

# ***Are the Kids All Right? The Impact of School Climate among Students with LGBT Parents***

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## **Abstract**

Using a large-scale survey of over 3,000 Canadian students, this study empirically investigates the correlation of having a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) parent with the likelihood of skipping school due to feeling unsafe. A multivariate logistic regression procedure with interaction terms was used. Results show that students who have an LGBT parent, and who report feeling unsafe at school due to their family type or their own real/perceived gender and/or sexual identity, were almost four times more likely to report skipping school than cisgender-heterosexual (CH) students with non-LGBT parents who feel safe at school.

*Keywords:* LGBT parent, school climate, homophobia, transphobia, bullying, students, Canada

## **Résumé**

Reposant sur un sondage mené auprès de plus de 3,000 élèves canadiens, cette étude analyse de manière empirique la corrélation entre le fait d'avoir un parent homosexuel, bisexuel ou transgenre (LGBT) et le risque de s'absenter de l'école par sentiment d'insécurité. Une analyse de régression logistique multivariée avec des paramètres d'interaction a été utilisée. Selon les résultats obtenus, les élèves qui ont un parent LGBT et qui disent ne pas se sentir en sécurité à l'école en raison de leur type de famille ou de leur propre genre ou identité sexuelle réel ou perçu étaient quatre fois plus susceptibles d'absentéisme que les élèves cisgendres-hétérosexuels (CH) ou ayant des parents non LGBT et qui se sentent en sécurité à l'école.

*Mots-clés :* parent LGBT, climat de l'école, homophobie, transphobie, intimidation, élèves, Canada

## Introduction

According to the 2011 Canadian Census Survey, there are approximately 64,575 LGB couples in Canada (45.5% female partners, 54.5% male partners—trans couples not enumerated). Among these couples, 9.9% have children. The majority of these children (94.3%) are aged 24 and under. Many arguments have been made that suggest having an LGBT parent can be detrimental to a child's well-being and future (Regnerus, 2012a). Regnerus (2012a), for one, has argued in his highly controversial article that children of LGB parents experience disadvantages compared to children of "intact biological families." Regnerus' findings from the New Family Structures Study (NFSS) sparked a debate among researchers about the methodological merit of his work (Amato, 2012; Eggebeen, 2012; Osborne, 2012; Perrin, Cohen, & Caren, 2013; Regnerus, 2012b). Many researchers have strongly critiqued and questioned Regnerus' findings and underlying political impetus (see, for example, Perrin, Cohen, & Caren, 2013). They draw on research showing that children who have a LGB parent progress just as well as children with cisgender-heterosexual (CH) parents (Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Rosenfeld, 2010; van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, van Rooij, & Hermanns, 2012; Wainright & Patterson, 2006, 2008). For instance, van Gelderen and colleagues (2012) found that children in lesbian families showed no difference from children in CH families on reports of quality of life. These studies suggest that it is the strength of the parent-child relationship, rather than the gender or sexual minority (GSM) status of parents, that has the greater effect on the positive health, development, and adjustment of children and adolescents (Patterson, 2006, Patterson & Wainright, 2007; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

It is understandable that people defend the "no-difference paradigm," especially in response to people using Regnerus's research to defend heterosexual-only marriage (and therefore "family"). However, there may be legitimacy behind some of Regnerus's empirically-based claims. Regnerus (2012a) does not suggest any causal connections between LGB parents and "suboptimal outcomes" among their children, and he is careful to point out some possible explanations that may aid in contextualizing his findings. He writes:

Although the findings reported herein [i.e., that children of LGB parents are more disadvantaged compared to biologically intact families] may be explicable in part by a variety of forces uniquely problematic for child development in lesbian

and gay families—including a lack of social support for parents, stress exposure resulting from persistent stigma, and modest or absent legal security for their parental and romantic relationship statuses—the empirical claim that no notable differences exist must go. (p. 766)

Among the social environments which children regularly frequent and where they may encounter “persistent stigma” is the school system.

Other research suggests that students with an LGB or transgender (LGBT) parent experience more hostile school environments than students with CH parents (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Ray & Gregory, 2001). Negative outcomes experienced by youth with an LGBT parent can be explained not as a consequence of their parent’s sexual orientation, but as the result of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity still thriving in society, and, more notably, in schools, where adolescents and youth spend much of their time. It is within this framework, and not Regnerus’s, that the current research is situated. More specifically, the goal is to empirically analyze, using a large-scale survey of Canadian students, the impact of having an LGBT parent on the propensity to skip school due to feeling unsafe. The decision to focus on skipping school is grounded in longstanding research that has shown skipping school to be a key correlate with grade retention (Rosenfeld, 2010), eventually dropping out of school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), and other negative social outcomes (Rumberger, 2011). Such an objective has led to the following two research questions: (1) Are students with an LGBT parent more likely to skip school because they feel unsafe than students with CH parents? (2) Are there additional factors, such as being harassed or bullied, that may account for a greater likelihood of skipping school, especially for students with an LGBT parent?

## **Review of the Literature**

Research suggests that children with an LGBT parent experience, much like LGBTQ students themselves (with the “Q” signifying students who are “questioning” or “queer,” a grouping that was not included in the research involving parents), hostile and unwelcoming school environments (Guasp, 2010; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Ray & Gregory, 2001). For example, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) published a report in 2008 specific to students with an LGBT parent, and found that such

students reported being verbally harassed due to their family composition (40%). Nearly half (47%) indicated that they were subjected to hearing negative comments from peers about their parents, or from school staff (28%). They found that nearly a quarter (23%) reported being mistreated by the parents of other students because they had an LGBT parent. Some 11% of students also reported being mistreated by a teacher because of their family, and 22% indicated that they had been discouraged from talking about their family status at school by a teacher, principal, or other staff person. Smaller numbers reported being physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) or assaulted (e.g., punched or injured) at school for having an LGBT parent (12%), or because of their own actual or perceived sexual identity (11%).

Research suggests that hostile school environments can affect students with LGBT parents' sense of school safety, as well as how often they skip school because of safety concerns (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). In the same GLSEN study, Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that 51% of all students in their national study had felt unsafe in school for some reason. Among students with an LGBT parent, the most common reasons cited were having an LGBT parent (23%) and their own actual or perceived sexual orientation (21% vs. 6% from the general student sample). Further, 15% (vs. 6%) of students had skipped class, and 17% (vs. 5%) had missed at least one day of school due to safety concerns. Finally, students with an LGBT parent who had been bullied were the most likely to miss class (34% vs. 10%) or skip a full day of school (44% vs. 11%) due to safety concerns, compared to students who had not been harassed for having an LGBT parent.

In another study of children of lesbian and gay parents, Ray and Gregory (2001) found that 18% of parents with children in primary school and 28% with adolescents in secondary school reported that their child had experienced teasing or bullying. When adolescents themselves were interviewed, just under half (45%) of students who were in Grades 7 to 10 indicated that they had experienced bullying or teasing due to their parent's sexual identity. Ray and Gregory (2001) also found that 17% of gay and lesbian parents felt that their children who were in secondary school experienced prejudice from a teacher.

Research seems to suggest that students with an LGBT parent do experience more hostile and uninviting environments than students with CH parents. Ultimately, school climates are seemingly not only homophobic toward LGBTQ youth, but toward youth who have LGBT parents as well. What is less clear, however, is the impact of such

climates. As noted, there has been a substantial amount of literature on the development and adjustment of children with LGBT parents. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies (mostly in the United States, but also internationally) have found that children of LGBT parents are well adjusted, with no developmental differences from their peers from CH families (Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Perrin & Siegel, 2013). For instance, using a representative sample of adolescents in Grades 7 to 12 from the American National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (the “Add Health” database), Wainright and Patterson (2006) examined the relationship between family type (i.e., lesbian or heterosexual parents) and delinquent behaviour, victimization, and substance abuse and found no significant differences between the two groups (see also Patterson, 2004). Patterson further reported that the strength of the parent–child relationship is a greater predictor of adjustment than the sexual orientation of the parent (Patterson, 2006). Wainright, Russell, and Patterson (2004) also focused on school-based outcomes and found no differences between family type and academic achievement and trouble in school, but found a significant association between family type and school connectedness, which was greater among students of LGB parents. Indeed, looking at grade retention using data from the 2000 American Census, Rosenfeld (2010) found that children of gay and lesbian couples were actually less likely to be held back in schools, although the difference was not statistically significant.

The fact that children and youth with LGBT parents develop in positive ways should not imply that they never experience any difficulties (Patterson & Riskind, 2011). Similar to members of other minority groups, children and youth of LGBT parents do experience discrimination (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005); however, empirical evidence of its impact is lacking, with a few notable exceptions. For example, Bos and van Balen (2008) found a significant correlation between levels of stigmatization and greater hyperactivity in boys and lower self-esteem in girls of children between eight and twelve years old with lesbian parents. In another study, Bos and colleagues (2008) found that children with lesbian parents who experienced incidents of homophobia were significantly more likely to exhibit more anxiety/depression, social problems, rule-breaking behaviour, and aggressive behaviour. Finally, drawing on two studies of adults raised by non-heterosexual parents, Lick and colleagues (2012) found that the social climate (e.g., local policies and the presence of LGB people) predicts well-being among the offspring of sexual minorities, regardless of the sexual orientation of the children.

While important, these findings are limited for several reasons. First, the research is based on small and/or non-probability samples, and thus is preliminary and in need of further research (Rosenfeld, 2010). Second, the majority of studies focused on lesbian parents, while only a few included gay fathers, and transgender parents were virtually non-existent. One notable exception is by Veldorale-Griffin (2014) who draws on qualitative methods to explore changes in the parent–child relationship by surveying parents and their adult children. Third, there is a general lack of research focusing directly on the school climate for students with LGBT parents. The only large-scale sample addressing the correlation between having an LGBT parent and negative school-based outcomes is GLSEN’s study (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), and while important, their findings do not go beyond simple bivariate analyses. Finally, there are no large-scale studies examining the impact of having an LGBT parent using Canadian data.

Given these shortcomings, the current project provides both bivariate and multivariate analyses, using a large-scale semi-probability sample of Canadian secondary students, some of whom have lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parents, in order to empirically investigate the impact of family type on the likelihood of skipping school. Two research questions form the basis of the project. First, are students with an LGBT parent more likely to skip school because they feel unsafe than students with CH parents? Second, are there additional factors, such as being harassed or bullied, that may account for a greater likelihood of skipping school, especially for students with an LGBT parent?

## **Data and Measures**

Statistical analyses were based on data collected from a survey of over 3,700 Canadian secondary school students, which was conducted between December 2007 and June 2009, and was primarily funded by Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (Taylor & Peter, 2011). General data cleaning as well as the exclusion of respondents who did not answer questions relating to their gender or sexual identity or that of their parents resulted in a final sample size of 3,092. The English questionnaire was translated into French so that both anglophone and francophone students could participate in the study. However, due to a parallel study done in Quebec, we did not attempt to collect data in that mainly French-speaking province (Chamberland, Émond, Julien, Otis, & Ryan, 2010). Instead,

we later combined identical questions from both samples in order to provide a national analysis (Peter, Taylor, & Chamberland 2014). The present article reports on the Canada-excluding-Quebec data only.

Data were collected through two methods using the same questionnaire: an open-access survey that produced a non-probability sample, and a controlled-access survey that yielded a probability sample. Recruitment to the open-access survey was done through direct contact and social networking (e.g., Facebook) by organizations across the country with an LGBTQ youth group component, through a nation-wide media campaign, and through snowball sampling methods. The controlled-access sample consisted of in-school questionnaires by students who attended one of the participating school districts selected through multi-cluster probability sampling techniques. Students completed the controlled-access survey in school computer labs (or, by request in remote northern communities with limited Internet access, on paper versions, which were then transcribed into the online survey database).

All datasets were merged and analyzed using IBM SPSS (v.22). In total, 118 survey participants reported having at least one LGBT parent (62.8% male students and 37.2% female students), which represents 3.8% of the overall sample. Half indicated having at least one parent who was lesbian or gay (1.9%/3.8%), while 1.3% reported having a bisexual parent, and less than 1% a trans parent. Over a quarter (27.1%) of respondents were “out” about their family to everyone at school, followed by 16.7% who were out to most people, and 36.5% who were out only to a few friends. Nearly 1 in 5 participants (19.8%) reported not being out to anyone at school about their family.

**Measures.** The variables used to empirically test the listed research questions are described below. Univariate descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics

| Continuous measures           | Mean  | SD   | Min. | Max. |
|-------------------------------|-------|------|------|------|
| School attachment             | 0     | .67  | -2.1 | 1.2  |
| # unsafe places               | 0     | 1.00 | -.70 | 3.35 |
| Dummy (categorical) variables | % Yes |      |      |      |
| LGBT parent                   | 3.8   |      |      |      |
| LGBTQ student/CH parent       | 26.7  |      |      |      |

| Continuous measures    | Mean | SD | Min. | Max. |
|------------------------|------|----|------|------|
| CH student/parent      | 69.5 |    |      |      |
| Skipped school         | 13.5 |    |      |      |
| Feel unsafe            | 21.4 |    |      |      |
| Verbal harassment      | 44.2 |    |      |      |
| Physical victimization | 17.5 |    |      |      |

**Family status.** A series of dummy or categorical variables were created for family status. For students with CH parents, the data were further split by the LGBTQ status of the respondent. Thus, three measures were created: students with an LGBT parent (regardless of LGBTQ status of the respondent), LGBTQ students with CH parents, and non-LGBTQ students with CH parents, with the last group acting as the reference category. Due to the small sample size of students with an LGBT parent, we could not further divide the data according to respondents' own gender or sexual identity.

**Feelings of safety.** A dummy/categorical variable was used based on the question, "In the past year, have you ever skipped school because you felt unsafe" (1=yes). In addition, a dummy/categorical variable was created based on a count of "yes" responses to whether or not students felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation, perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or for having an LGBT parent. Finally, an index of unsafe places was constructed, which comprised of 15 areas in school for which respondents indicated by yes/no answers whether they were unsafe for LGBTQ students. Examples include hallways, classrooms, stairwells, change rooms, schoolyard, washrooms, and the cafeteria. The index was mean-centered and then computed into standard deviation units.

**Harassment/victimization.** Five variables were used to create a measure based on whether or not students experienced some sort of verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation, perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or because they had an LGBT parent. A dummy/categorical variable was computed where the higher value represents the presence of verbal harassment. A second dummy/categorical variable was computed for physical victimization based on the same reasons stated for verbal harassment (1 = yes).

***School attachment.*** Ten Likert-scale agreement questions were used to measure students' attachment to the school environment, half of which were reverse-coded so that higher values from all responses correspond to a greater sense of belonging. Items were computed to form a school attachment index ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and then centred on the mean and finally calculated into standard deviation units.

***Analytical procedures.*** In order to determine whether there are substantial differences across the gender and sexual identity of parents among students, the following statistical analyses were employed. First, the sample was divided into three independent groups—students with an LGBT parent regardless of their own gender or sexual identity, respondents with CH parents who identified as LGBT, and participants with CH parents who identified as CH as well. These groups served as the independent variable for a series of bivariate relationships with measures such as school attachment, skipping school, victimization experiences, and feelings of safety at school. Depending on the level of measurement of the dependent variables, the following statistical procedures were used: one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with  $\eta^2$  ( $\eta^2$ ) as a measure of effect size, and chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) with Cramer's V to measure effect size. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, an effect size that is .138 and over is considered to be "large." (e.g., if an  $\eta^2 = .32$ , the effect size is quite large and the independent variable accounts for 32% of the change in the dependent variable).

Second, a multivariate logistic regression model was constructed using the hierarchical block-entry method, which allows researchers to assess the relative contribution of each variable block separately from previously entered blocks (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Finally, a series of interaction terms were computed in order to test for any conditional or moderating relationships with the outcome measure. In the absence of moderating tests, the focal relationship is assumed to be invariant; however, such is often not the case. In order to reduce the complexity of the final interaction model, only significant interactions terms for students with an LGBT parent were included.

## Results

**Bivariate relationships.** Students were asked whether or not they had skipped school in the past year because they felt unsafe at school, with 13.5% reporting that they had. Overall, CH students with non-LGBT parents were the least likely to report skipping school (8.0%), while a quarter (23.8%) of LGBTQ students with CH parents indicated that they had skipped school. This percentage rose to 41.0% for students with an LGBT parent, regardless of their own gender and sexual identity ( $X^2(2, N = 3018) = 203.2$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .26$ ).

On average, students with an LGBT parent report lower mean school attachment (-.42 SDs) than respondents without an LGBT parent who themselves identify as LGBTQ (-.32 SDs), and significantly lower mean school attachment than non-LGBTQ participants with CH parents (.14 SDs;  $F(2807) = 167.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ ). Students with at least one LGBT parent were also significantly more likely to report feeling unsafe at school due to their gender or sexual minority status (including perceived status and/or for having an LGBT parent) (58.5%) than non-LGBTQ students with CH parents (6.4%), but were slightly less likely than LGBTQ students with CH parents (62.2%) ( $X^2(2, N = 3092) = 1126.7$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .60$ ). Nearly three-quarters (74.6%) of students with an LGBT parent versus 47.0% of CH participants without an LGBT parent could name at least one area in their school that was unsafe for LGBTQ individual. This percentage was slightly higher than that for LGBTQ-identified students with CH parents (70.7%) ( $X^2(2, N = 3092) = 155.6$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .22$ ).

Students with an LGBT parent also reported high levels of direct victimization. For instance, 38.6% indicated being verbally harassed because they had an LGBT parent, and 27.9% reported being physically harmed for the same reason. As shown in Figure 1<sup>1</sup>, participants with an LGBT parent also experienced directed victimization for their own

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1 Verbal harassment ( $X^2(2, N = 3031) = 376.3$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .35$ ); physical victimization ( $X^2(2, N = 3015) = 151.5$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .22$ ); sexual harassment ( $X^2(2, N = 3021) = 127.4$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .21$ ); mean rumours or lies spread about you at school because you are or perceived to be LGBTQ or family or friends are ( $X^2(2, N = 3010) = 658.6$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .47$ ); cyber-bullying ( $X^2(2, N = 2997) = 309.2$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .32$ ); seen specific examples of homophobic graffiti in which you were named ( $X^2(2, N = 3005) = 129.5$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .21$ ); and property stolen or deliberately damaged at school because you are or perceived to be LGBTQ or family or friends are ( $X^2(2, N = 2999) = 169.5$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .24$ ).

gender or sexual identity or their perceived gender or sexual identity. In fact, almost two-thirds (65.8%) reported being verbally harassed for these reasons, and two in five (39.7%) indicated experiencing physical victimization. Further, 45.6% of respondents with an LGBT parent reported being sexually harassed at their school in the past year, and half (49.6%) had mean rumours or lies spread about them at school because they, or someone in their family, were or were perceived to be LGBTQ. Over a third (36%) reported experiencing cyber-bullying for the same reason, one quarter (25.4%) had seen specific examples of homophobic graffiti in which they were specifically named, and 24.6% had property stolen or deliberately damaged at school in the last year.

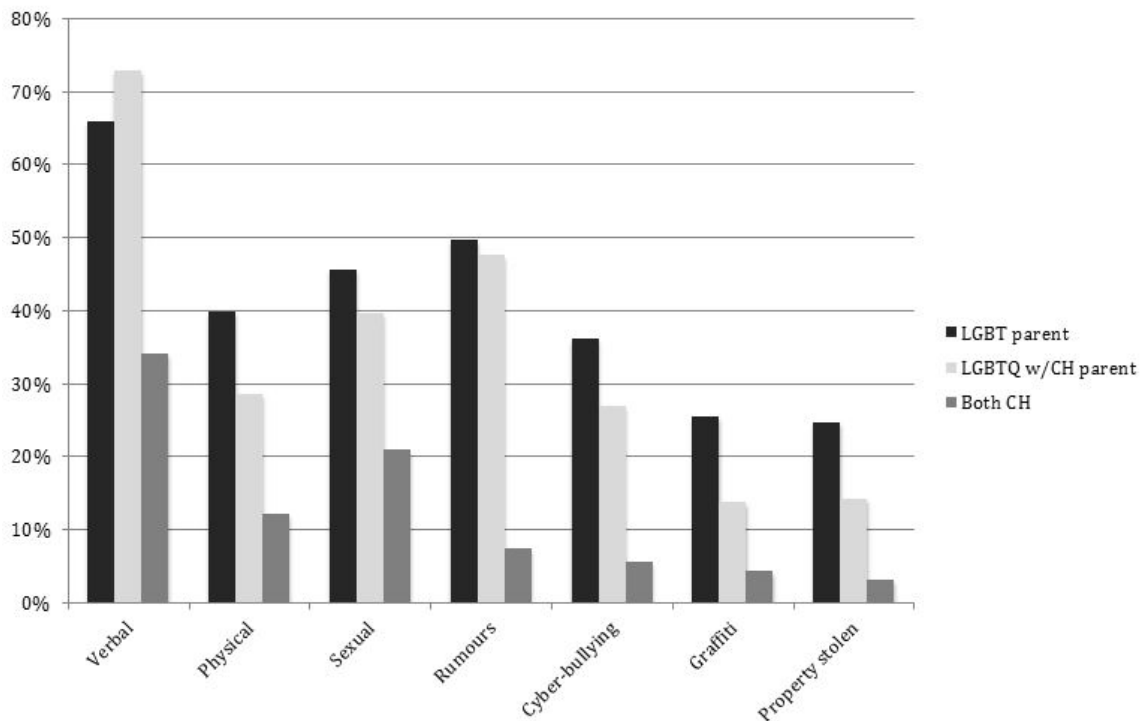


Figure 1. Targeted victimization

**Logistic regression model.** A logistic regression was completed to determine the relationship between student/parent LGBT status and prevalence of skipping school. The model includes dummy/categorical variables for LGBTQ students with CH parents and respondents with an LGBT parent regardless of their own GSM status, contrasted against non-LGBT students with non-LGBT parents. The results are presented in Model 1 of Table 2.

There was a significant association between both LGBTQ students with CH parents ( $OR = 3.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and respondents with an LGBT parent ( $OR = 7.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and skipping school, compared to non-LGBTQ students with CH parents. In particular, students with an LGBT parent were over seven times more likely than CH students with non-LGBT parents to report that they skipped school in the last year due to not feeling safe at school. Albeit an imperfect proxy, LGBT status of parents and/or students explains relatively little (11%) of the variance in the likelihood of skipping school.

**Table 2.** Logistic regression of predictors for skipping school in the past year

|  | <b>Model 1</b>            |                     | <b>Model 2</b>            |                     | <b>Model 3</b>         |                     |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Variable                                   | <i>B</i>                  | Odds ratio          | <i>B</i>                  | Odds ratio          | <i>B</i>               | Odds ratio          |
| Constant                                   | -2.51<br>(.09)***         | —                   | -3.35<br>(.14)***         | —                   | -3.30<br>(.14)***      | —                   |
| LGBTQ student/<br>CH parent                | 1.36<br>(.12)***          | 3.88<br>(3.05-4.93) | .03<br>(.18)              | 1.04<br>(.73-1.46)  | -.24<br>(.26)          | .79<br>(.48-1.29)   |
| LGBT parent                                | 2.05<br>(.22)***          | 7.73<br>(5.04-11.9) | .79<br>(.27)**            | 2.20<br>(1.28-3.76) | .18<br>(.47)           | 1.20<br>(.48-3.03)  |
| Feel unsafe                                |                           |                     | .48<br>(.18)**            | 1.61<br>(1.13-2.28) | -.05<br>(.30)          | .95<br>(.53-1.70)   |
| Verbal                                     |                           |                     | 1.06<br>(.17)***          | 2.88<br>(2.07-4.01) | 1.07<br>(.17)***       | 2.92<br>(2.1-4.07)  |
| Physical                                   |                           |                     | 1.03<br>(.14)***          | 2.81<br>(2.13-3.71) | 1.06<br>(.14)***       | 2.89<br>(2.18-3.83) |
| Unsafe places                              |                           |                     | .20<br>(.06)**            | 1.22<br>(1.08-1.38) | .19<br>(.06)**         | 1.21<br>(1.07-1.37) |
| School attachment                          |                           |                     | -.96<br>(.11)***          | .38<br>(.31-.48)    | -.96<br>(.11)***       | .38<br>(.31-.48)    |
| LGBTQ student/<br>CH parent*feel<br>unsafe |                           |                     |                           |                     | .78<br>(.39)*          | 2.18<br>(1.02-4.66) |
| LGBT parent*feel<br>unsafe                 |                           |                     |                           |                     | 1.31<br>(.62)*         | 3.72<br>(1.1-12.7)  |
| Nagelkerke<br>pseudo $r^2$                 | 11.0%                     |                     | 34.3%                     |                     | 34.7%                  |                     |
| $\chi^2$                                   | 168.1, df = 2, $p < .001$ |                     | 395.2, df = 5, $p < .001$ |                     | 6.6, df = 2, $p = .04$ |                     |

Note: SE's are in brackets below *B*'s, while  $CI_{95}$  are in brackets under the odds ratio. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2, Model 2, adds the additional independent measures, which increases the explanatory power of the model threefold accounting for 34% of the variance. When these explanatory variables are entered, the association between LGBTQ students with CH parents (compared to non-LGBTQ students with CH parents) and skipping school is no longer significant, indicating that these new measures could statistically explain this difference in propensity to skip school. This will be discussed further below. All additional explanatory measures had significant associations with skipping school in the last year: experiences of physical victimization (OR = 2.81,  $p < .001$ ), verbal harassment (OR = 2.88,  $p < .001$ ), weak school attachment (OR = .38,  $p < .001$ , or Inv. OR = 2.63), feeling unsafe due to LGBTQ status/perceived LGBTQ status or for having an LGBT parent (OR = 1.61,  $p < .01$ ), and number of places in school that are unsafe for LGBTQ people (OR = 1.22,  $p < .01$ ).

Our interest is to assess not only the association between key explanatory measures (e.g., verbal harassment, school attachment, etc.), but also how the relationship between such explanatory measures and skipping school changes when we account for the LGBTQ status of students and/or parents (i.e., interaction effects). As shown in Table 2, Model 3, students with an LGBT parent who reported being unsafe at school due to their own LGBTQ status (including perceived status) or due to having an LGBT parent were 3.72 times more likely ( $p < .05$ ) to have skipped school in the last year than non-LGBTQ students with CH parents who did not feel unsafe at school for the same reasons. A similar significant interaction term is found for LGBTQ students with CH parents (OR = 2.18,  $p < .05$ ).

An illustration of the interaction term is shown in Figure 2. One in five (20.4%) students with an LGBT parent who feel safe at school reported skipping school in the past year, but this number increases to 55.9% for students with an LGBT parent who do not feel safe at their school due to their own or their parent's LGBTQ identity. This gap is much larger than for CH students with CH parents; in this group, 7.2% of those who felt safe at school reported skipping versus 19.8% who did not feel safe at school. LGBTQ students with CH parents fall in the middle—8.6% who felt safe at school reported skipping versus 32.7% who did not feel safe at school.

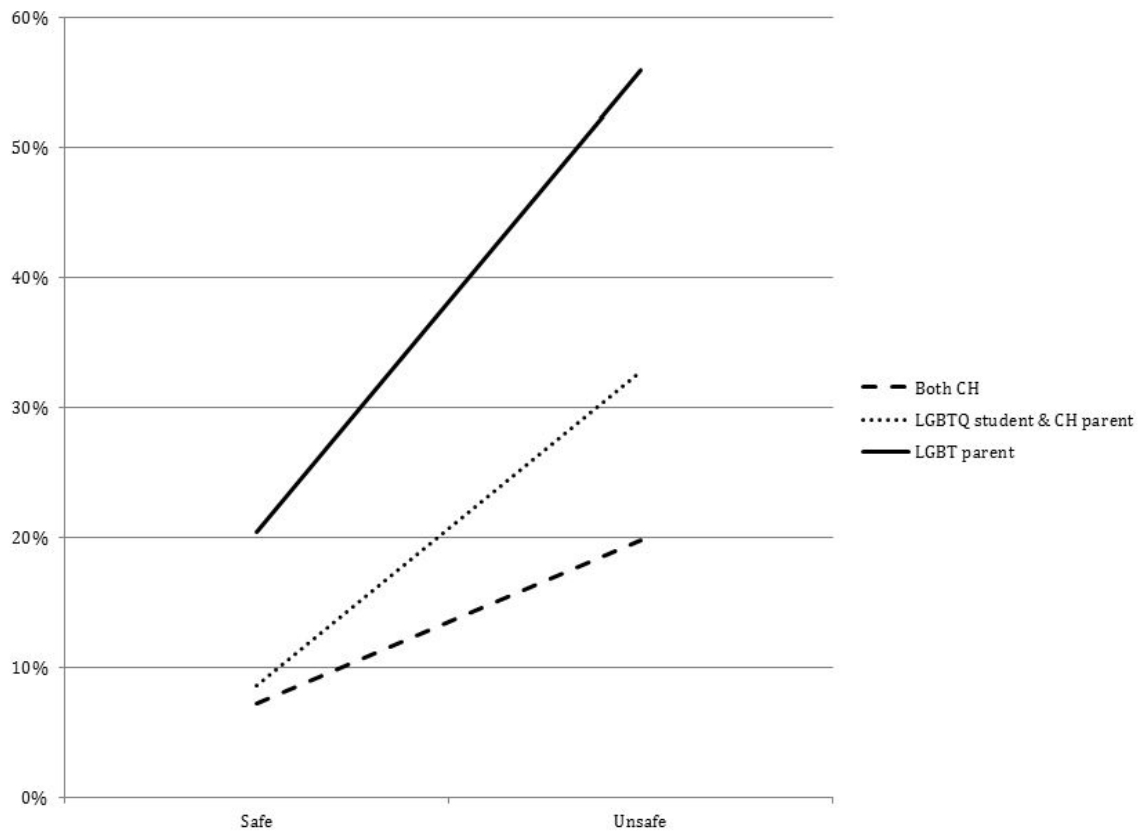


Figure 2. Prevalence of skipping school by feeling safe at school by family type

## Discussion

The current research empirically investigates respondents from a large-scale, national sample in order to examine whether or not there are differences in skipping school among students with an LGBT parent. Results have shown that students with an LGBT parent are often subjected to in-school harassment and bullying, and such a school climate has an impact on their school experience in terms of skipping school. While not a perfect correlation, there is a substantial amount of research that shows a positive and statistically significant relationship between student attendance and academic achievement (Rody, 2004). Indeed, several studies have concluded that school attendance should be regarded

as an academic outcome, meaning that attendance is a direct indicator, rather than a cause or determinant, for academic success (Gottfried, 2010). Given the importance of school attendance, it is necessary to examine who is more likely to skip school for feeling unsafe, and for what reasons.

In answering the first research question, our empirical investigation shows that students with an LGBT parent are far more likely to report skipping school in the past year because they feel unsafe ( $OR = 7.7$ ) than CH students with CH parents. Similar to LGBTQ students, as shown in Figure 1, students with an LGBT parent are significantly more likely to report being verbally, physically, and sexually harassed at school as well as a wide variety of other forms of targeted victimization than CH students with CH parents. In this regard, our research is consistent with GLSEN's study (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008) where two out of five students (40%) reported being verbally harassed for having an LGBT parent, compared to our finding of 38.6%. With respect to skipping school, our results are substantially higher for students with LGBT parents than in GLSEN's study (41% vs. 15%), although some of this disparity may be due to how skipping school was measured in each study. Moreover, unlike Wainright, Russell, and Patterson's (2004) study that found a positive relationship between gay and lesbian parent status and school connectedness among students, our results show that students with LGBT parents had lower levels of school attachment—a result that is consistent with GLSEN's study (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

In response to our second research question, results show that verbal harassment ( $OR = 2.9$ ) and physical victimization ( $OR = 2.8$ ) are the strongest predictors of skipping school, and the significance of having an LGBT parent holds even when these additional correlates are included. Other important predictors include low school attachment (Inv.  $OR = 2.63$ ), feeling unsafe due to one's GSM status or one's perceived identity ( $OR = 1.61$ ), and identifying more places in school that are unsafe for LGBTQ people ( $OR = 1.22$ ). These findings in and of themselves are not surprising, and have been well documented elsewhere (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Taylor et al., 2011). The interest in the multivariate logistic regression model, however, lies in the significant interaction term between LGBT parent family status and feeling unsafe at school (due to a student's own or perceived GSM identity or for having LGBT parents) on the odds of skipping school. Put another way, our data shows that students who have an LGBT parent and feel unsafe at school due to their own real or perceived LGBTQ identity or due to

having an LGBT parent are almost four times more likely ( $OR = 3.72$ ) to report skipping school in the last year, compared to non-LGBTQ respondents with CH parents who feel safe at school.

These findings support the argument that school is not always a safe place for students with LGBT parents, which is having an impact on their school attendance. Associated recommendations for schools on how to deal with the problem of bullying due to having an LGBT parent have been similar to those addressing LGBTQ-based harassment. For example, in a qualitative-based research report by the Stonewall organization in the U.K., Guasp (2010) provides 10 recommendations, some of which are relatively basic (such as not making assumptions about students' family structure and responding to homophobic language), while others are more comprehensive (such as inclusive curricula and the importance of early education). In recent years, there has been a substantial amount of research that has shown the detrimental impact that harassment and bullying has had on LGBTQ students—ranging from a reduced sense of school belonging (Peter, Taylor, Ristock, & Edkins, 2015) to an increased risk for suicidality (Peter & Taylor, 2014). In Canada, at least, many jurisdictions have responded by enacting province-wide legislation (i.e., Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec) and/or specific LGBT anti-discrimination policies at the school district level. It is too soon to tell what impact such legislation and policy will have on the well-being of LGBTQ students, especially within their school climate; however, they are certainly a step in the right direction. Encouraging results can be found in GLSEN's American survey, in which students with LGBT parents reported fewer incidents of mistreatment when they went to schools with anti-discrimination policies than those without (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

In line with Guasp's (2010) recommendation, an important further step would be a strong commitment from policy makers and educators to LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum and education. Our research uncovers another category of student who could benefit from an LGBTQ-inclusive environment—that of students with LGBT parents. LGBTQ-inclusive education addresses the evidence that homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity in schools affect many students in addition to those who identify as a gender or sexual minority. Indeed, research has shown that the best way to address homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity is to purposely promote the equality of LGBT people as part of a broader whole-school ethos (Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2015). Further, Bos and colleagues (2008), found that children of lesbian parents who attended schools with LGBT

curricula, but still experienced homophobia, showed fewer social problems and exhibited less aggression than children of lesbian parents who faced homophobia but did not go to such schools. There does seem to be support from teachers in Canada for this work. For instance, in the first large-scale national survey of over 3400 educators in Canada, Taylor and colleagues (2015) found that 84.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they approve of LGBTQ-inclusive education, and 96.0% agreed/strongly agreed that LGBTQ rights are human rights (see also, Meyer et al., 2015).

Yet, it is imprudent to suggest that progressive legislation/policies and supportive teachers are the panacea to the eradication of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity in schools. For instance, even though a preliminary trivariate analysis of our data found that students with an LGBT parent who went to schools with an anti-homophobia policy were less likely to report skipping school due to feeling unsafe (38.5%) than similar participants who went to schools without such a policy (51.4%), the former number obviously represents an unacceptably high number of students. Moreover, over half of students with an LGBT parent who attend a school with a district level anti-homophobia policy reported feeling unsafe at school (53.8%) compared to three-quarters of those who do not attend such schools (77.5%), which was not a statistically significant difference. Clearly more research is needed in order to thoroughly investigate both the existence of anti-homophobia policies and the extent of implementation of such policies.

Research has continuously shown that LGBT parents love and are committed to their children, and in this regard, to borrow one Hollywood film title, “the kids are all right.” Indeed, in terms of the school environment, American-based research by GLSEN has shown that LGBT parents were more likely than the national sample to volunteer at their child’s school (67% vs. 42%), to be members of the school’s parent-teacher organization (41% vs. 26%), and to have a higher level of contact with school personnel regarding their child’s future education and school program (68% vs. 38%) (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Research has also shown that many LGBT parents worry about their children being vulnerable to bullying and victimization due to their LGBT identity (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2004). In this regard, LGBT parents are more likely to talk to their children about their gender and sexual identity, as well as larger issues of heteronormativity in society (Breshears, 2011), and to communicate to their children that their family type is not wrong, shameful, or something that needs to be hidden (Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005). In a phenomenology-based qualitative project, Titlestad and

Pooley (2014) found that adult children of LGB parents indicated experiencing incidents of homophobia, but also thought that their family type gave them unique advantages over other family structures. The capacity of children of LGBT parents to thrive in spite of the challenges they face underlines their resilience. The problem, however, is that the family is merely one social institution among others, and no parent can segregate their children completely from the social forces within other environments. Thus, even the most loving and committed parents cannot insulate their children from homophobia and transphobia. Parents need healthy and safe school environments in order to facilitate positive school outcomes for their children.

Despite research that highlights the importance of school attendance on future sociological and economic outcomes, there is a disconnect between our findings (that suggest a hostile school climate for many students with LGBT parents that has resulted in an increased propensity for skipping school) and the large body of literature that confirms the “no-difference paradigm” in terms of the long-term psychological and social well-being of children and youth who have LGBT parents. It could be that children of LGBT parents are more resilient and eventually develop superior coping skills that aid in them adapting to diverse social environments, which leads to positive adjustment over time. Such a conclusion has been somewhat supported in the research by Lick, Patterson, and Schmidt (2013), who found that children of same-sex parents reported more positive social experiences and less stigma during adulthood than during earlier developmental periods. It is important to be clear that our goal is not to dismiss the “no-difference paradigm” in which research has consistently shown that it is the quality of the parenting relationship, not family type, which has greater predictive power in psychosocial adjustment and school outcomes among children and youth—including those with LGBT parents (Patterson, 2006; Patterson & Wainright, 2007). We agree with scholars who argue that the sexual orientation (or gender identity) of parents should not be the focus when questioning the well-being of children and youth. Certainly, from a human rights argument with legal implications, this is an important statement, and it is borne out of a growing body of research.

While public opinion toward LGBT individuals in general and civil rights in particular has become more favourable in recent years, there is still a long way to go, especially in terms of definitions of family (Becker & Todd, 2013). Indeed, current research shows that individuals are still somewhat hesitant about LGBT couples raising children

(Webb & Chonody, 2014). For example, results from a British public opinion poll show that while 61% of the sample supported same-sex marriage, only 49% supported same-sex adoption rights (Populus, 2009, cited in Webb & Chonody, 2014; see also Massey, Merriwether, & Garcia, 2013). It is necessary to develop anti-discrimination policies and work for LGBTQ-inclusion measures that address the larger socio-cultural issues of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity that pervade various social institutions (e.g., the family, religious, school, workplace, and legal). Herek (2010) makes this important point in support of the American Psychological Association's public record opposing any discrimination based on sexual orientation (albeit lacking in matters of gender identity) in regards to parenting:

In making good on Psychology's pledge to eradicate the stigma historically associated with homosexuality, it is important that we not only challenge widespread factual misconceptions in these domains, but that we also address the deeper structures that perpetuate sexual stigma. Even as we continue to share our specific research findings and clinical insights about sexual orientation with the lay public, we should also promote a fundamental questioning of the assumption that differences between non-stigmatized and a stigmatized minority group inevitably reflect the latter's deficits. (p. 697)

Given the growing body of evidence about the harms experienced by LGBTQ students, students with LGBT parents and others who are targeted by a homophobic, transphobic, heteronormative school climate, it behooves everyone vested in the field of education to follow suit.

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