

## NIH event highlights adverse health effects of bullying

By Eddy Ball

NIH observed Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Pride Month June 13 with a panel discussion on bullying across the lifespan, “Painting Kinder Tomorrows ... Today: Eliminating Bullying Through Education, Practice, Research, and Advocacy.” The program took place in Natcher Auditorium on the NIH campus in Bethesda, Md., and was webcast for employees at other locations, including NIEHS.

### Linked Video

[Watch the panel discussion on bullying and the LGBTI community \(01:29:43\)](#)

Hosting the event was the NIH Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management (OEODM) [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex \(LGBTI\) Special Emphasis Program \(SEP\)](#), (<http://oeodm.od.nih.gov/sep-lgbti.htm>) in collaboration with Salutaris, the NIH LGBT Employees’ Forum; and LGBT Fellows and Friends.

The [program](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/assets/file417455.pdf) (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/assets/file417455.pdf>) (8MB) opened and concluded with remarks by OEODM Director Debra Chew, who introduced NIH Principal Deputy Director Lawrence Tabak, D.D.S., Ph.D. Expressing the NIH leadership’s commitment to diversity and LGBTI health research, Tabak reflected on how bullying has evolved in the world of electronic communications.

“Bullying, unfortunately, has [also] changed with the times ... We’ve always had bullies ..., but now we’ve got online bullying, virtual bullying, social media bullying, and messaging bullying,” Tabak said. “What does it say about us and the world, if we don’t get a handle on this?”

### Trying to get a handle on bullying — at school, at work, in the community

Moderator and discussant Darnell Moore, a writer and LGBT social activist living and working in New York, helped to give bullying a personal dimension, by setting the stage for a poetry reading by LGBTI SEP Manager Albert Smith Jr. on how it feels to be a victim. The persona of “Colored Homicidal” by youth slam poet Kai Davis is a young lesbian girl, who is physically abused and humiliated to the point that she is driven to self-loathing and ultimately violence of her own. The poem’s theme is simple, but moving and relevant — verbal and physical violence begets pain, and one outlet for pain is to perpetuate a cycle of even more violence and suffering.

The impressive group of panelists included Arnold Grossman, Ph.D., professor of applied psychology at New York University; Mark Hatzenbuehler, Ph.D., professor of sociomedical sciences at Columbia University; Erin Reiney, director of the Bullying Prevention program at the Health Resources and Services Administration; and Jessica Hawkins, a coordinator with [NIH CIVIL](#), (<http://hr.od.nih.gov/hrguidance/civil/>) a resource that promotes a healthy and safe workplace, and helps prevent workplace violence.



*“Today we commemorate the men and women around the world who identify themselves as LGBTI,” Chew said, as she described what she called the “NIH diversity fabric.” She described Tabak as a champion of the LGBTI community and of diversity at NIH. (Photo courtesy of NIH)*



*In his introduction, Tabak described new developments in addressing LGBTI health concerns, including an updated nondiscriminatory policy that specifically includes LGBTI employees, a trans-NIH committee on LGBTI research, and a series of active listening sessions at NIH beginning June 27. (Photo courtesy of NIH)*



*“We are gathered here to discuss the real time effects of bullying,” Moore said in his opening remarks. “It is an act that produces a range of affective and psychological effects. It produces shame.” (Photo courtesy of NIH)*

## Bullying across the lifespan

Presentations by the panelists ranged from Grossman's studies of elderly gay men, to Hawkins' work to reduce bullying in the workplace by co-workers and supervisors. Most of the presentations, like Hatzenbuehler's studies of the effects of anti-bullying programs in the public schools of Oregon, raised as many questions as answers, pointing to just how much research still needs to be done.

Because the victims, both LGBTI and straight, have until recently been in the closet about the psychological, social, workplace, and health effects of verbal and physical abuse, not even the experts are completely sure of the extent of the human suffering and economic impact involved. In schools, bullying can affect educational outcomes for victims in ways not fully understood, and, as Hawkins explained, no one yet knows how extensively bullying shapes absenteeism and productivity in the workplace.

Reiney had a list of best practices to share with her colleagues and the audience. While her program calls for consistent, long-term interventions, she, like Hawkins, cautioned against zero tolerance policies. As obviously wrong as the abuse perpetrated by bullies is, in a sense, bullies are also victims of the very fear, hatred, and violence they practice. According to Reiney, some might profit from a chance to experience disciplinary consequences that are corrective, as well as punitive, to become part of a solution.



*Smith was obviously moved by the words of the Kai Davis poem describing how tormentors typecast and bullied the persona. "I never asked to be a rainbow. They colored me homicidal." (Photo courtesy of NIH)*



*Hatzenbuehler thanked NIH for supporting his studies on bullying in Oregon's public schools. (Photo courtesy of NIH)*



*"This is a long road," Reiney said of her agency's campaign. (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/>) "Ultimately, it needs to become uncool to bully." (Photo courtesy of NIH)*



*Seated at the panel, from left, are Grossman, Hatzenbuehler, Hawkins, and Reiney. "Early intervention is key," Hawkins told the audience. "If you see things, speak up." (Photo courtesy of NIH)*



*Grossman explained that elderly LGBTI people spent decades learning to be as invisible as possible, and their health issues have not been studied extensively. "[But] they do exist, and they do need services," he said. (Photo courtesy of NIH)*

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