

# INCLUSIVE AND INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO CITYWIDE BULLYING PREVENTION

Bullying is a pervasive and extremely harmful problem that affects youth and their families in communities across the nation. Every young person deserves to live, learn, and grow in an environment that is safe, supportive, and fully inclusive. Unfortunately, for too many young people—particularly at-risk groups like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth—school and the wider community are places that bring fear of bullying.

One of the most important responsibilities of local government is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our youth. As leaders entrusted with the task of protecting the next generation, it is incumbent on city officials to take every measure possible to safeguard youth from the devastating and enduring harms of bullying.

## WHAT IS BULLYING?

Though no single definition of bullying is ubiquitously utilized, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Department of Education worked together to create the first uniform federal definition of bullying in 2014. According to this definition, bullying includes any unwanted, aggressive behavior among youth that is repeated (or likely to be repeated) and involves a real or perceived power imbalance.

Bullying includes making threats, spreading rumors, intentionally excluding someone from a group, and physical or verbal attacks. Importantly, bullying can occur through the use of communication tools like text messages, email, online chat, and social media. Bullying that occurs through these channels is known as cyberbullying.

## PREVALENCE AND EFFECTS

Bullying is a serious public health issue that affects an alarming number of youth. According to the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)—a national survey of high school students—more than twenty percent of students experienced bullying on school property, and more than fifteen percent reported being cyberbullied. Moreover, the National Center for Education Statistics 2013 School Crime Supplement reported a twenty-two percent prevalence of bullying among students between the ages of twelve and eighteen.

**Bullying inflicts severe and lasting physical, psychological, social, and educational harm. Bullied youth are more likely to engage in drug or alcohol use and experience anxiety and depression, which can lead to suicidality and other self-destructive behaviors. Bullied youth are also more likely to experience negative academic outcomes, including an increased risk of dropping out of school. Furthermore, studies show that the negative social, physical, and mental health effects of bullying persist well into adulthood.**

## DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON LGBTQ YOUTH

LGBTQ youth and those perceived to be LGBTQ face a disproportionately high risk of being bullied. According to the 2013 National School Climate Survey, 74.1% of nearly eight thousand LGBTQ students surveyed nationwide reported being verbally harassed during the previous school year because of their sexual orientation and 55.2% because of their gender expression. Furthermore, 27.9% reported being physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

Additionally, the 2015 YRBS revealed that over 59.1 percent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students and students who reported being unsure of their sexual orientation were targets of bullying on school property, compared to just 18.8 percent of heterosexual students—a prevalence rate of almost 3.4 times more than their heterosexual counterparts. The same observation held true for cyberbullying. The prevalence of cyberbullying was more than 3.5 times higher for LGB and unsure students nationally than their heterosexual counterparts.

Additionally, the severe physical, mental, social, and educational harms caused by bullying can be greatly compounded for LGBTQ youth and those perceived to be LGBTQ. Sadly, LGBTQ youth still face rejection from family, peers, teachers, and their larger communities. These challenges, together with the direct impacts of bullying, place LGBTQ youth at an even higher risk of negative health outcomes like depression and suicidal ideation.

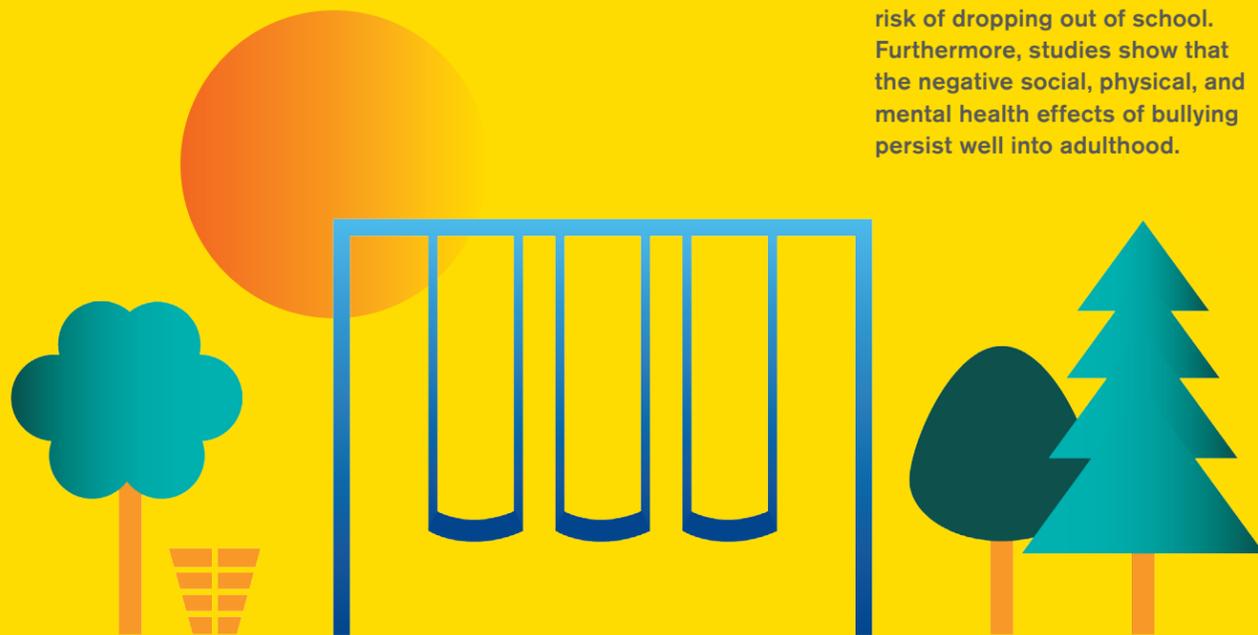
## WHAT CAN MUNICIPALITIES DO?

It is imperative that cities do everything in their power to ensure that their youth—including especially-at-risk LGBTQ youth—are safeguarded from the harms of bullying. Municipalities are uniquely positioned to holistically protect youth from bullying.

First, while anti-bullying school district policies that enumerate sexual orientation and gender identity are vital, many cities lack direct control over school district rules and regulations. Municipalities in this position can still address the problem by actively working with school boards to educate them about the importance of LGBTQ-inclusive anti-bullying policies and advocating for their enactment.

Further, although much of the existing research on bullying focuses on youth in schools, it is clear that bullying often spills over into other realms of the daily life of youth. One such area is the wide range of youth services that many cities support or provide directly. These include services provided by a city's parks and recreation department or public library, for instance. Municipalities generally exercise a great deal of control over policies governing participation in city services or the use of city facilities. Consequently, cities can and should take immediate and wide-reaching action to protect all youth from bullying while accessing city services or facilities.

In 2012, the District of Columbia (D.C.) implemented an innovative and fully-inclusive approach to do just that. This approach centered on the establishment of a Youth Bullying Prevention Task Force. While D.C. is a federal district that possesses a legal structure and authority different from municipalities, its approach to tackling the problem of bullying is one most municipalities can adopt either through local legislation or administrative action.



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**AN EMERGING MODEL: CITYWIDE YOUTH BULLYING PREVENTION TASK FORCE**

The primary charge of a municipal Youth Bullying Prevention Task Force is to develop and implement inclusive citywide policies and programs to protect youth from bullying. The Task Force should be given a wide remit, to include but not be limited to:

- Eliminating bullying in schools through engagement and advocacy with school boards and the development of LGBTQ-inclusive anti-bullying educational and awareness programs for schools within the City;
- Eliminating bullying in all youth-serving city agencies and facilities, including public libraries, parks, recreation centers, and other public spaces, through the development and implementation of sexual orientation and gender identity-inclusive bullying prevention policies;
- Developing educational and awareness anti-bullying community programming, including programs with a focus on particularly at-risk youth like LGBTQ youth;

- Developing and implementing city employee training on the City's bullying prevention policies and current evidence-based best-practices in bullying prevention; and
- Periodically reviewing existing laws and policies for efficacy and compliance with the latest evidence-based best-practices, and recommending appropriate legislative and policy updates to the City Council and Mayor/City Manager.

Importantly, LGBTQ-inclusive anti-bullying laws and policies that apply to city services and the use of city facilities should also apply to organizations that receive city funds or provide services to youth for or on behalf of a city. Moreover, the Task Force should be comprised of representatives from relevant city agencies, teachers, school administrators, parents, mental health professionals, direct service providers, advocates, community members, and youth.

A Task Force created with the above framework ensures that the City utilizes the greatest extent of its authority and reach to prevent bullying against all youth. In addition, requiring periodic review of existing laws and policies ensures that the City's bullying prevention laws and policies are working and kept in line with current best-practices.



**RECOGNIZING LGBTQ-INCLUSIVE CITYWIDE BULLYING PREVENTION EFFORTS**

As noted on page 66, the MEI scorecard will undergo significant revisions in 2018. One of these changes include the way we assess anti-bullying policies for local credit. Municipalities that implement a citywide bullying prevention task force that expressly incorporates efforts to protect at-risk LGBTQ youth will be awarded credit in the 2018 MEI.

**CONCLUSION**

Bullying is a pervasive and extremely detrimental problem that affects youth in every community across the country. LGBTQ youth and those perceived to be LGBTQ are especially at risk of being targets of bullying, and its devastating effects—including depression and increased suicidality—are often heightened for these young people who may also be struggling with familial and societal rejection and discrimination.

It is crucial that local leaders make every effort to protect all youth—including particularly-at-risk LGBTQ youth—from bullying in city services and facilities, in organizations and services supported with city funds, and in schools through advocacy and engagement with local school boards. Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Task Forces focused on achieving these goals can help ensure the safety and wellbeing of our next generation.

LGB and unsure youth are over three times more likely to be **targets of bullying** on school property

