

# High School Victimization and Student Risk Experiences of Gender Minority Youth

Brooke Ruffa, M.Ed. [bcr9uf@virginia.edu](mailto:bcr9uf@virginia.edu)  
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D. & Timothy Konold, Ph.D.

Youth Violence Project  
<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>



## INTRO

Gender minority youth experience more victimization and negative school experiences than their cisgender peers (Goldblum et al., 2021). However, there is a lack of research conducted on a large scale on the prevalence rates of gender minority students in schools (Shantilla et al., 2021). Furthermore, a substantial amount of research has broadly consolidated the experiences of all gender minority youth as a single group. However, research has shown that the experiences of gender minority students may differ based on their gender identity (Price-Feeney et al., 2021). The current study examined the unique victimization, sexual harassment, perceived prevalence of bullying, and mental health experiences across gender minority students (transgender, non-binary, questioning) (n= 701).

## METHODS

The sample consisted of 106,865 high school students (71% participation rate) from 299 schools (92% participation rate) who completed the pre-covid 2020 Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey. Bullying was measured on a four-item scale that assessed student bullying experiences. Students were given a standard definition of bullying and were asked how many times in the past school year they had experienced physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying. Students were asked four questions about experiencing sexual harassment (Crowley et al., 2019). The prevalence of teasing and bullying in a school was measured with five items that focused on the extent of bullying and teasing observed at school as distinguished from personal victimization.

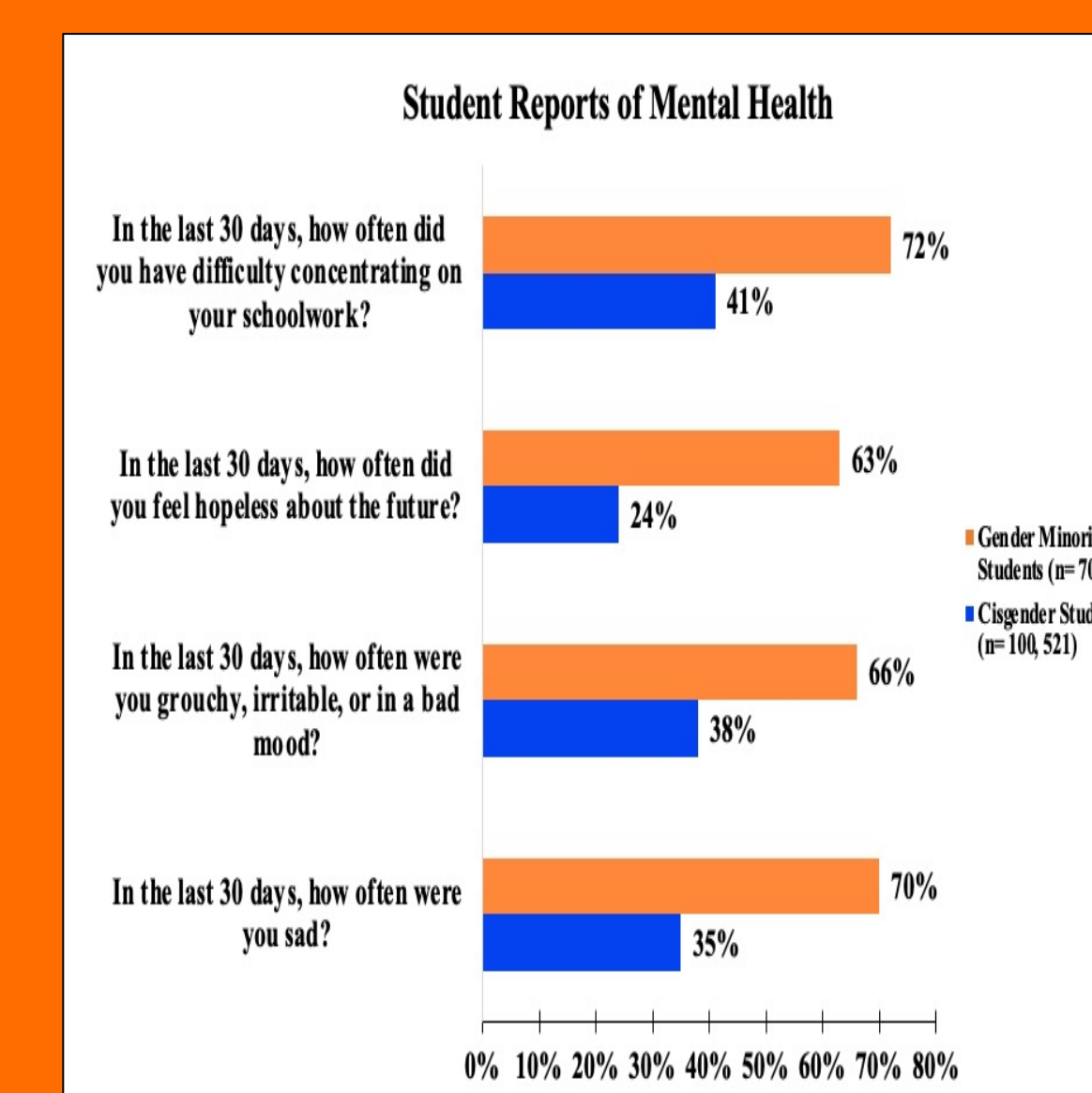
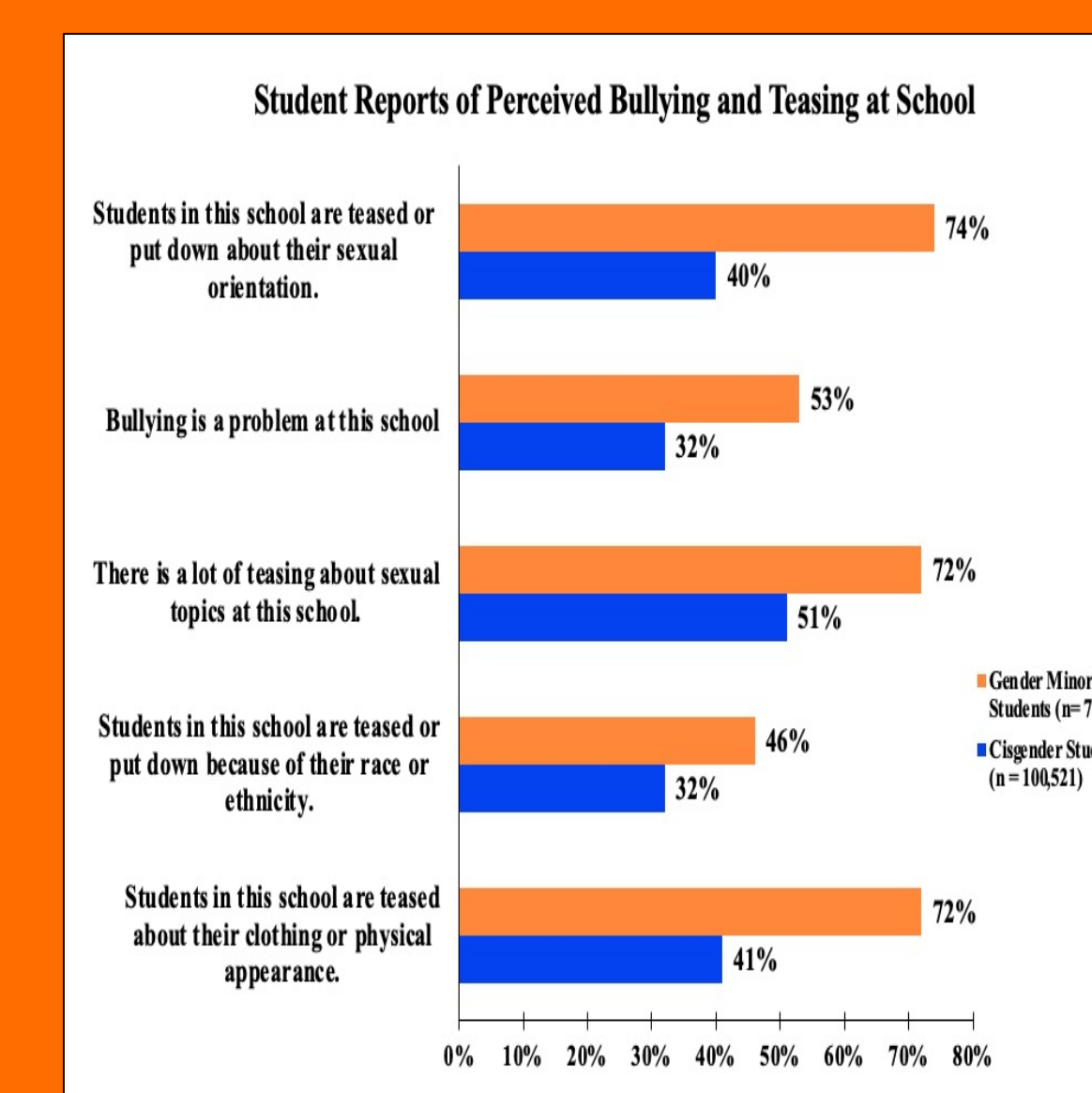
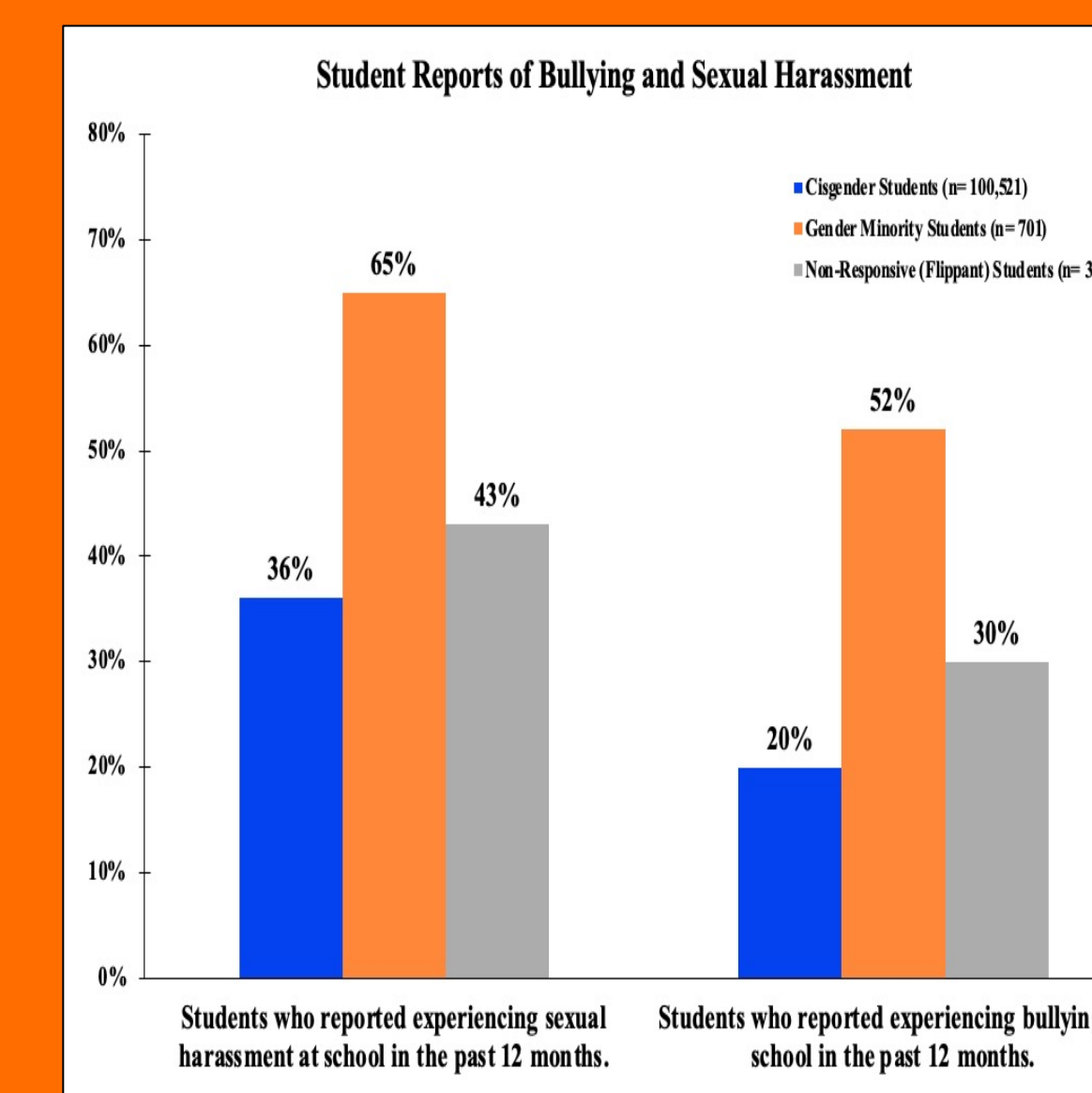
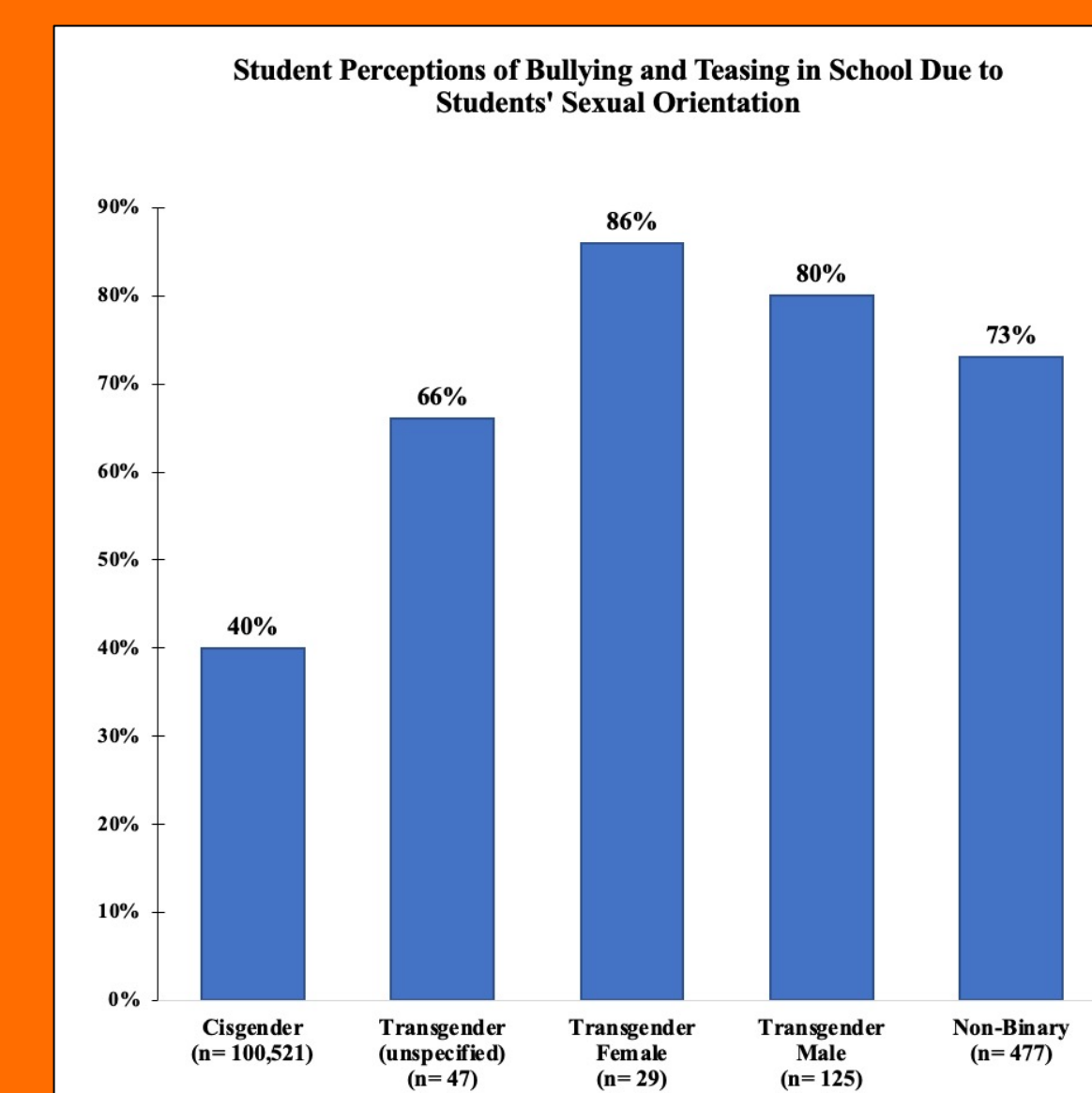
When asked about their gender, students were given four options, including an option for students to self-describe their gender. Students' self-descriptions were reviewed and coded into two main categories: responsive and non-responsive. Responsive categories included: non-binary, transgender (unspecified), transgender female, transgender male, and gender questioning. Within the non-responsive category, there were two sub-categories: flippant (e.g., "helicopter," criticisms that there were only two genders) and statements describing their sexual identity. Kappa values for research coders were consistently high across gender identity categories, ranging from .86 to .99, and were all statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). A total of 3,275 non-responsive students were analyzed separately.

## RESULTS

Overall, we found that gender minority youth reported higher rates of peer victimization (sexual harassment, bullying) and perceived more teasing and bullying at school than cisgender students. Across all students who identified as gender diverse, 65% reported at least one instance of sexual harassment, and 52% said they had been bullied in the past year.

Transgender and non-binary youth reported consistently higher percentages of bullying experiences compared to cisgender and gender questioning youth. For instance, 54% of transgender students reported being bullied at school this year, compared to about 37% of gender questioning and 20% of cisgender students.

**Gender minority students reported higher rates of sexual harassment, bullying, and mental health difficulties compared to cisgender students. Furthermore, gender minority youth perceived more frequent teasing and bullying at school than their cisgender peers.**



## RESULTS (continued)

Similar to the results for bullying victimization, we found that non-binary (65%), transgender (unspecified) (64%), and transgender male (67%) students reported more sexual harassment than all cisgender students (36%). However, no significant relationship was found for questioning and transgender female students.

We also examined gender minority students' perceptions of teasing and bullying at school and found that a majority of gender minority students (53%) reported that bullying was a problem in their school compared to cisgender students (32%). Of note, 72% of gender minority students said that there was a lot of teasing about sexual topics at their school, while only 51% of cisgender students agreed with this statement. Additionally, results indicated that a higher percentage of transgender (unspecified) (66%), transgender female (86%), transgender male (80%), and non-binary (73%) students were likely to agree/strongly agree that students at their school are teased or put down about their sexual orientation compared to cisgender students (40%).

Finally, after examining students' mental health outcomes, we found that transgender female, transgender male, non-binary, and questioning students reported higher average depressive symptom scores than cisgender students. Results further indicated that most gender minority students (70%) reported feeling often or always sad in the last 30 days. We also found higher rates of gender minority youth (63%) endorsed often or always feeling hopeless about the future compared to their cisgender counterparts (24%).

## DISCUSSION

We found that gender minority students reported higher rates of bullying, sexual harassment, and adverse mental health outcomes. Furthermore, gender minority students perceive more teasing and bullying in their school than their cisgender peers. This is consistent with past research that has collapsed the experiences of all gender minority students. The findings from this study indicate that more research is necessary to inform future school psychology practices that can address the needs of transgender, non-binary, and questioning youth. A valuable contribution of the current study is that we examined school-based victimization experiences of gender minority subgroups. We also identified students who made non-responsive or flippant statements when asked to self-describe their gender. The exclusion of these invalid responding students is important because their responses could distort the results comparing gender minority and cisgender groups. Our results will help improve our understanding of gender minority subgroups.

Transgender and non-binary students reported significantly higher prevalence rates of bullying and teasing within their school, as well as higher personal bullying victimization experiences, than cisgender students. And students questioning their gender identity reported higher average depressive symptoms scores than cisgender youth, which is an important contribution since gender questioning students have sometimes been overlooked and dropped from related studies (Kolsciw et al., 2018). Further, the reporting of perceived prevalence of bullying for each gender minority group is an important addition to the literature, given that most related studies have focused solely on student reports of direct bullying experiences.

Our findings indicate a need to reduce school-based bullying and sexual harassment that targets gender minority youth. Victimization experiences of gender minority youth may be exacerbated if they are in schools where school personnel do not know how to support the identity and experiences of these students (Simons & Russel, 2021). Specific training and intervention programs to support gender minority youth are needed to create a more positive and supportive school environment. School psychologists can help make these adjustments to intervention programs and provide supportive resources to gender minority students.

A primary limitation of this study is that it is a correlational and cross-sectional study that cannot establish causal relationships. Moreover, we measured student experiences of victimization, but not whether specific incidents of victimization were motivated by the student's demographic characteristics. A final limitation is that the survey items rely on student self-report. School psychologists interested in more information should contact [youthviolence@virginia.edu](mailto:youthviolence@virginia.edu).

### Notes

A more complete report and references are available from the author: [bcr9uf@virginia.edu](mailto:bcr9uf@virginia.edu). This project was supported by grants #NIJ 2017-CK-BX-007 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice.