

**National Interfaith Anti-Bullying Summit  
December 2-3, 2017  
Sponsored by  
American Muslim Health Professionals and  
Institute for Social Policy and Understanding  
As well as Other Partners**

**Summit Pre-Read**

**Abstract**

**Religious minority students are common targets of hate-related speech, as well as harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB) in schools. Challenges exist in our current understanding of religious-based bullying and these include but are not limited to: a failure to have a uniform definition for HIB across the scholarly, legal and policy realms; variations in reporting and recording of HIB incidents; a lack of research which examines risk and protective factors associated with being the target of hate; and a dearth of evidence-based approaches to address the prevention and intervention of religious-based bullying. This brief summary integrates the most current evidence about religious-based bullying and the strategies that have been shown to effectively address this form of HIB in schools. Future directions for research and prevention are elucidated and resources and suggested readings are provided.**

**Religious-based Bullying: A Challenging but Necessary Problem to Address**

An area of the bullying literature, which has received little research attention and even less in terms of prevention and intervention programming, is religious-based bullying. According to the US Department of Education, in 2015, 1% of 12-18 year olds reported being the target of religious-based hateful speech while on school grounds (Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2017). However, this number vastly underestimates the prevalence rates of harassment, intimidation, or bullying (HIB) because of one's actual or perceived religious affiliation, for two reasons. First, children are unlikely to report this form of bullying if they feel that adults in their school will do nothing about it. Data from focus groups on children from various religious backgrounds supports the fact that while some teachers were aware of religious-based bullying, they did nothing to intervene (Dupper, Forrest-Bank, & Lowry-Carusillo, 2015). Second, this statistic only reflects instances in which an attack is made with an *explicit* reference to one's religion. In other words, microaggressions, social exclusion, as well as harassment and intimidation are likely to happen to individuals affiliated with minority religious groups though no explicit attack on their religion may be made during the incident.

In terms of negative outcomes, bias-based bullying has been shown to be more harmful than other forms of bullying. Specifically, one study found that youth who were harassed due to a minority group affiliation reported higher levels of mental health issues and substance use compared to those who were targets of non-biased-based harassment (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Other evidence suggests that even frequent "minor" experiences of microaggression related to minority status are associated with poor mental health outcomes since the attacks are perceived to be due to an integral part of one's identity and are expected to occur again (Huynh, Devos, & Dunbar, 2012). With regards to faith-based

bullying specifically, since many religious followers wear visible religious symbols (e.g., the Muslim *hijab*, the Sikh *dastaar* as well as *chunni* or *dupatta*, and the Jewish *yarmulke*, to name a few), the target of the attack often anticipates future incidents (Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, & Desia, 2016; Klein, 2015).

This growing body of research evidence on bias-based bullying points to critical areas that still require research attention and evidence-based prevention work. What follows are specific sections providing a brief overview of the current knowledge on religious-based bullying concerning (a) definitions, (b) statistics, (c) prevention and intervention strategies, and (d) future directions for the field.

### **Multiple Definitions Create Difficulties for Assessment**

The scholarly literature defines bullying as requiring three criteria (Olweus & Limber, 2010):

- ❖ 1) an intent to harm (physical, psychological, or social, etc.)
- ❖ 2) an imbalance of power such that the target has difficulty defending him- or herself
- ❖ 3) this hurtful behavior is repeated or occurs in a persistent manner

The legal perspective varies greatly from state to state, though there is movement towards stricter definitions and school responsibility. For example, the NJ Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, which is one of the strictest anti-bullying laws in our nation, takes a more general approach by using the phrase “harassment, intimidation or bullying”. It includes all elements of the definition above, however it allows for “**a single incident or series of incidents**” thereby requiring schools to respond whether or not harm is inflicted multiple times. Furthermore, this law also explicitly notes vulnerable groups (e.g., religious, racial, sexual minorities, etc.) in its conception of HIB.

Honing in on a unified definition of bullying, and bias-based bullying specifically, has been a challenge across the scholarly and policy realms. As a consequence, identifying accurate prevalence rates that explicitly identifies vulnerable groups has been a challenge. Religious-based bullying is a multilayered issue particularly as it relates to the intersection of religion, ethnicity, race, and ancestry. Literature documents the entanglement of ethnicity, race, and ancestry with religion promoting the stereotype that people of darker skin color are followers of non-Christian faiths (Joshi, 2006; Bajaj et al., 2016). The conflation of skin color and religion enables a perception of individuals of color to be considered “other” “enemy” and “terrorist”. Consequently, hate crimes and bias-based bullying become more acceptable when the individual is considered an outsider possessing anti-American views; the escalation of hate crimes after terrorist activities supports this position.

### **Muslims and Jews Experience Disproportionately High Rates of Hate-Speech and Bullying**

According to the US Department of Education’s Indicators of School Crime and Safety Report, in 2015 1% of 12-18 year olds reported being the target of hate-related words due to religion while on school grounds (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). In terms of being the target of hate-related words based on ethnicity, 1.8% reported being targeted. While these statistics are not significantly different than those obtained in 2013, there was a 25%

increase in student reports of seeing hate-related graffiti from 2013 to 2015. There were no significant gender differences in rates of reported hate-related speech.

Further research findings tease apart these numbers. In a study conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) on a nationally representative sample of American families, 42% of Muslims, 23% of Jews, and 6% of Catholics reported that at least one child had been bullied in the past year because of their religion (2017). Importantly in 25% of the cases involving Muslim students, a teacher or administrator at school perpetrated the bullying.

Other research also supports the high prevalence rate of peer victimization among Muslim youth. A report by CAIR, the Council on American Islamic Relations (n.d.), found that 50% of their sample of California Muslims aged 11-18 reported being called mean names about their religion. Likewise, in as-of-yet-unpublished data collected from 86 Muslim youth, over thirty percent reported being bullied through social exclusion or by mean names and half of the sample reported that they feared being bullied in the future (Ansary, 2017).

“Schools mirror larger forces of exclusion and inequality in society, often reflecting dominant notions of who does and does not belong” (Bajaj et al., 2016, p. 482). Since HIB in schools is a reflection of the larger socio-political climate (Bajaj et al., 2016; Dupper et al., 2014) and because the US Department of Education statistics do not breakdown bullying based on religious affiliation, it is important to examine other sources of data. According to an ISPU poll conducted in 2016, greater than half of Muslim participants reported experiencing religious-based discrimination. This number is in stark comparison to other religious groups with 5% of Jews, 4 % of Catholics, and 2% of Protestants reporting discrimination based on faith affiliation (ISPU, 2016). In a similar vein, it is helpful to examine the most recently available FBI hate crimes statistics from 2015 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016):

- ❖ 51.3 percent were anti-Jewish.
- ❖ 22.2 percent were anti-Islamic (Muslim).
- ❖ 4.4 percent were anti-Catholic.
- ❖ 0.4 percent (6 offenses) were Anti-Sikh.
- ❖ 0.4 percent (5 offenses) were Anti-Hindu.

In terms of hate crimes based on race/ethnicity/ancestry

- ❖ 3.4 percent were a result of bias against groups of individuals consisting of more than one race (anti-multiple races, group).
- ❖ 3.3 percent resulted from anti-Asian bias.
  
- ❖ 1.2 percent were classified as anti-Arab bias.

### **Evidence-Based Prevention and Intervention Strategies Make a Difference**

Effective bullying programs share some common prevention and intervention features. With regards to *prevention* of bullying and bias-based bullying specifically, effective programs focus on (a) a whole school approach, (b) a positive school climate, (c) teacher

and staff training pertaining to prevention, (d) social emotional character development of students, (e) promoting upstanders (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & Green, 2015), (f) an explicit mention of protected groups in the school's HIB policy (see Hatzenbuehler, & Keyes, 2013), and (g) cultural sensitivity and support for minority students (e.g., faculty sponsorship for clubs or student groups, a recognition of all religious holidays, etc.). Curricula including texts and media resources often inaccurately depict facts about Islam, as well as other religious faiths, and reinforce negative perceptions (Sabry & Bruna, 2007). Accordingly, teachers and administrators need to focus on addressing bias in their curriculum, instruction, and develop efforts to foster home-school-community relations (Sabry & Bruna, 2007).

With respect to the management of *bullying when it happens*, schools must intervene in the following ways (a) swift action in accordance with the school's HIB policy, which provides guidance on reporting, investigation, and disciplinary procedures; (b) specific tracking of the target's religious, ethnic, racial, and any other defining feature to identify if specific groups are targeted within that school; (c) explicit teacher and staff training about how to handle HIB situations in accordance with the school's policy; (d) the presence of an HIB team of staff and teachers who are highly trained to provide professional development, investigate reported incidents, and evaluate and improve the school's HIB policy (Ansary et al., 2015).

In addition to toolkits and resources noted below, Bajaj and colleagues (2016) have created a program to address Islamophobia, and Klein (2015) outlines guidelines for strengthening responses of Sikh youth faced with (HIB). Neither of these programs have been empirically assessed, though they are grounded in theory.

### **Strides Need to be Made: Future Directions for Research and**

**Prevention/Intervention**The literature is far from deconstructing our understanding of religious-based bullying or providing a clear path for prevention and intervention. Progress is needed to improve our definition, measurement, and reporting of this form of victimization. So long as reporting mechanisms solely examine bullying without also recording the racial, ethnic and ancestry information of the target, we will continue to underestimate the prevalence of this form of abuse. In other words, the conflation of race, ethnicity, and religion will continue to be a substantial barrier to our understanding of just how frequently bias-based bullying occurs. With regards to risk and protective factors as well as outcomes of religious-based bullying, more ground needs to be covered. While wearing religious symbols has been a documented risk factor (Bajaj et al., 2016; Klein, 2015), how do other variables such as acculturation, years lived in the US, and facets of ethnic identity play a hand in this issue? What school, familial, and peer dynamics confer risk or protection? In terms of outcomes, though there is emerging evidence suggesting that bias-based harassment is more harmful psychologically than non-biased based forms (Russell et al., 2012), these findings need to be replicated and tested in larger and more diverse samples.

With regard to prevention and intervention, strides have been made in terms of suggested programmatic features to prevent religious-based bullying (Bajaj et al., 2016;) or to provide vulnerable children with some tools to combat it (Klein, 2015), however the efficacy of these programs have not been assessed. With regards to the effectiveness of general anti-

bullying programs to address bias-based bullying, the evidence is limited. In a recent review of the efficacy of anti-bullying programs, programs were less effective in diverse schools compared to more racially, ethnically, and religiously homogenous schools (Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014). Thus, there is the suggestion that discrimination or lack of respect for diversity is at play, however we have no information on just how religious, racial, and ethnic diversity within a school influences the implementation of anti-bullying programs. Another facet related to the challenges of implementation that is glaringly lacking in the literature on religious-based bullying, is the issue of “buy-in” from educators. Indeed, bullying prevention and social emotional learning program implementation require much more than manuals and toolkits. They necessitate a deep--and oftentimes personal--commitment on the part of administrators and educators to grapple with the challenges needed to tailor-fit a program to a school’s existing daily operations (Elias, 2017). Accordingly, program implementation must entail a robust commitment from administrators and educators to engage in an honest evaluation of their own biases towards specific religious groups: This must be done as a prerequisite to professional training on the issue of bullying. As noted earlier, since 25% of American Muslim families report that their child was a target of bullying perpetrated by a teacher the literature is at a loss for how to address this complex issue. Indeed, future research is needed to inform program development with regards to administrator and educator commitment to the implementation of anti-bullying programs with a specific emphasis on religious-based HIB prevention and intervention.

Indeed there is a dearth of knowledge on this issue with many significant gaps in the literature still remaining. The objective of this summit is to synthesize our most current understanding of religious-based bullying by gathering the forerunners in research and programmatic development on this topic to share their work. Scholars, policymakers, educators, and parents must work within the confines of the existing scholarship with an eye towards executing and disseminating work that forwards our prevention and intervention efforts to address religious-based bullying. Every child deserves to be educated in an environment that is free from abuse and within a school context that values each child equally.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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## ONLINE RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS & PARENTS

- × **US Department of Health and Human Services – Stop Bullying Website**  
[stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov)
- × **National School Climate Center**  
<http://www.schoolclimate.org/>
- × **NJDOE Essential Dimensions and Considerations for Safe and Supportive School Conditions**  
<http://www.nj.gov/education/schools/vandv/1213/forms/EssentialDimensionsandConsiderations.pdf>
- × **NJDOE Keeping our Kids Safe, Healthy, and in School**  
<http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/behavior/hib/>
- × **Safe Communities, Safe Schools Fact Sheet**  
<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/safeschools/#>
- × **SAMSHA – CSAP Prevention Pathways –Includes Manuals and Toolkits**  
<https://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac/resources/bullying-prevention>
- × **American Federation of Teachers (AFT)**—provides a plethora of resources for educators  
<http://www.aft.org/bully>
- × **Education World-- Teacher Lesson Plans on Tolerance**  
[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/lesson/lesson294.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson294.shtml)
- × **Results of the Social Justice and Multicultural Teacher Educators Resource Survey**  
<http://www.edchange.org/survey.html>
- × **EdChange –A variety of resources including 25 websites that address diversity**  
<http://www.edchange.org/handouts.html>

- × **Islamic Networks Group** –offers a variety of resources on combating Islamophobia—<http://www.ing.org>
- × **Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU)**—provides data and resources aimed at building understanding and strengthening American Muslim community development  
<https://www.ispu.org>
- × **Sikh Coalition**—offers training materials promoting understanding of the Sikh faith  
[https://www.sikhcoalition.org/resources/?fwp\\_resource\\_types=reports-publications](https://www.sikhcoalition.org/resources/?fwp_resource_types=reports-publications)

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