

# How Harassment, Bullying, and Self-Harm Affect Students' Perceptions of Their Environment

Jamie Cormier, Alexis Giacco, Hannah Nordstrom, Hailey Raudat, & Ross Jones  
Advisors: Andrew J. Rizzo, Katie M. Edwards, & Vicki L. Banyard

## Introduction

Adolescents can frequently experience sexual harassment, bullying, and self-harm in high school. Such victimization can in turn affect a students' perception of their environment, including aspects of school authority, school opportunities, self-actualization, and student autonomy.

- There may not be any effects of sexual harassment victimization on student functioning and perceptions, though negative views on self-actualization and school opportunities is possible. Some studies indicate that individuals who experience sexual harassment tend to report less self-actualization<sup>4</sup> and lower feelings of belongingness within their schools<sup>5</sup>.
- Adolescents that experience bullying may have overall negative views of their school and their ability to function at school. Students who are bullied at school tend to report less opportunities for engagement at school and more school avoidance behaviors<sup>6</sup>. Bullied students also tend to see school authority as lower and school rules as unfair<sup>7</sup>.
- Research on self-harm sometimes offers contradictory findings; self-harm may influence school opinions. Students feelings of autonomy, self-actualization, and perceptions of school authority could be unaffected by self-harm<sup>8</sup>, while perceived school opportunities may be lower<sup>9</sup>.

In summary, there is not enough research on how sexual harassment, bullying, and self-harm affect student's functioning and perceptions of their high school. As such, we have only a few **tentative predictions, while the majority of this analysis is exploratory:**

- (H1) Students who report experiencing sexual harassment will also report lower perception of self actualization compared to those who have not experienced sexual harassment.
- (H2) Students who report experiencing bullying will report lower perceptions of school involvement and opportunities and also lower school authority compared to those who have not experienced bullying.
- (H3) Students who report engaging in self-harm will also report lower perceptions of school involvement and opportunity compared to those who have not engaged in self-harm.

## Methods

**Participants:** 996 students from a public school in a New England town who completed an anonymous written survey in April 2016. Most of the students were White (87%). Of the students, 48% identified as male, and 52% identified as female. The sample was distributed across age as follows: 13-16 years old (61%), 17-19 years old (39%).

**Outcomes Variables:** Students responded to 18 statements about their opinions regarding their school using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree). An exploratory factor analysis indicated a four-factor solution with adequate fit and theoretically related item clusters (not presented in this poster). Each factor included between 2-7 items.

Name of Factor	Sample Item	$\alpha$	M	SD
Self-Actualization	I think the things I am learning in school will be important for me later in life.	.83	2.67	0.59
School Opportunity & Involvement	I have many chances to be part of class discussions or activities.	.76	2.99	0.58
School Authority	The rules in my school are enforced fairly.	.76	2.64	0.69
Student Autonomy & Independence	In my school, students have many chances to help decide things like class activities and rules.	.65	2.25	0.70

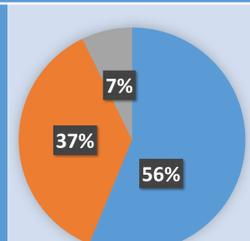
## Methods (cont.)

**Predictor Variables:** Students responded to three items about past experiences of victimization. Responses were then recoded into dichotomous indicators of self-harm, bullying, and harassment victimization.

■ Never ■ 1+ Times ■ No Response

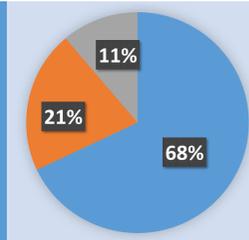
### Bullying Victimization

In the past year, how often have you been the target of bullying, whether in person or online?



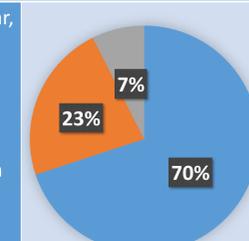
### Engaged in Self-Harm

Have you ever tried to deliberately harm yourself?



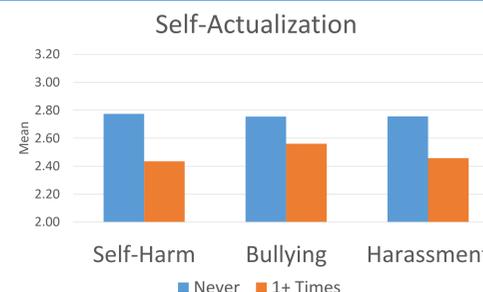
### Sexual Harassment Victimization

In the past year, how often has anyone touched, grabbed, or pinched you in a sexual way?

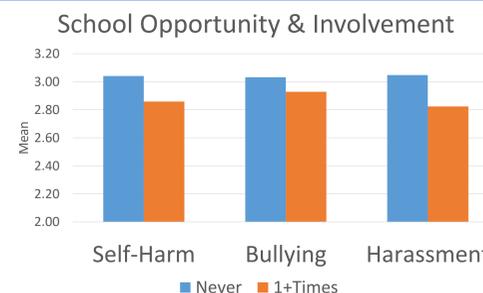


## Results

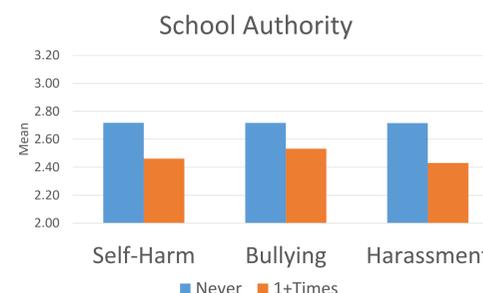
Perceived self-actualization differed significantly across engaging in self-harm,  $F(1, 872) = 57.64, p < .01$ , experiencing bullying,  $F(1, 911) = 24.68, p < .01$ , and experiencing sexual harassment,  $F(1, 909) = 46.46, p < .01$ .



Perceived school opportunity and involvement differed significantly across engaging in self-harm  $F(1,870) = 16.67, p < .01$ , experiencing bullying  $F(1,908) = 7.28, p < .01$ , and experiencing sexual harassment  $F(1,906) = 26.88, p < .01$ .

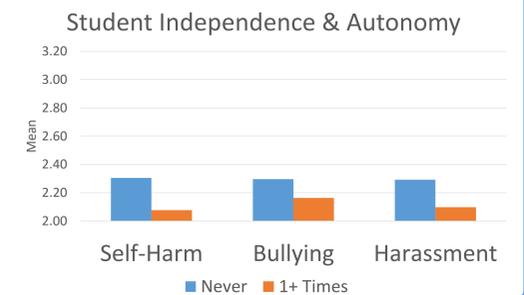


Perceived school authority differed significantly across engaging in self-harm  $F(1,867) = 22.75, p < .01$ , experiencing bullying  $F(1,907) = 16.02, p < .01$ , and experiencing sexual harassment  $F(1,905) = 30.06, p < .01$ .



## Results (cont.)

Perceived independence and autonomy differed significantly across engaging in self-harm  $F(1,861) = 17.24, p < .01$ , experiencing bullying  $F(1,901) = 7.98, p < .01$ , and experiencing sexual harassment  $F(1,899) = 13.39, p < .01$ .



## Discussion

- Students have more positive perceptions of school authority, student independence and autonomy, school opportunity and involvement and self-actualization when they have never experienced self-harm, bullying or sexual harassment.
- These findings demonstrate the potentially negative influence that self-harm, bullying, and sexual harassment have on a student's perception of school and their environment. They also highlight the importance of experiencing any kind of victimization.
- Based on our findings, it seems students that are bullied or sexually harassed have negative opinions of their environment. Being victimized may cause students to feel unsafe and overlooked by peers and/or authority figures.
- Self-harm can sometimes be used by students as an unhealthy coping mechanism. It is possible that students' negative perceptions of their environment could increase the frequency at which they harm themselves. It is important to note that disorders or severe emotional distress could also contribute to the frequency of self-harm.

## Limitations & Future Directions

- Generalizing these findings should be done carefully, as our data is limited to a small sample from a single school in New England with mostly white students.
- Future studies should include more diverse student populations in their sample, in order to explore differences in victimization and school perceptions across gender, sex, socioeconomic class, and age.
- Bystander interventions may be useful to prevent acts of bullying, harassment, or self-harm which could occur at schools. This could include identifying certain characteristics among other students who witness bystanders intervention. These findings are important for the progression of future research for violence intervention among students.
- Future research and policy should explore additional ways to implement prevention methods to decrease the prevalence of self-harm, bullying, and sexual harassment at school. This could include training authority figures and caregivers on how to provide a safe space for their students, or recognize signs of bullying, self-harm, or sexual harassment.

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