

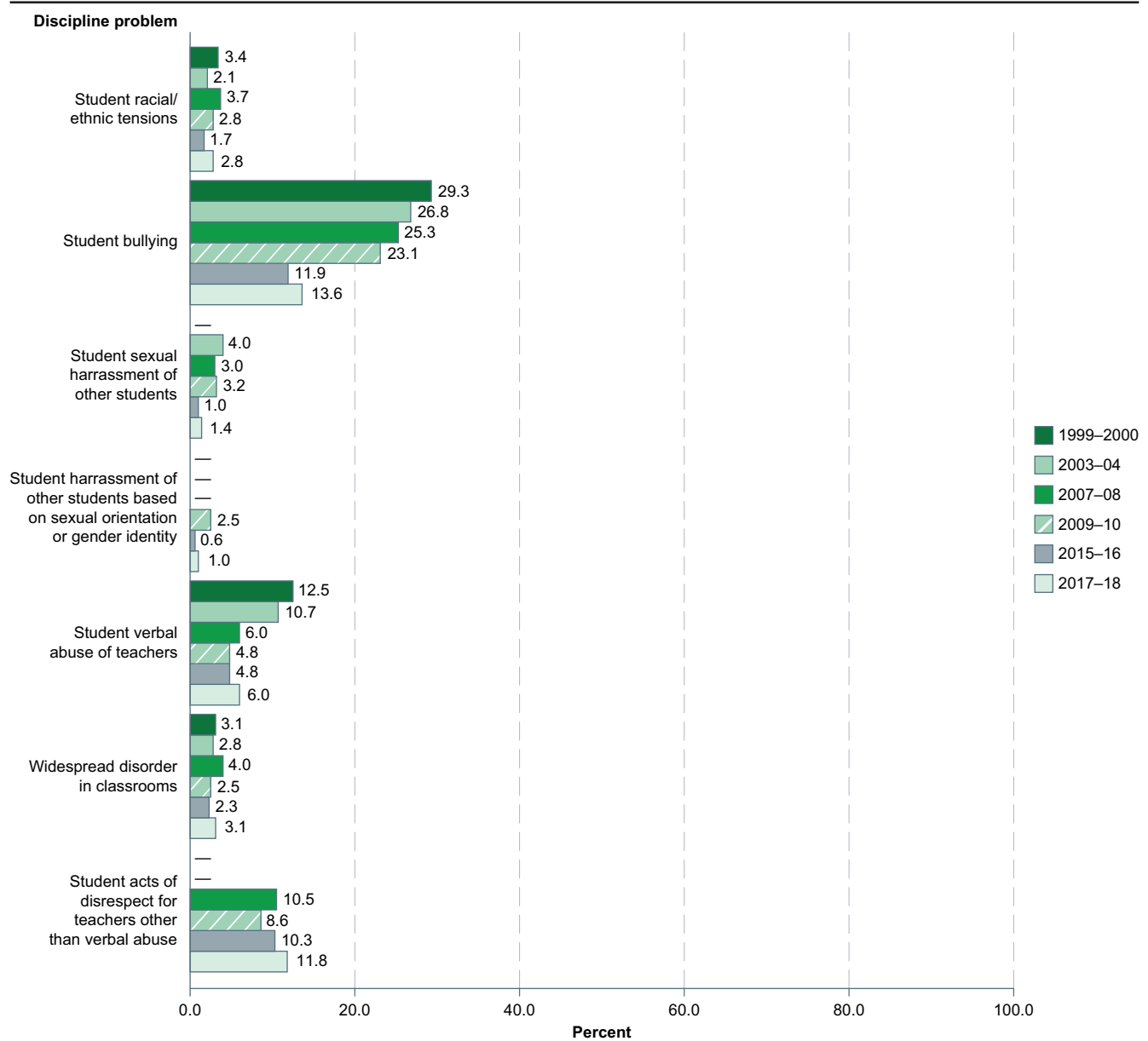
## Discipline Problems Reported by Public Schools

*The percentage of public schools that reported student bullying occurred at least once a week decreased from 29 percent in 1999–2000 to 14 percent in 2017–18.*

Between 1999–2000 and 2009–10, as well as in 2015–16 and 2017–18, the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) asked public school principals how often certain disciplinary problems happened in their schools<sup>1</sup> during the school year. In 2013–14, school principals were asked to provide responses to a similar set of questions on the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) survey of school safety and discipline.<sup>2</sup> Using data from both surveys, this indicator examines whether the following discipline problems were reported by public schools as occurring at

least once a week: student racial/ethnic tensions, student bullying,<sup>3</sup> student sexual harassment of other students, student harassment of other students based on sexual orientation or gender identity, student verbal abuse of teachers, student acts of disrespect for teachers other than verbal abuse, and widespread disorder in the classroom. SSOCS also looked at the occurrence of gang activities happening at all and cyberbullying<sup>4</sup> at least once a week during the school year; however, these items were not collected in the FRSS survey.

**Figure 1. Percentage of public schools reporting selected discipline problems that occurred at school at least once a week: Selected school years, 1999–2000 through 2017–18**



— Not available.

NOTE: Responses were provided by the principal or the person most knowledgeable about crime and safety issues at the school. "At school" was defined to include activities that happen in school buildings, on school grounds, on school buses, and at places that hold school-sponsored events or activities. Respondents were instructed to include discipline problems only for those times that were during normal school hours or when school activities or events were in session, unless the survey specified otherwise. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

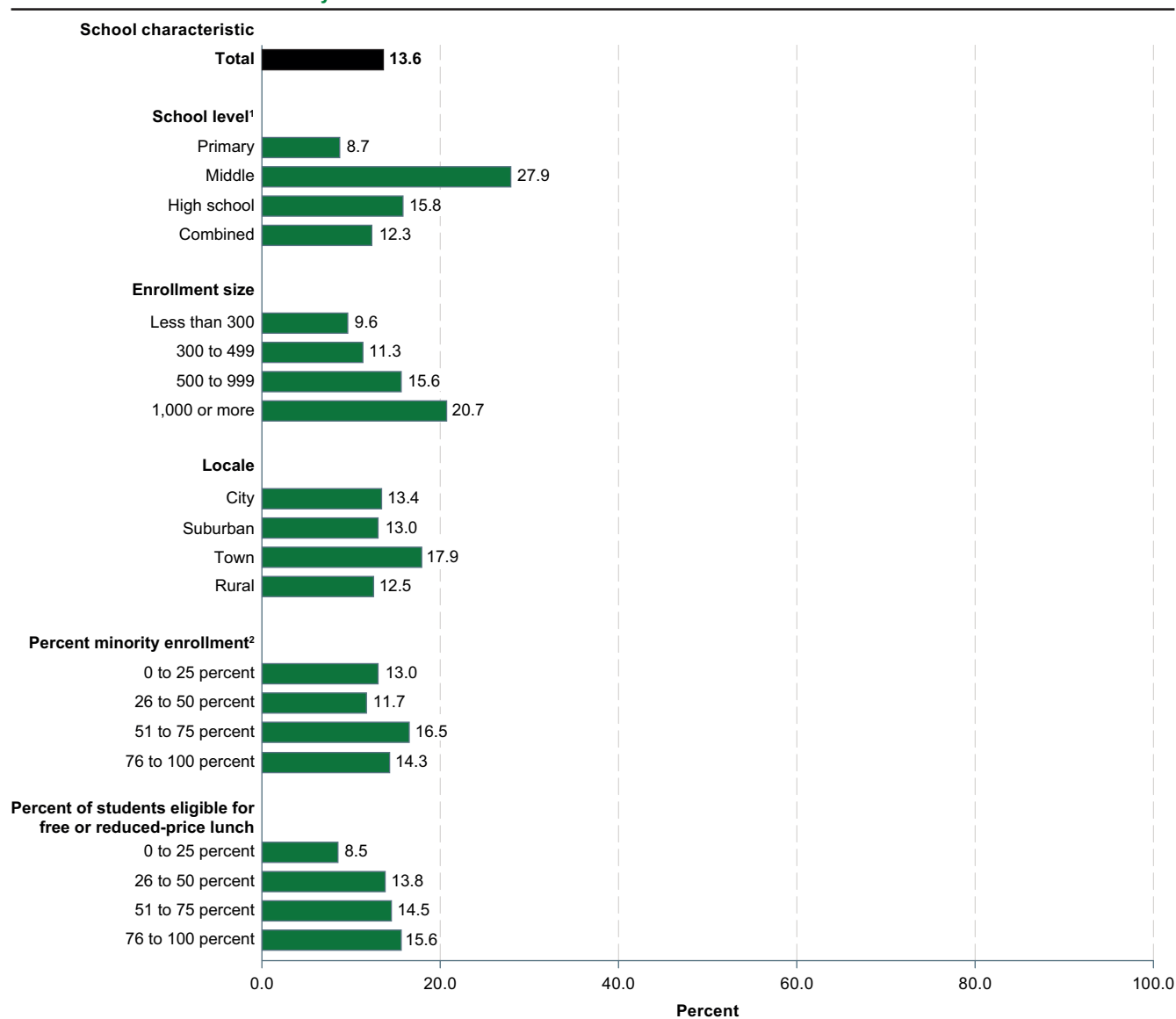
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000, 2003–04, 2007–08, 2009–10, 2015–16, and 2017–18 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2016, and 2018. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 230.10.

In 2017-18, about 14 percent of public schools reported that bullying occurred among students at least once a week. About 6 percent of public schools reported student verbal abuse of teachers, 12 percent reported acts of student disrespect for teachers other than verbal abuse, 3 percent each reported widespread disorder in the classroom and student racial/ethnic tensions, and 1 percent each reported sexual harassment of other students and harassment of other students based on sexual orientation or gender identity. About 11 percent of public schools reported that gang activities had happened at all during the 2017-18 school year.

The percentage of public schools that reported student bullying occurred at least once a week decreased from 29 percent in 1999-2000 to 14 percent in 2017-18. Similarly, the percentage of public schools that reported the occurrence of student verbal abuse of teachers at least once a week decreased from 13 percent in 1999-2000 to 6 percent in 2017-18. The percentage of public schools reporting student acts of disrespect for teachers other

than verbal abuse at least once a week was not measurably different between 2017-18 and 2007-08 (the first year of data collection for this item). Similarly, there were no measurable differences between 2017-18 and 1999-2000 in the percentages of public schools reporting the occurrence of widespread disorder in the classroom or student racial/ethnic tensions at least once a week.

The percentage of public schools that reported the occurrence of student sexual harassment of other students at least once a week decreased from 4 percent in 2003-04 (the first year of data collection for this item) to 1 percent in 2017-18.<sup>5</sup> The percentage of public schools reporting student harassment of other students based on sexual orientation or gender identity at least once a week was lower in 2017-18 (1 percent) than in 2009-10 (3 percent; the first year of data collection for this item). The percentage of public schools that reported gang activities at their schools at all during the school year decreased from 19 percent in 1999-2000 to 11 percent in 2017-18.

**Figure 2. Percentage of public schools reporting student bullying occurred at school at least once a week, by selected school characteristics: School year 2017–18**

<sup>1</sup> Primary schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not higher than grade 3 and the highest grade is not higher than grade 8. Middle schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not lower than grade 4 and the highest grade is not higher than grade 9. High schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not lower than grade 9. Combined schools include all other combinations of grades, including K–12 schools.

<sup>2</sup> Percent combined enrollment of Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students, and students of Two or more races.

NOTE: Responses were provided by the principal or the person most knowledgeable about crime and safety issues at the school. "At school" was defined to include activities that happen in school buildings, on school grounds, on school buses, and at places that hold school-sponsored events or activities. Respondents were instructed to include discipline problems only for those times that were during normal school hours or when school activities or events were in session, unless the survey specified otherwise. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

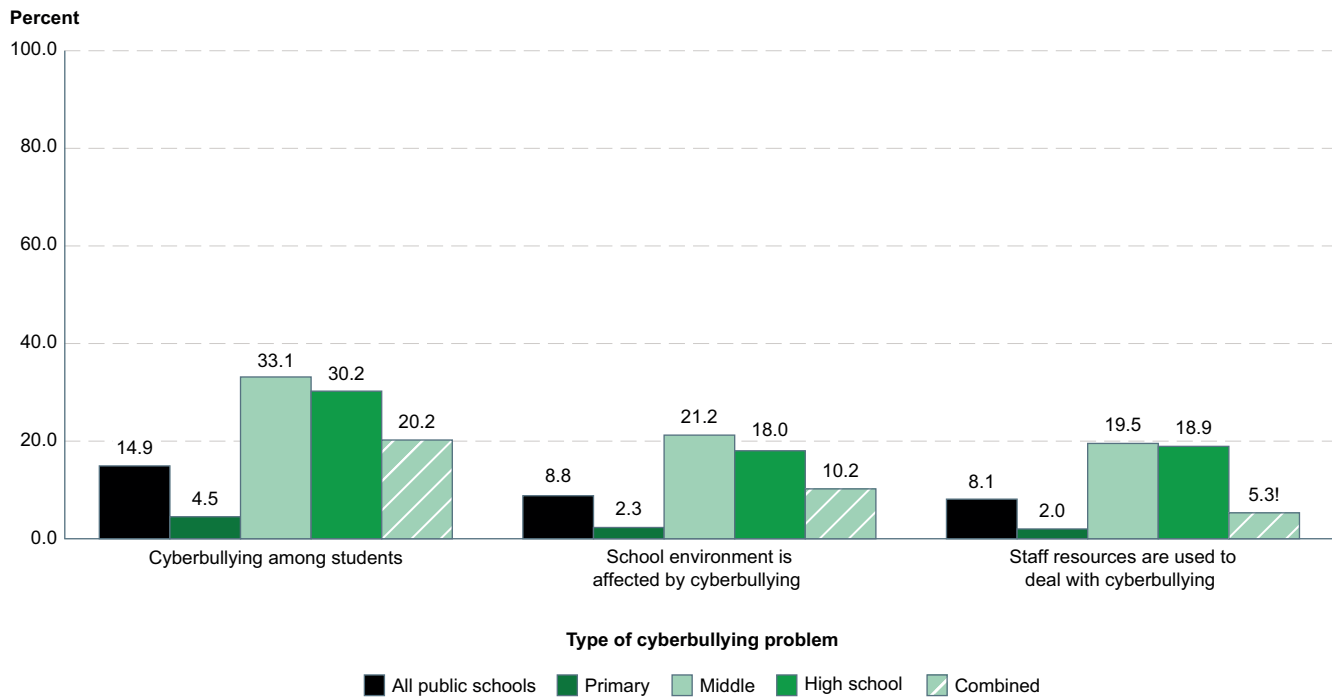
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017–18 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2018. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 230.10.

Student bullying was the most commonly reported discipline problem among public schools across survey years.<sup>6</sup> During the 2017-18 school year, the percentage of public schools reporting student bullying varied by school characteristics. For instance, the percentage of public schools that reported student bullying occurred at least once a week was higher for middle schools (28 percent) than for high schools (16 percent), combined schools (12 percent), and primary schools (9 percent). The percentage for high schools was also higher than the percentage for primary schools.<sup>7</sup>

In 2017-18, a higher percentage of public schools with 1,000 or more students enrolled reported student bullying at least once a week (21 percent) than schools of smaller

enrollment sizes. The percentage of public schools reporting student bullying was also higher for those with 500 to 999 students enrolled (16 percent) than for those with 300 to 499 students enrolled (11 percent) or with under 300 students enrolled (10 percent).

In 2017-18, public schools where 25 percent or less of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch reported the lowest percentage of student bullying (9 percent); the percentage of student bullying reported by other schools ranged from 14 to 16 percent.<sup>8</sup> There were no measurable differences by locale or by percent minority enrollment<sup>9</sup> in the percentages of public schools reporting student bullying.

**Figure 3. Percentage of public schools reporting selected types of cyberbullying problems occurring at school or away from school at least once a week, by school level: School year 2017–18**

! Interpret data with caution. The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent.

NOTE: Responses were provided by the principal or the person most knowledgeable about crime and safety issues at the school. "Cyberbullying" was defined for respondents as occurring "when willful and repeated harm is inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices." "At school" was defined for respondents to include activities that happen in school buildings, on school grounds, on school buses, and at places that hold school-sponsored events or activities. Respondents were instructed to include cyberbullying "problems that can occur anywhere (both at your school and away from school)." Primary schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not higher than grade 3 and the highest grade is not higher than grade 8. Middle schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not lower than grade 4 and the highest grade is not higher than grade 9. High schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not lower than grade 9. Combined schools include all other combinations of grades, including K–12 schools.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017–18 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2018. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 230.65.

In the 2017-18 SSOCS survey administration, schools were also asked to report selected types of cyberbullying problems at school or away from school that occurred at least once a week. About 15 percent of public schools reported that cyberbullying had occurred among students at least once a week at school or away from school in 2017-18. Nine percent of public schools also reported that the school environment was affected by cyberbullying, and 8 percent of schools reported that staff resources were used to deal with cyberbullying.

Public schools' reports on the occurrence of cyberbullying at school and away from school varied by school characteristics in 2017-18. Higher percentages of middle schools (33 percent) and high schools (30 percent) than of combined schools (20 percent) and primary schools (5 percent) reported cyberbullying among students. The percentage of public schools that reported cyberbullying among students was generally higher for schools with larger enrollment sizes (table 7.2). For instance, 32 percent of schools with an enrollment size

of 1,000 or more students reported cyberbullying among students, compared with 16 percent of schools with 500 to 999 students enrolled and 11 percent each of schools with 300 to 499 students enrolled and schools with 300 or fewer students enrolled.

A higher percentage of public schools in towns (20 percent) than in suburban areas (14 percent) and cities (13 percent) reported cyberbullying among students in 2017-18. Public schools where 76 percent or more of the students were minorities reported the lowest percentage of cyberbullying at least once a week (10 percent); the percentage of cyberbullying reported by other schools ranged from 14 to 18 percent. In addition, the percentage of public schools reporting cyberbullying was lower for those where 76 percent or more of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (12 percent) than for those where 51 to 75 percent of the students (17 percent) and 26 to 50 percent of the student (18 percent) were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> “At school” was defined for respondents to include activities that happen in school buildings, on school grounds, on school buses, and at places that hold school-sponsored events or activities. Respondents were instructed to include discipline problems only for those times that were during normal school hours or when school activities or events were in session, unless the survey specified otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> The 2013-14 FRSS survey was designed to allow comparisons with SSOCS data. However, all respondents to the 2013-14 survey could choose either to complete the survey on paper (and mail it back) or to complete the survey online, whereas all respondents to SSOCS had only the option of completing a paper survey prior to 2017-18, when SSOCS experimented with offering an online option to some respondents. The 2013-14 FRSS survey also relied on a smaller sample than SSOCS. The FRSS survey’s smaller sample size and difference in survey administration may have impacted the 2013-14 results.

<sup>3</sup> The 2015-16 and 2017-18 questionnaires defined bullying as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.” The term was not defined for respondents in previous survey administrations.

<sup>4</sup> “Cyberbullying” was defined for respondents as “occurring when willful and repeated harm is inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices.”

<sup>5</sup> Since 2009-10, the questionnaires defined sexual harassment as “conduct that is unwelcome, sexual in nature, and denies

or limits a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from a school’s education program. The behavior may be verbal, nonverbal, or physical.” In 2007-08 and earlier years, the term was defined for respondents as “unsolicited, offensive behavior that inappropriately asserts sexuality over another person. The behavior may be verbal or nonverbal.” Caution should be used when comparing changes in this item over time.

<sup>6</sup> The only exceptions were that in 2015-16 and 2017-18, the percentage of public schools reporting student bullying at least once a week was not measurably different from the percentage reporting student acts of disrespect for teachers other than verbal abuse at least once a week.

<sup>7</sup> Primary schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not higher than grade 3 and the highest grade is not higher than grade 8. Middle schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not lower than grade 4 and the highest grade is not higher than grade 9. High schools are defined as schools in which the lowest grade is not lower than grade 9. Combined schools include all other combinations of grades, including K-12 schools.

<sup>8</sup> The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs is a proxy measure of school poverty. For more information on eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch and its relationship to poverty, see NCES blog post “[Free or reduced price lunch: A proxy for poverty?](#)”

<sup>9</sup> “Percent minority enrollment” was defined as percent combined enrollment of Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students, and students of Two or more races.

**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, tables 230.10 and 230.65

**Related indicators and resources:** [Bullying at School and Electronic Bullying](#); [Students’ Reports of Gangs at School](#); [Students’ Reports of Hate-Related Words and Hate-Related Graffiti and Schools’ Reports of Hate Crimes](#)

**Glossary:** At school; Bullying (School Survey on Crime and Safety); Cyberbullying; Free or reduced-price lunch; Gang (School Survey on Crime and Safety); Gender identity (School Survey on Crime and Safety); Harassment (School Survey on Crime and Safety); Locale codes; Public school or institution; Racial/ethnic group; Sexual harassment (Fast Response Survey System and School Survey on Crime and Safety); Sexual orientation (School Survey on Crime and Safety)