minority Adolescents, Controlling for Significant School Characteristics, and Age, Ethnicity, and Gender of Students*

	Dating Violence OR (95% CI)	Threatened/Injured at School OR (95% CI)	Skipped School Because Unsafe OR (95% CI)	Suicide Attempt in Past Year OR (95% CI)	2+ Suicide Attempts, Past Year OR (95% CI)	Suicide Attempt With Injury OR (95% CI)
LGB Student Support Group	<b>0.48*</b> (0.25–0.91)	<b>0.47*</b> (0.21–0.99)	<b>0.43*</b> (0.20–0.92)		<b>0.29*</b> (0.10–0.85)	
Perceived Staff Support		<b>0.36***</b> (0.22–0.62)			<b>0.34*</b> (0.14–0.84)	
Other Peer-Support Group		<b>0.35***</b> (0.16–0.75)	<b>0.27***</b> (0.14–0.51)			
Psychological Counseling	<b>0.30***</b> (0.18–0.49)					
Monitoring At-Risk Students			<b>5.16***</b> (1.60–16.62)			
Student Court		<b>0.44*</b> (0.20–0.97)				
Sexual Harassment Training		<b>0.29**</b> (0.11–0.76)				
Community-Service Learning		<b>2.45*</b> (1.07–5.60)		<b>3.37**</b> (1.51–7.54)		
Peer-Tutoring Program				<b>0.57*</b> (0.32–0.99)		
Anti-Bullying Policy				<b>0.39**</b> (0.19–0.79)	<b>0.19***</b> (0.09–0.43)	

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 4  
*Reported Suicide Attempts Among Sexual Minority Youth as Predicted by Victimization, Perceived Availability of Staff Support, and School Programs*

	Suicide Attempt OR 95% CI	Two+ Suicide Attempts OR 95% CI	Attempt With Injury OR 95% CI
School Victimization	<b>4.35***</b> (2.04–9.27)	<b>4.61***</b> (1.80–11.78)	<b>2.40**</b> (1.31–4.41)
Personal Victimization	1.45 (0.69–3.03)	1.28 (0.37–4.40)	<b>2.26*</b> (1.18–4.30)
Perceived Staff Support		<b>0.19**</b> (0.06–0.60)	
LGB Student Support Group		0.30 (0.07–1.33)	
Peer-Tutoring Program	0.60 (0.29–1.24)		
Community-Service Learning	<b>3.11*</b> (1.00–9.65)		
Anti-Bullying Policy	<b>0.37*</b> (0.16–0.86)	<b>0.16*</b> (0.03–0.81)	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.35</b>	<b>0.35</b>	<b>0.22</b>

Note. Student demographics, distress/depression, and significant school characteristics were included as control variables.  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present research is one of the first population-based studies to move beyond documenting the risk experiences of sexual minority youth toward empirically investigating school factors that might mitigate those risks. Consistent with a growing body of research, sexual minority youth in our study reported significantly higher in levels of risk than other students. Study results confirmed our key hypotheses: that the presence of school support groups for LGB students was significantly associated with lower victimization and suicidality risk for sexual minority adolescents, that the perception of staff support was protective, and that victimization was a significant predictor of suicidality. Several other school characteristics and programs also were found to be associated with greater safety for this population.

### *LGB Support Groups*

Our hypothesis that sexual minority youth would report less victimization and suicidality if they attended schools with a GSA or similar group was supported. The absence of a significant association of GSAs with suicidality in subsequent analyses controlling for personal and school victimization suggests that these groups—or the school environments they exemplify—may function to prevent suicidality primarily by reducing victimization contributing to it. The value of GSAs has been discussed by a number of authors (e.g., Lee, 2002; Lipkin, 1999; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001; Szalacha, 2003); however, the current study is the first to demonstrate an empirical link between such groups and the self-reported risk experiences and behaviors of youth who define themselves—or might be defined as—LGB. The significant positive findings for LGB school support groups are all the more striking because these groups vary in nature and size. Several research studies of GSAs in Massachusetts schools have found that they are often quite small, sometimes numbering only a handful of students (Doppler, 2000; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001), and that a substantial proportion of GSA members are heterosexual adolescents who joined largely out of a concern for social justice (Doppler, 2000; Szalacha, 2003). Further, the group occasionally may take the form of a counselor-led quasitherapeutic group rather than a student-run GSA. There is no way to know whether sexual minority students responding to the survey were themselves members of LGB support groups in their schools. Given this variability and the lack of

detail in our data, the significant association between GSAs and victimization of sexual minority youth is especially noteworthy.

The cross-sectional nature of the study, of course, precludes drawing firm conclusions about causality. It is plausible to argue that GSAs foster the safety and well-being of sexual minority students, that confident and safe sexual minority youth are more likely to establish GSAs in their schools, or that a third factor, such as a school administration committed to building a supportive and inclusive school climate, is responsible for both the GSA and the lower rates of victimization and suicidality. Whatever the direction of influence, the presence of a support group for LGB students is tangible evidence of a school's commitment to, or at least official acceptance of, sexual minority adolescents. For sexual minority adolescents "scanning for safety," it may represent a safe haven, even if they are not members. For other students and staff, it may indicate that sexual orientation harassment will not be tolerated.

#### *Perceived Availability of Staff Support*

Sexual minority youth who asserted that there was no adult in the school they could talk to about a problem were more likely than others to have been threatened at school and to have made multiple suicide attempts in the previous year. Further, even when victimization was taken into account, the perception of staff support appeared to have a significant, protective effect against multiple attempts. Although clearly not all problems faced by sexual minority youth concern sexual orientation, it is important for school mental health professionals and other staff to be sensitive to the needs of all students and to become knowledgeable about sexual orientation issues. Unfortunately, one recent study (Savage et al., 2004) found that the majority of school psychologists surveyed had little or no professional training on sexual orientation. Another found that although most student-services staff (i.e., school psychologists, counselors, social workers, and nurses) believed that they had a professional obligation to help sexual minority youth, far fewer felt adequately trained to do so (Sawyer, 2001). Ongoing professional development and inservice training for support-services staff and for teachers may be needed to address this issue. Finally, it is important not only that knowledgeable professionals are present in the school but also that sexual minority students believe that those staff members are accessible and willing to help them. Strong communication channels signaling a concern for all students regardless of sexual orientation and indicating staff approachability are important.

#### *Other School Characteristics and Programs*

In addition to hypothesized findings discussed earlier, our analyses also identified several school factors associated with lower rates of victimization, suicidality, or both among sexual minority youth. The general school characteristics linked to greater safety for sexual minority students may at first appear counterintuitive. Specifically, these youth reported less victimization and suicidality if they attended schools with more low income and ethnic minority students, larger schools, urban schools, and schools with a lower average perceived safety rating by the general-student population. That is, sexual minority youth appeared to be safer from both interpersonal and self-inflicted harm in schools often stereotyped as less safe, perhaps because the size and diversity of these schools afforded more social/ecological "niches" and made possible a greater variety of acceptable ways to belong. Whatever the causes of these unexpected findings, one implication of the results is that school safety in general does not necessarily extend to safety for sexual minority students; special efforts may need to be made on their behalf.

Several additional school programs were found to be associated with greater well-being among sexual minority youth. Some of these relationships (e.g., the links of psychological counseling services to lower rates of dating violence, of student courts and staff sexual-harassment training to

less school victimization of sexual minority youth, and of antibullying policies to fewer reported suicide attempts among sexual minority students) make intuitive sense and suggest fruitful avenues for future investigation. Other findings, especially the relationship of community-service learning to higher rates of sexual minority student suicidality, are far more difficult to explain, given the protective effects community service learning programs have been found to have in other studies (e.g., Center for Human Resources, 1999; O'Donnell et al., 1999). Because data from the principal survey included such a wide variety of school programs, policies, and school characteristics, note that the possibility of Type I error is high. In addition, because the study is cross-sectional and correlational, drawing causal inferences is unwarranted. Results regarding school characteristics and this set of school programs are best taken not as firm conclusions but rather as first steps toward identifying contextual influences on the well-being and healthy development of sexual minority youth.

### *Predicting Suicidality Among Sexual Minority Adolescents*

As Ayyash-Abdo (2002) noted, adolescent suicidality should be viewed in ecological context rather than simply in individualistic terms. The results presented here underscore the school context as a major contributor to suicidal thinking and attempts among sexual minority youth. School victimization was a significant predictor of all three suicide-attempt measures, even when other factors were taken into account. Threats, harassment, and intimidation at school may be especially critical for sexual minority youth. School is an obligatory environment for most adolescents, one in which they spend a major portion of their time, and school victimization may occur repeatedly over time, especially if it is part of a high-school "pecking order" in which some students attempt to ensure their own "normality" or their status as superior to others. Also, antigay victimization has been found to occur often in the presence of others, and is sometimes even encouraged and applauded by peers (Franklin, 2000). Several studies have found that bystanders—even school staff—who witness such harassment frequently fail to intervene (Smith & Smith, 1998; Szalacha, 2003; Thurlow, 2001). LGB adolescents may be reluctant to report even the most severe victimization if they perceive school authorities as unsympathetic, unapproachable, and unwilling to intervene on their behalf. If these factors lead sexual minority youth to believe that their isolation or endangerment is chronic or irremediable, escape through dropping out, substance use, or even suicide may seem to be a viable option.

Other factors predicted suicidality as well. Personal victimization (i.e., having ever experienced dating violence or forced/coerced sex) was significantly associated with recent injurious suicide attempts—a finding consistent with extensive previous research that has demonstrated the damaging effects of interpersonal violence, particularly sexual assault, on mental health (Bensley et al., 1999; Brener, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001).

Finally, it is notable that antibullying policies had a strong and significant negative association with suicide attempts, even when victimization and perceived support were taken into account. Though antiweapon and antidrug policies have long been in place, school antibullying policies are a relatively recent development. High schools that have them may be presumed to be taking a vigorous proactive approach to ensuring physical and emotional safety for all of their students. Communities and school districts vary in their willingness to address the risks facing sexual minority adolescents directly; they even vary in their willingness to recognize that LGB youth attend their schools; however, steps such as creating, communicating, and enforcing strong antibullying policies are within the capacity of even the most conservative schools and communities. Our results indicate the potential value of such policies in shaping school climate.

*Limitations and Implications for Research*

In addition to the previously discussed cross-sectional, correlational nature of this study, there are additional limitations that need to be addressed. First, while the MYRBS is representative of Massachusetts public high-school students as a whole, we cannot be sure that it accurately represents all sexual minority youth in the state or the country. Young people who experience same-sex attractions, but who neither act on those attractions nor self-identify as LGB, for example, are not included as sexual minority youth in this study. Moreover, many adolescents may not be willing to indicate LGB identity or same-sex sexual behavior, even on an anonymous survey under controlled conditions. The MYRBS does not include adolescents who are skipping school or who have dropped out—populations in which sexual minority youth may well be overrepresented. Despite these concerns and despite ongoing, vigorous debate among researchers about how best to operationalize “sexual orientation” (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Youth Sexual Orientation Measurement Work Group, 2003; Russell, 2003; Savin-Williams, 2001), the study is nonetheless based on a large, representative sample of students from 52 high schools, a strength not shared by the more common sexual orientation studies based on small, convenience samples of self-identified LGB youth drawn from a single site.

A second major limitation concerns MYRBS measures, most of which are single items. The survey included three items tapping suicidality and two items related to victimization at school, but only one on dating violence and one on perceived school staff support availability. Also note that all MYRBS measures are based on self-report, with no external verification. Further, although sexual minority youth reported significantly higher rates of suicide attempts and victimization, there is no way to demonstrate that their heightened levels of risk were specifically related to their sexual orientation. On the school level, presence or absence of support groups for LGB students and other school programs, trainings, and policies are indicated only by principals' responses to single yes/no questions; no measures of the quality, scope, or survey-participant involvement in any of the programs were included in the study. Clearly, future research efforts in this area would benefit by employing richer, more detailed measures of the core constructs investigated here.

A third limitation relates to the somewhat dated nature of the data presented here. We cannot be sure that GSAs or antibullying policies—both of which may have become more common in the past few years—would bear the same relationship to school safety for sexual minority youth as was true in the late 1990s. Replications of this study in other locations and with more recent data would be valuable.

Although research on sexual minority adolescents has burgeoned over recent years, most has focused on demonstrating heightened risk experiences among these youth while very little empirical work has examined either contextual, environmental factors that may influence these risks or interventions designed to reduce them. The present study, capitalizing on existing datasets and limited in detail, is one of very few (adding to Blake et al., 2001, and Szalacha, 2003) to match school-level factors to individual outcomes for sexual minority adolescents. This line of inquiry is in its infancy, and needs further development. The associations found in this study between the presence of GSAs and lowered risk rates are highly encouraging, as they imply that these groups may contribute significantly to improving the school environment, yet we know little about the social psychological mechanisms involved. Prospective longitudinal studies following changes in school culture as GSAs are begun and mature would be extremely helpful, enabling us to understand more clearly the direction of influence and to pinpoint key factors in successful school change. Similarly, other deliberate efforts to shape the school environment, such as staff training or introduction of LGB curricular materials, should be carefully studied for their influence both on sexual minority adolescents and on others in the school community. In sum, future research should

focus in far more depth on aspects of the school culture and the peer social environment that are associated with optimal development for self-identified LGB adolescents and for others whose emerging sexual preferences or behaviors distinguish them from their heterosexual peers.

The 2001 federal education legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), requires that schools be safe, supportive, and conducive to learning for all young people, not just the mainstream majority. All schools can and should be held accountable for protecting their students from harm. Further, major professional associations in education have acknowledged the importance of ensuring the safety and promoting the well-being of sexual minority youth (National Association of School Psychologists, 1999; National Education Association, 2002). School psychologists, counselors, and teachers are an important part of this effort and can work to help all youth feel welcomed and supported at school. A more ecological approach to primary prevention also is critical. School policies and their communication and enforcement, programs and activities for students, and staff training all contribute to shaping school culture. School staff, especially those with expertise in mental health, can take the lead in fostering school environments that are supportive for sexual minority and other students.

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