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## Anti-gay Slurs May be Damaging to Heterosexual Students Too

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**Contact Information***Available for logged-in reporters only***Description**

A study of middle-school students in Central Illinois has found that being called anti-gay names significantly predicts higher levels of trauma for students regardless of sexual orientation. Such name-calling may lead to anxiety, depression, personal distress, and a lower sense of school belonging.

Newswise — A study of middle-school students in Central Illinois has found that being called anti-gay names significantly predicts higher levels of trauma for students regardless of sexual orientation. Such name-calling may lead to anxiety, depression, personal distress, and a lower sense of school belonging.

“These results are another indication that verbal bullying in schools should not be tolerated,” said Dr. Robert-Jay Green, executive director of the Rockway Institute at Alliant International University. “Unfortunately, anti-gay name-calling is often viewed by adults as part of growing up and is tolerated by school officials, but this study finds the behavior is damaging to all students.”

The study, “Predicting Psychosocial Consequences of Homophobic Victimization in Middle School Students,” was conducted by V. Paul Poteat and Dorothy L. Espelage of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and published in *The Journal of Early Adolescence* (May 2007; Vol. 27, No. 2; pp.175 -191).

Among a group of 143 seventh graders, Poteat and Espelage examined the extent to which being the target of anti-gay name-calling over a one week period predicted psychological effects after controlling for students’ previously reported levels of psychological functioning. In seventh grade, these students reported their level of anxiety, depression, school belonging, and social withdrawal. The students were surveyed again a year later, when they were in the eighth grade, and they again reported these conditions as well as the frequency with which they were called homophobic epithets by other students. The sexual orientation of the students was not known, but it was assumed that the vast majority of students were heterosexual.

The results indicate that “being the victim of homophobic name-calling is a serious concern and significantly predicts several negative psychosocial outcomes,” stated the researchers. Also, there were differences between the sexes. For males, being the recipient of name-calling was significantly linked with anxiety, depression, personal distress, and a lower sense of school belonging. For females, being the object of name-calling was connected with higher levels of social withdrawal.

These gender differences may be related to the more general use of name-calling in male groups to establish “dominance hierarchies” (that is, to show ‘who’s boss’) and the use of name-calling in female groups to exclude others from participation in activities.

The researchers recommend that although name-calling may “appear to be harmless banter between friends, teachers and administrators should intervene during these occurrences, and school policies should specifically address and seek to decrease these occurrences.” The study also indicates that “school counselors should be open to discussing antigay bullying and victimization when counseling and working with students who are victimized by their peers...”

The authors of the study concluded: “Existing research has underscored the traumatizing effects of homophobic victimization for gay and lesbian students, and this investigation suggests that homophobic victimization can also be

detrimental to heterosexual students, further underscoring the relevancy of this issue for teachers, administrators, and school counselors.”

Dr. Green added: “Based on research findings like these, several states and many individual school districts in the U.S. have established ‘safe school’ policies that prohibit antigay name-calling. Any child could find themselves the target of antigay humiliation and exclusion for not fitting in with the crowd on a particular day or week at school. Hopefully this study will encourage school personnel to take this form of bullying more seriously.”

The researchers and Rockway Institute experts are available to comment on these findings.

About Rockway Institute: The nonpartisan Rockway Institute promotes scientific and professional expertise to counter antigay prejudice and improve public policies affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The Institute’s view is that public opinion, policies, and programs should be shaped by the facts about LGBT lives, not by political ideology. A primary goal is to organize the most knowledgeable social scientists, mental health professionals, and physicians in the United States to provide accurate information about LGBT issues to the media, legislatures, and the courts. The Institute also conducts targeted research projects to address the nation’s most pressing LGBT public policy concerns. Website: [www.rockwayinstitute.org](http://www.rockwayinstitute.org)

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