

# A Whole-School study of the extent and impact of homophobic bullying

Highland Council Psychological Service



Works for Positive Change

## ***Summary of Report***

Data and interpretations are presented from a whole secondary school survey about pupils' experiences of homophobic bullying. The aim of the survey was to explore whether and how homophobic bullying is an issue for young people in Highland and to provide some assessment of any need for intervention following from the Highland Council's duties under the Equalities Act (2010), and to inform discussions about what might need to be done.

The survey questionnaire and methods were developed in consultation with young people and school staff, and in conformity with British Psychological Society guidelines for research with vulnerable groups.

Analysis of data suggests the following summary conclusions:

- 13% of the sample said that they were currently affected by homophobic bullying at least monthly
- Young people who identified as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) were at least three times more likely than others to experience homophobic bullying
- However, of those young people currently experiencing homophobic bullying, three-quarters are heterosexual, and three-quarters are boys.
- Vulnerable groups include almost anyone, particularly boys, openly LGBT young people and young people who do not behave according to gender stereotypes. Homophobic bullying happens as a result of attitudes about sexual minorities, and about gender, but also because it seems to be an effective way of bullying anyone.
- 24% of all young people could identify at least one adverse consequence to themselves as a result of homophobic bullying. This included young people not directly bullied themselves.
- Nearly 7% of the whole school sample reported a major consequence to themselves, such as using alcohol, drugs, or self-harm and suicide attempts
- Most of these young people were not LGBT, though LGBT young people had a higher risk of major adverse consequences of homophobic bullying.
- 44% of the sample could remember homophobic bullying occurring in Primary School
- Homophobic bullying can occur almost anywhere, with higher frequency in unsupervised locations, but also in classes, suggesting promising scope for intervention. Break and online/phone were the most identified areas.
- There is a complex pattern of attitudes towards using the word "gay" as a negative adjective, suggesting that intervention in this area needs to be carefully thought out.

Some suggestions for steps to be taken are made in conclusion, reflecting the richness and complexity of these findings, and the need for careful and sensitive interpretation.

We thank the young people and their teachers for their thoughtful and honest participation.

### ***Why was this work done?***

The Equalities Act (2010) places specific duties on local authorities to address prejudice-based disadvantage related to particular protected characteristics, including sexual orientation. The international literature suggests that homophobic bullying is widespread and can have significant effects on the well-being of young people, whether they are in a sexual minority or not. We wanted to understand the situation in Highland so as to make sure any steps proposed were both justified in terms of evidence of need and also tailored to our specific context.

### ***Who did we ask about homophobic bullying?***

We asked a whole secondary school to complete a questionnaire about homophobic bullying, having obtained informed consent following British Psychological Society Guidelines for research with vulnerable groups. Careful consultation with the Executive of Highland Youth Voice, and with Pupil Support staff informed questionnaire design and implementation, and follow up care was provided if needed by school staff and educational psychologists. Data was collected in Autumn 2013 as part of the evidence gathering for a revised Council bullying policy.

There were 335 responses, spread evenly across year groups. Young people provided information about their gender, whether they had any lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) friends and (if they wished to tell us) whether they were LGBT themselves. Table 1 shows the percentage distributions:

Male	Female	Did not say	With LGBT friend	LGBT themselves
55%	43%	2%	27%	4%

Table 1. Percentage breakdown of various aspects of the whole sample

There is thus a good gender balance in the sample. It is a heartening piece of data that over a quarter of young people could identify an LGBT friend, since it implies that at least some sexual minority youth have a supportive network of people happy to own them as friends.

Results are reported below, mostly as percentages. Where differences are mentioned between groups, these are always statistically significant unless otherwise stated. Statistical technicalities (tests used, p value, etc) are omitted for clarity, but available on request.

### ***DOES homophobic bullying happen?***

It does. Estimates of how much depend on how the question is asked. With a direct prompt, about 34% of the sample said they had no lifetime to date awareness of homophobic bullying ever happening in school, with 61% able to recall incidents having happened (not everyone answered the question).

In terms of present day experience, **4%** of the sample said they themselves were affected *daily*, with **13%** being affected at least monthly. The figure is slightly higher when we ask if

their friends are affected, with **22%** saying their friends experience homophobic bullying at least monthly. The results are presented in Figure 1.

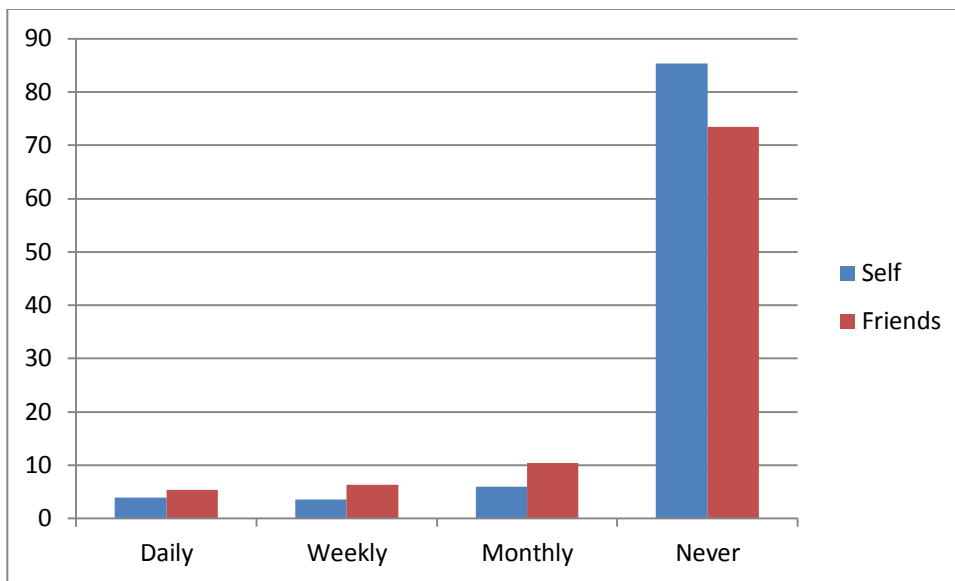


Figure 1. Percentage responses to the question as to how often young people, or their friends experience homophobic bullying.

Another way to gain an estimate is to ask indirectly about adverse consequences, of which more later. Here, **24%** identified at least one adverse consequence of homophobic bullying for themselves at some point in their lives.

So we can say that, in this whole school sample, about **13%** were currently experiencing homophobic bullying, and just under a **quarter** have experienced some kind of harm as a result of homophobic bullying, whether now or in the past.

### ***WHERE does homophobic bullying happen?***

We asked young people to tell us where homophobic bullying happens, across a range of possible locations. The percentages of young people identifying particular places are presented in Table 1 (please note these do not sum to 100 as young people could indicate more than one location).

Class	Break	Dining	Corridor	PE	Bus	Home	Online/phone	Community	None
27	43	13	34	19	21	14	40	22	26

Table 1. Percentages of sample identifying different locations for homophobic bullying

The three highest locations are unsurprisingly those with least adult presence – break, corridor and online/phone. However, it is notable that a **quarter** of the young people identify *classes* as a location, and 19% identifying *PE* in particular. Given these are locations

where adult supervision is more available, there may be promising possibilities for intervention.

### ***WHEN does homophobic bullying happen?***

It could be a natural assumption that sexual orientation only really becomes relevant and understood during adolescence and thus that younger children may not be affected by homophobic bullying. Our sample provides clear evidence that this is not the case. We asked young people when were their first memories of homophobic bullying happening in school. The responses are shown in Figure 2.

The data suggests that **44%** of the entire sample have a first memory of homophobic bullying occurring in *primary school* (this does not mean they were either targets or perpetrators themselves of course). The peak of first incidence is during P4-P6, but 3% could remember homophobic bullying in P3 or earlier, which if nothing else is evidence of impact since these respondents are recalling now in secondary school. About 9% of the young people had a first memory in S1, suggesting the transition time is important.

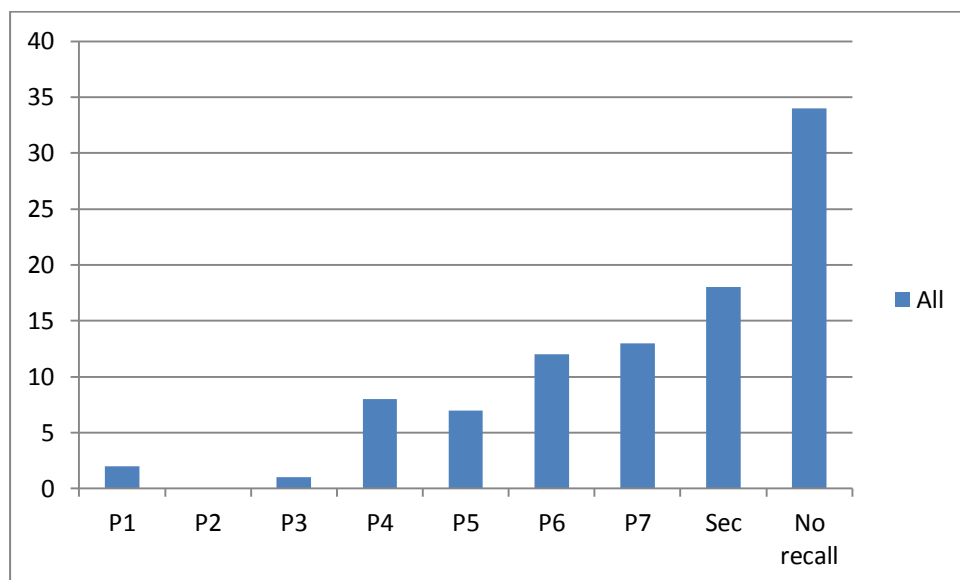


Figure 2. Percentage of ages of first memory of homophobic bullying

### ***Who is affected?***

It could also be an assumption that homophobic bullying is simply the bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and that it happens because of negative attitudes to sexual minorities. The picture found here is more complex.

The data show that being LGBT does sharply increase one's risk of experiencing homophobic bullying, though being the friend of someone who is LGBT does not (the small differences below for this latter group are not statistically significant). Figure 3 presents the comparative percentages of how often young people are affected.

Encouragingly, **46%** of LGBT young people told us that they were never affected by homophobic bullying. However, one can see that the risk of daily harassment is considerably higher. Some of this may be that LGBT young people are more likely to attribute bullying to their sexual orientation, but this is unlikely to account for all of the disparity. In terms of risk, LGBT youth are at least three times more likely to be bullied than non-minority young people, and it can also be seen that, if bullied, this is more likely to be intensive.

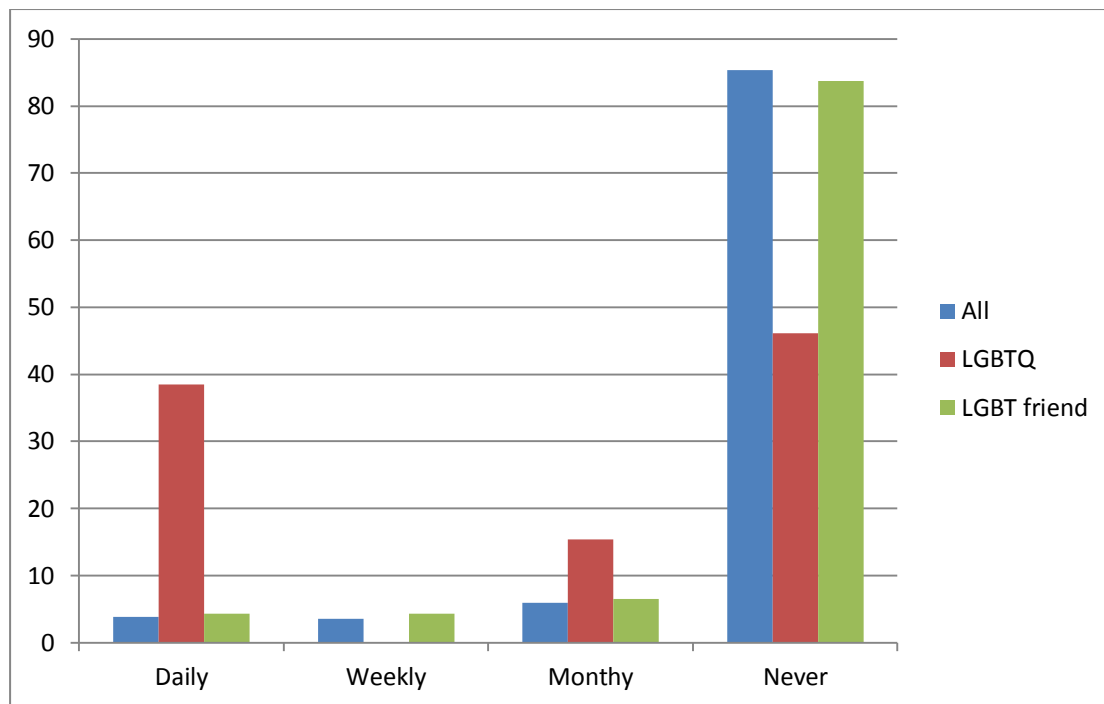


Figure 3. Percentages of whole sample and of LGBT young people, and their friends affected by homophobic bullying

Another way of looking at this data is to ask about the sexual orientation of those who experience homophobic bullying. Figure 4 shows this breakdown, below. The data suggest that **three-quarters** of those currently experiencing homophobic bullying identify as *heterosexual*. This proportion swamps any error resulting from being either unwilling to identify otherwise or not yet sure. There is also a gender pattern, illustrated in Figure 5.

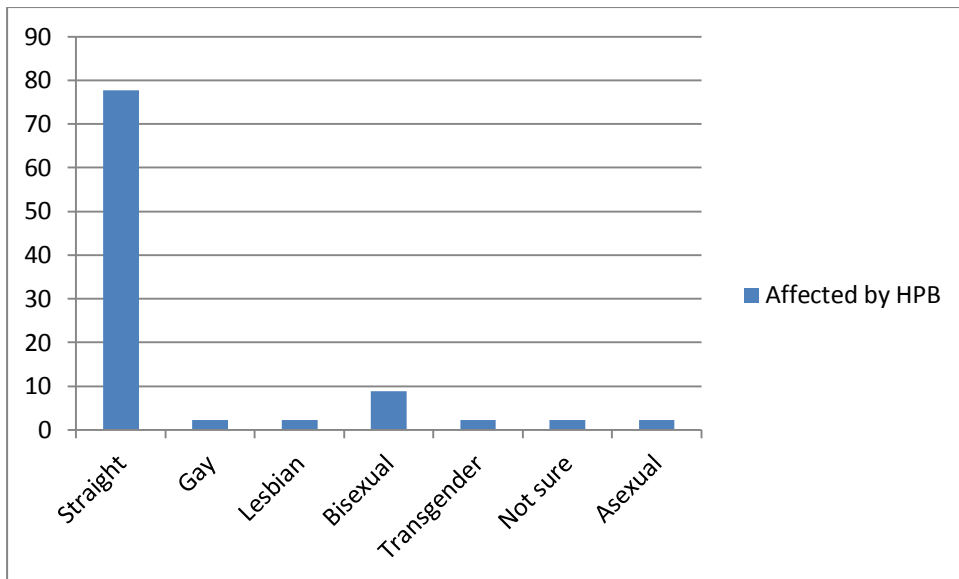


Figure 4. Declared sexual orientation of young people affected by homophobic bullying

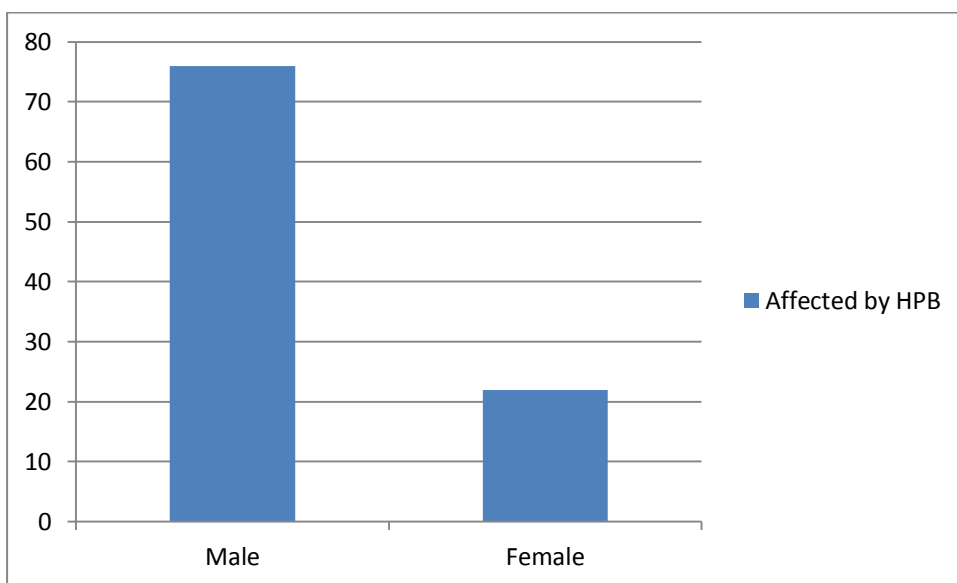


Figure 5. Percentages by gender of those currently affected by homophobic bullying

Homophobic bullying does have an impact on girls, with **7%** of all girls reporting they are affected by it at least monthly. But out of those who are currently affected, **three-quarters** are boys.

If nothing else, these results show that homophobic bullying is a complex phenomenon involving a variety of processes. Being LGBT increases one's risk of experiencing homophobic bullying, but does not make it inevitable. Most people experiencing homophobic bullying are not identified in a sexual minority, nor are they friends of those who do, and boys are at higher risk than girls.

From an equalities perspective, homophobic bullying thus seems to involve factors connected both to gender and to sexual orientation.

### So who is vulnerable?

To clarify these issues, we also asked the young people “who in your school has experienced homophobic bullying?” and offered a range of categories (based on the international literature) for them to select as many as they wished. The responses are presented in Figure 6, both from the whole group and from those who said they were currently experiencing homophobic bullying.

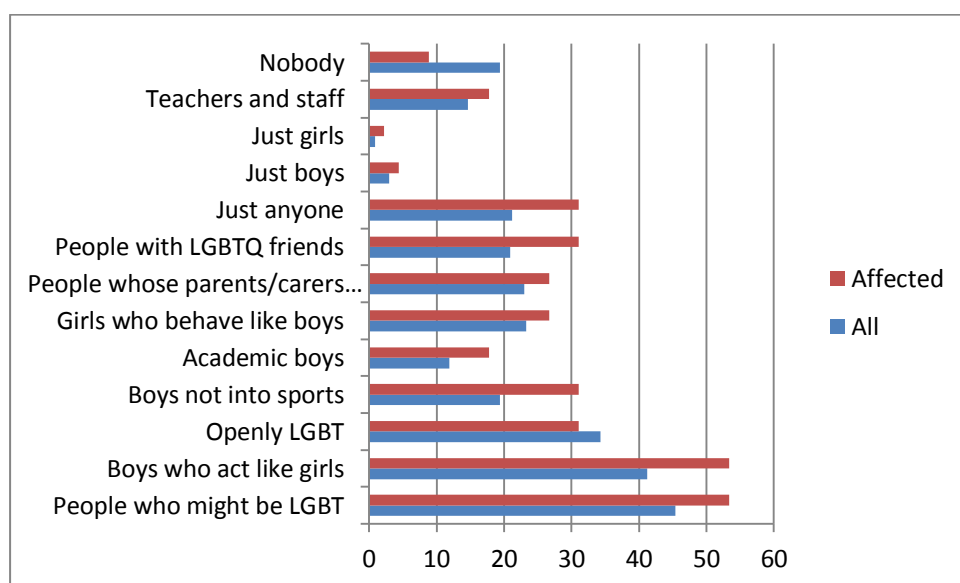


Figure 6. Percentage responses to question as to who is vulnerable to homophobic bullying, both by whole sample and by those currently affected by homophobic bullying.

Just to be clear, these data do not represent risk directly. If 24% of young people said that girls are vulnerable to homophobic bullying, this does not mean that 24% of girls are vulnerable, or that a girl has a 24% chance of experiencing homophobic bullying. But the responses do give a rough idea of relative risks for different groups, in terms of young people’s memories of what happens.

The most nominated category was “people who might be LGBT”, with 45% of young people selecting this, and the second most nominated being “people who are openly LGBT”, at 34%. This requires some careful interpretation. It might seem puzzling that people who are openly LGBT are less vulnerable to homophobic bullying than those who “might be” LGBT. Why is this? It could be that some openly LGBT young people have enough confidence in themselves and/or a sufficiently protective friendship group to be able to deflect bullying. However, this cannot be an entire explanation, since we know from the incidence data that LGBT young people have an increased risk of experiencing homophobic bullying.

The finding is consistent with a recent Stonewall survey of teachers’ perceptions. It begs the question of how that “might be” judgement is made by young people, a question that may be partially resolved by some of the other responses to our survey.

For we also find that groups of people who are not “typical” boys or girls are also vulnerable. This signal strengthens if one looks at the responses of those currently affected



by homophobic bullying (most of whom are heterosexual). Over half of these say that “boys who behave like girls”, or who are academic or not sporty, experience homophobic bullying. The proportion identifying “girls who behave like boys” also rises, and almost a **third** of these respondents think that “just anyone” can be subject to homophobic bullying.

So perhaps the groups most vulnerable to homophobic bullying are boys who do not behave as boys typically “should” – including being into study or not into sports, or being attracted to other boys – and also girls who are similarly not sufficiently stereotypically feminine.

It should be noted that **15%** of the young people said that teachers or other school staff had experienced homophobic bullying. This is an issue that merits further research and follow-up.

***What is the impact of homophobic bullying?***

We asked young people whether they had experienced any of a range of consequences as a result of homophobic bullying. The percentage responses are presented in Table 2.

Impact	Doing less well at work	Staying away from school	Hiding	Moving school	Bullying someone else	Getting into fights	Falling out with friends
Percentage of sample	4	4	3	3	1	7	10

Impact	Fall out with parents	Feel embarrassed	Feel guilty	Feel depressed	Have bad thoughts about the future	No impact
Percentage of sample	5	10	4	10	7	64

Impact	Drink alcohol	Take drugs	Become ill	Self harm	Consider suicide	Attempt suicide
Percentage of sample	2	1	2	4	3	2

Table 2. Percentages of young people reporting personal consequences as a result of homophobic bullying

Most young people ticked no consequences, but others ticked several or many. In all, **24%** of the sample identified at least one adverse consequence. Looking at “major”

consequences, such as alcohol or drug use, self-harm or suicidal thoughts or attempts, **7%** of young people identified at least one of these, as a consequence of homophobic bullying.

There is some evidence of resilience in the population, since 29% of those who said they were bullied at least monthly did not identify an adverse consequence. However, we should note the converse – 71% of those currently on the receiving end of homophobic bullying could identify one of these non-trivial harms as a result.

In addition, as many as **49%** of those who said they had experienced an adverse consequence of homophobic bullying were *not* currently being bullied. The consequences could refer either to past incidents, or to the effects of living in an environment where homophobic bullying happens. For example, where homophobia is used to make sure boys act like boys, this will result in anxiety for many more boys than are actually bullied. This is supported by the fact that 32% of those who are not themselves currently bullied, but whose friends are, identify an adverse consequence to themselves, although being a friend of an LGBT young person does not increase chances of an adverse consequence.

Finally, we can ask whether consequences are evenly spread – does everyone have one or two, or are there people with many more? The median number of consequences for those identifying any is 2.5, with some young people identifying up to 18. Figure 7 shows the range of responses:

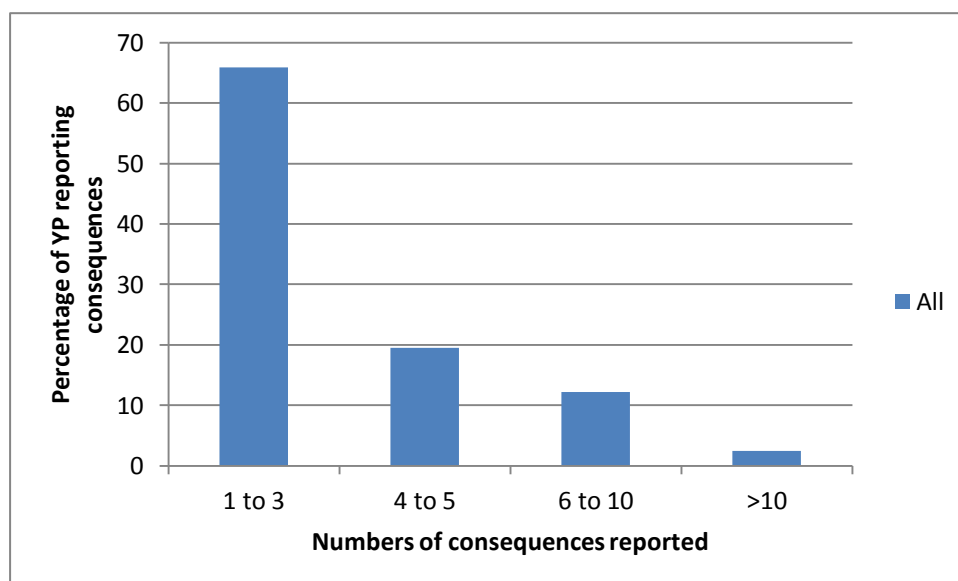


Figure 7: Numbers of consequences reported by young people who identified adverse consequences to themselves

It can be seen that for most, there are “only” a few consequences, but for a significant number of young people, not all of whom are directly affected, the cumulative impact of homophobic bullying is considerable.

This point is strengthened if we distinguish “minor” consequences (the first two rows of Table 2) from “major ones, such as drug use and self-harm. Most of the young people who reported adverse consequences experienced “only” minor ones, although we should recognise that even one or two of these can have a significant impact on well-being.

However, 7% of the *whole* school sample reported a major consequence to themselves as a result of homophobic bullying. One wonders, and further research could show, how much of the general incidence of these major consequences is accounted for by homophobic bullying. The proportion rises to 38% if one just considers LGBT young people, which is not hard to understand if one reflects that LGBT young people are more likely to experience homophobic bullying, and also that being in a situation where homophobic bullying happens at all would be likely to be more harmful to LGBT individuals. Figure 8 puts this into a whole population context. It shows that the majority of those reporting a major adverse consequence to themselves as a result of homophobic bullying are not LGBT, but also that many are.

The picture is therefore similar for the incidence of homophobic bullying. At the individual level, risk increases significantly if one is LGBT, while at the population level, most of those affected adversely by homophobic bullying are not LGBT.

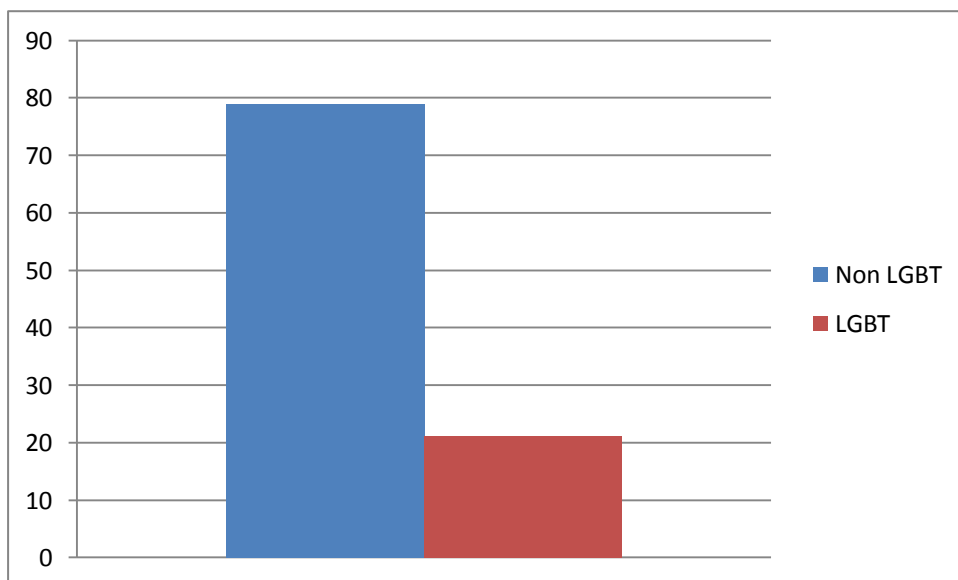


Figure 8. Reported sexual orientation of young people identifying at least one major consequence of homophobic bullying to themselves.

### The “g” word

We asked the young people their views on whether using the word “gay” as a negative adjective – “those trainers are really gay”, etc – is never, always or sometimes wrong. Percentage responses are shown in Figure 9, for the whole sample, for LGBT young people, and for those currently experiencing homophobic bullying.

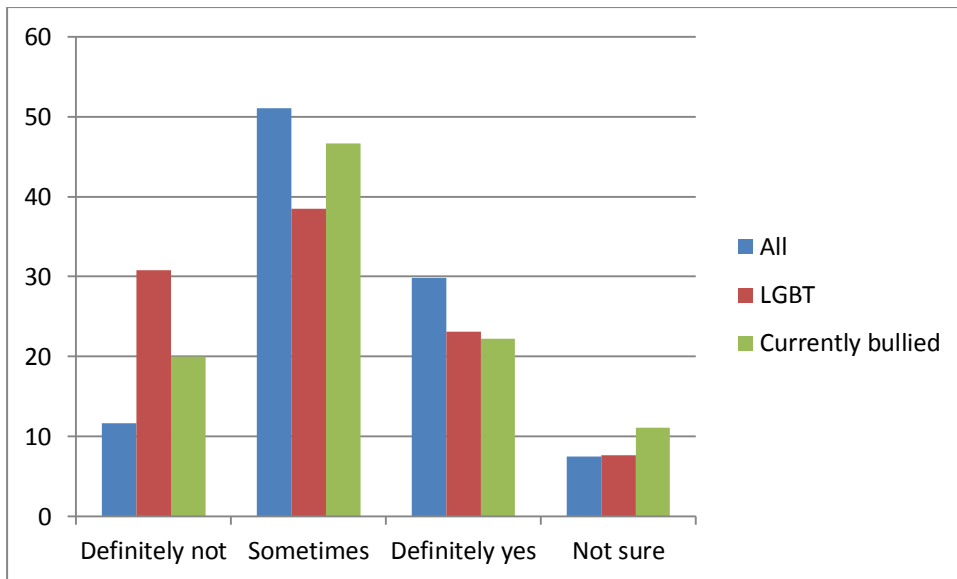


Figure 9. Percentage responses by different groups to the question, “Do you think using the word ‘gay’ to describe something bad is wrong?”

Among the whole sample, just under a third thought this use of “gay” was definitely wrong, and about half felt it depends on circumstance. Only a small minority thought it was definitely not wrong. Looking at LGBT young people, there is a puzzling difference that they were more likely to say that it is definitely not wrong to use the word in this way. A similar, and also statistically significant difference, is seen for those currently experiencing homophobic bullying.

Interpretation of these findings will need to be left as an open question here. It could be that LGBT young people are genuinely less likely to be bothered by this use of “gay”, or it could be that they have simply got inured to it. The data cannot distinguish, and the sample size is small. However, one conclusion is that intervention in this area needs some careful thought and dialogue with the young people.

### ***WHY does homophobic bullying happen?***

The numerical data give some clues as to the mechanisms and drivers behind homophobic bullying. We also asked the young people an open question, “in your opinion, what are the reasons why you think homophobic bullying happens?” There was a wide range of, sometimes very frank and honest, responses which indicate that drivers for homophobic bullying include:

- Attitudes, emotions and opinions about sexual minorities
- Any differences can be addressed using homophobic bullying
- Especially boys or girls not behaving as they “should”
- It is an effective way to bully anyone
- Benefits to the perpetrator
  - Looking good, or providing entertainment
  - Dealing with feelings of insecurity

These are illustrated at some length below, with examples, not simply because these are the real voices of young people, but also because they give some insight into the kinds of interventions that may help.

### *Attitudes and opinions about sexual minorities*

This was the most frequent reason suggested. Attitudes expressed, or more commonly imputed to others, included that being gay is morally wrong or not normal. For example:

*Gays and bisexuals aren't normal, there is a reason why there is just man and woman.*

*I think it's because people think it's weird.*

*A lot of people just are not used to gay people and will dislike or make fun of anything that isn't considered normal.*

*People think that [being LGBT] is wrong. In some cultures people can be what they are.*

Other suggestions include that people don't realise how hurtful HPB can be, or that people who bully are immature or ignorant about sexuality.

### *Differences not to do with orientation*

By contrast, 60 responses suggested that HPB is not always to do with sexual orientation per se. Young people can be targets just by being different in any way, and HPB is an effective way to target them. For example:

*For being different, an excuse to pick on someone*

*If someone just doesn't like another person/group they will just make comments about them and spread things about them*

*Because you might like stuff that other people don't*

A subset of responses point to HPB as a way of policing gender – being directed at anyone who is not sufficiently masculine (8 responses):

*Because boys/girls are expected to behave in a certain way and because someone might change their actions*

*If boys (mainly) take more care in doing their hair or putting on nice clothes to look better*

*If someone is generally 'gay'*

### *LGBT people are “different”*

A particular attitude that young people named as driving HPB is the thought that LGBT people are different. Some statements suggested that this was reason enough in itself. Others pointed to particular differences such as not fitting in, or ways of acting. For example:

*Because of the way people act and they/people start to think things*

*Because gay/bisexual/lesbian people can act different*

The theory seems to be that LGBT people act in certain ways and that this makes them vulnerable either because people don't like those ways, or because this makes them stand out. One respondent perhaps summarised the theme in a single word – “stereotypes”.

### *Benefits to the perpetrator*

Some suggestions were along the lines that HPB happens because “it works”. There were various benefits cited for administering HPB. Some are generic to all bullying actions, such as getting a laugh and showing off. Others are more specific benefits such as looking masculine:

*I think it is because some people think it is funny, but it's not.*

*People may be jealous or even showing off. Sometimes they are trying to prove something.*

*Just a bunch of idiots trying to act hard in front of their mates*

### *An effective way to bully anyone*

Consistent with the last theme are responses that suggest HPB occurs because it is an effective way to bully those who are going to be bullied. Homophobia can be used to take out anger on someone, if one is jealous of a relationship, if someone is disliked, or just as a good “come back”. Some responses suggested that perpetrators did not realise how hurtful HPB can be. For example:

*I think it mostly happens because people fall out with each other and they say bad things about each other.*

*People wanting to be nasty in general so can't come up with anything other than a gay comment*

*Homophobic bullying could happen as an insult, and to offend people who aren't homosexual more often*

*I think that some people are not aware that they are bullying*

Of course this can only work in a culture where it is less than optimal to be LGBT.

### *Emotions about LGBT people*

Although strictly speaking attitudes, some responses are coded in this category because they explicitly expressed emotions about LGBT. These ranged from discomfort to disgust, and are based either on being LGBT in itself, or on the experience of being around LGBT people. A few examples will make the point sufficiently:

*Because boys always want to be masculine, and the thought of being 'gay' or 'lesbian' is appalling*

*Because it is disgusting to be gay*

*Probably because they think that gays and lesbians will try to kiss the same sex*

*I don't really feel comfortable talking to a gay male because I'm male and I am not gay*

### *Insecurity of perpetrator*

Perhaps not surprisingly considering the above, some explanations for HPB focussed on possible confusion within those who bully, or a need to defend themselves against being the object of bullying:

*Because people might be afraid to admit their own sexuality or are confused*

*Because they are just trying to hide that they are homosexual*

*Maybe they are gay and don't want to be*

Given that many teens of any orientation engage in same sex sexual behaviour, or experience same sex desires, a degree of more or less comfortable self-questioning is likely to be widespread. Of course, this can only lead to HPB in a culture where being LGBT is less than a good thing.

### **What can we do?**

This research suggests, in line with the international literature, that homophobic bullying is a widespread and complex phenomenon. Two aspects need to be acknowledged and addressed:

- That sexual minority youth often experience bullying, and that this has adverse consequences
- That most people who suffer from homophobic bullying are heterosexual, and that cumulatively about a quarter of pupils can identify an adverse consequence to themselves

Further, it is clear that homophobic bullying begins young, and can be remembered from the earliest years of schooling.

The current research confirms that homophobic bullying is distinctive as a form of prejudice-based bullying since it is experienced by, and affects adversely, a population well beyond those in the protected minority. It is not clear how much homophobic bullying is, in fact, homophobic – the drivers are often perhaps more suitably described as gender prejudices.

Given these complexities, it will be apparent that a simple bullet list of solutions is not likely to be helpful or appropriate. The following things need to be done to make progress:

- Commitment at an Authority level to reducing the incidence and impact of homophobic bullying in our schools
- Consideration of what central and Area level structures and resources are required to address bullying in general, and homophobic bullying specifically
- Further, but more sustainable, information gathering work to generalise these findings
- Whole school (including Primary Schools), evidence-based, approaches to addressing homophobic bullying as a specific issue
- Engagement with staff groups to explore these issues for teaching and other staff, and any barriers to addressing homophobic bullying
- Engagement with relevant voluntary and third sector groups and organisations to support work in Highland
- Involvement and dialogue with parents/carers and community

### ***Acknowledgements***

Thanks to the teachers and young people of the school in which this survey took place. Young people approached the survey with seriousness, thoughtfulness and care, and teachers were very helpful in allowing class time for the survey and in providing follow up to young people who needed it.

The Executive of the then Highland Youth Voice were of great help in compiling the questionnaire, which also borrows items from the Stonewall *Teachers' Report*. The questionnaire was drafted and piloted by Kirstie McClatchey during her time as an assistant research psychologist with the Council.

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