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Gay gang- and crime-involved men's experiences with homophobic bullying and harassment in schools

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Homophobic language and harassment in American schools is pervasive. Although several studies suggest sexual minority youth engage in defensive violence to respond to homophobic bullying in schools, these encounters remain largely unexplored. Instead, extant literature focuses on these youths' likelihood of being bullied and the negative school or mental health outcomes associated with homophobic victimization. In this paper, I utilize in-depth interviews with 53 gay gang- and crime-involved men to present a descriptive portrait of their experiences with homophobic bullying and harassment in schools, and the ways they manage and respond to these events. This study moves beyond prior studies by detailing how, under what circumstances, and why gay youth may choose to 'fight back' against homophobic bullying. Specifically, fights were enacted to address disrespect and to build a reputation as someone who was not to be bullied; the goal of which was to curtail future harassment.

Keywords: gangs; homophobic bullying; sexual minority youth; youth violence; LGBT

Introduction

Extant research suggests some sexual minority¹ youth choose to 'fight back' against homophobic bullying and harassment in schools (Johnson 2008, Grossman *et al.* 2009, Kosciw *et al.* 2010), but these instances remain largely unexplored. Instead, research highlights consequences such as negative school outcomes and increased depression, suicidality, and substance use (e.g., Bontempo and D'Augelli 2002, Espelage *et al.* 2008, Birkett *et al.* 2009). Although these are important avenues of exploration and are also the focus of much of the broader literature on school bullying, neglecting to explore how sexual minority youth respond to homophobic victimization in schools fails to capture the full range of those youths' experiences. The omission of these active responses is also surprising in light of evidence that school bullying victimization is associated with delinquent behavior, gang membership, and violence (Cullen *et al.* 2008, Carbone-Lopez *et al.* 2010, McGee *et al.* 2011, Tofi *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, research suggests sexual minority youth are more likely to engage in fighting and weapons carrying than their peers (e.g., Russell *et al.* 2001, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011, Button *et al.* 2012), but the extent to which these acts are defensive in nature is unclear.

In this paper, I will utilize in-depth interviews with 53 gay gang- and crime-involved men to address my primary research questions: What are their experiences with homophobic bullying and harassment in schools, how do they respond to these events, and why? Where appropriate, I will also explore how their interactions with family members

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and close friends parallel these experiences, and will discuss the effects these negative experiences might have on their involvement with violence and gangs. I conclude with suggestions for policy and future research.

Literature review

What does homophobic victimization sound/look like?

Homophobic language, which is pervasive in schools, can include 'gay' used in a negative way ('that's so gay') and derogatory words for gay and lesbian people, such as 'faggot' or 'dyke.' Around 80% of sexual minority youth have experienced verbal harassment at school because of their sexual orientation, and many report being distressed by this (Rivers 2001, D'Augelli *et al.* 2006, Kosciw *et al.* 2012). Estimates of the number of homophobic epithets heard per day range from several to more than 50 (Plummer 2001); during the entire high school career, estimates include 'thousands' or 'too many to count' (D'Augelli *et al.* 2002, p. 163). Sexual minority youth, including those youth of color, report low levels of teacher intervention when homophobic comments are made (Diaz and Kosciw 2009, Grossman *et al.* 2009, Kosciw *et al.* 2012). Over half of the students in a large-scale study of sexual minority youth (Kosciw *et al.* 2012) even heard teachers make homophobic remarks (see also Smith and Smith 1998); educators also report hearing their colleagues make such statements (McCabe *et al.* 2013).

Although all youth are susceptible to homophobic victimization, sexual minority youth *are* more likely than their heterosexual peers to be bullied, homophobically teased (Poteat and Espelage 2005, Williams *et al.* 2005, Birkett *et al.* 2009, Berlan *et al.* 2010), and physically victimized (DuRant *et al.* 1998, Faulkner and Cranston 1998, Garofalo *et al.* 1998, Russell and Joyner 2001, Bontempo and D'Augelli 2002, Goodenow *et al.* 2006, Robinson and Espelage 2011, Button *et al.* 2012). Nearly one-fifth of sexual minority youth report having been physically assaulted (for example, being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw *et al.* 2012). Youth who were 'out' (had revealed their sexuality) at school reported more victimization than those who were not 'out' (D'Augelli *et al.* 1998).

Although varying definitions of bullying are employed in the extant literature (Felix *et al.* 2011), Olweus's (1993) definition is commonly utilized by criminologists: Bullying occurs when a student is the target of negative actions (including physical aggression and/or verbal threats, teasing, or name-calling) by one or more peers repeatedly over time. Bullying can be direct or indirect (such as spreading rumors) and entails a power imbalance between the victim and the bully. Although Olweus (1993) notes that a single instance of serious harassment could be considered bullying, extant literature has focused on these actions, both direct and indirect forms, over time (e.g., Unnever and Cornell 2003, Cullen *et al.* 2008, Esbensen and Carson 2009, Carbone-Lopez *et al.* 2010). Students may also have differing conceptions regarding what constitutes bullying (Swain 1998); for example, more students report experiencing various negative events (bullying) than the number of students who report being 'bullied' (Sawyer *et al.* 2008, Esbensen and Carson 2009). In light of these varying definitions, I discuss literature regarding in-school homophobic 'bullying' and homophobic victimization more generally to convey a holistic picture of the nature, extent, and outcomes of these occurrences.

Why does homophobic bullying occur?

Historically, bullying was regarded as non-serious, typical behavior for boys that could prevent 'corruption' of a boy's masculine and sexual identity by identifying appropriate

masculine norms (Wackerfuss 2008, p. 146). Today, homophobic bullying is regarded as a way to achieve dominance and social status (Sears 2008) for similar reasons: to 'patrol' the behaviors of other boys, especially gender atypical ones, in an attempt to ensure their conformity to normative masculinity and sexuality (Epstein 1997, McGuffey and Rich 1999, Plummer 2001, Pascoe 2007). A variety of personal or behavioral characteristics deemed socially unacceptable for males (by adolescent standards) can mark boys as gender atypical, such as primarily spending time with girls and being bookish, shy, or otherwise different; males whose behaviors are so patrolled may not identify as gay (Smith and Smith 1998, Plummer 2001, Rivers 2001, Thurlow 2001, Kimmel and Mahler 2003, Phoenix *et al.* 2003, Poteat and Espelage 2005, Pascoe 2007).

Misogyny underlies the mistreatment of gender atypical boys because of societal contempt for 'feminine' behavior (Epstein 1997, Brooks 2000). Males who refuse to fight or aggressively assert their dominance are scolded with epithets that allude to femininity or non-normative sexuality, such as 'punk,' 'sissy,' and 'fag' (Matza and Sykes 1961, Anderson 1999). Unsurprisingly, homophobic epithets are more often used by males (Smith and Smith 1998, Thurlow 2001, Poteat and Espelage 2005, D'Augelli *et al.* 2006) to control or challenge another's masculinity. When masculinity is challenged, normative masculine resources such as fighting can be marshaled to 'correct' subordinating scenarios (Messerschmidt 2000, p. 13).

Do all youth sexual minority youth experience homophobic bullying in the same ways?

Youth in different parts of the country (or world) may have very different experiences with homophobic bullying and harassment. American students in the South or Midwest are the most likely to experience victimization and hear homophobic remarks (Kosciw *et al.* 2012); for example, nearly all (98%) of sexual minority students surveyed in Ohio have heard 'gay' used in a negative way (GLSEN 2011). Sexual minority students are safer in large and urban schools, despite the fact that these schools have higher overall reports of violence than smaller and rural schools (Goodenow *et al.* 2006).

Intersections, such as those of gender, sexual orientation, and race, may also be at play. Male sexual minority youth, especially those who are gender atypical, report higher rates of both verbal and physical harassment than their female counterparts (Rivers 2001, D'Augelli *et al.* 2002, 2006). However, it is *White* male victims of homophobic bullying who are disproportionately portrayed in the media, which can lead to the belief that sexual minority youth of color do not experience homophobic bullying, or that it does not affect them as much as it does *White* youth (Paceley and Flynn 2012). Indeed, Russell and Truong (2001) suggest that *White* sexual minority youth may be the most at risk for negative school attitudes, experiences, and expectations because minority status is new to them.

Although additional research must be done to determine the relationships between race, sexual orientation, and victimization (Daley *et al.* 2008, Kosciw *et al.* 2009, Button *et al.* 2012, Cianciotto and Cahill 2012), research suggests many sexual minority youth of color are harassed on the basis of their race or ethnicity *and* their sexual orientation or gender expression (Daley *et al.* 2008, Diaz and Kosciw 2009, Russell *et al.* 2009). McCready (2003) argues that racial segregation in high schools can prevent queer youth of color from seeking available resources; also, teachers and administrators may not know how to address the needs of these youth, or may not comprehend the pressures facing them. Pressures include not wanting to be 'outed' as queer, or not wanting to identify with the largely-*White* groups as a result of connections to fellow students of color (McCready

2003, see also Daley *et al.* 2008). McCready (2001, p. 39) also suggests that among researchers and educators, there exists ‘an all-too-prevalent conception of queer students’ race as an appendage to what is perceived as their primary identity: sexuality.’

This lack of advocacy on the part of teachers and administrators may be symptomatic of a larger phenomenon experienced by boys of color in American schools, as described by Ferguson (2000): teachers, especially White ones, are intimidated by Black boys and are unsure of how to discipline them (see also Rios 2011). Ferguson (2000) also suggests that Black boys do not rely on teachers to intervene in fights because they are not seen as having any real power to change the nature of students’ interpersonal interactions; furthermore, teachers are mistrusted due to ‘the historical and locally grounded knowledge of power relations that come from living in a largely black and impoverished neighborhood’ (p. 182). In an attempt to prevent future disrespect and violence, retaliatory fighting can aid in building a reputation for toughness, especially when formal systems for recourse have failed (Anderson 1999, Rios 2011). Grossman and colleagues’ (2009) research on a sample of sexual minority youth of color who attended New York City schools validates this: in light of the lack of official intervention in their harassment, some youth resorted to violence to respond to their victimization and to prevent future harassment.

What outcomes are associated with bullying and homophobic victimization?

Criminological research suggests bullying victimization is associated with several negative outcomes, such as lower self-esteem and higher fear of school victimization (Esbensen and Carson 2009), drug use, delinquent behavior, gang membership (Cullen *et al.* 2008, Carbone-Lopez *et al.* 2010), and violence/aggression later in life (McGee *et al.* 2011, Ttofi *et al.* 2012), even after controlling for known risk factors for delinquent behavior and aggression (Cullen *et al.* 2008, Ttofi *et al.* 2012). Bullying’s independent effects on delinquency and violence can be exacerbated by both personal and school factors, such as aggressive attitudes and low bonds to school (Cullen *et al.* 2008). Involvement in deviant lifestyles and delinquency can increase the likelihood of being a bullying victim (Carbone-Lopez *et al.* 2010, Zaykowski and Gunter 2012).

Homophobic teasing and victimization result in a lower sense of school belongingness, less-positive perceptions of the school climate, and increased anxiety, depression, suicidality, alcohol/marijuana use, and truancy for youth of all sexual orientations (D’Augelli *et al.* 2002, Poteat and Espelage 2005, 2007, Espelage *et al.* 2008, Birkett *et al.* 2009, Kosciw *et al.* 2012), but are especially salient for sexual minority youth. For example, over half of the sexual minority youth in Rivers’s (2001) study reported they had contemplated self-harm as a result of being bullied. Students questioning their sexuality may be the most at risk, as they report higher levels of bullying, homophobic teasing/victimization, general victimization, depression/suicidal feelings, alcohol/marijuana use and truancy than heterosexual and lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) students (Espelage *et al.* 2008, Birkett *et al.* 2009), and may engage in acting-out behaviors to detract from or mitigate the stress of the questioning process (Williams *et al.* 2005). Physical victimization, even that which may not be homophobic in nature, results in higher rates of substance use, suicidality, and sexual risk behaviors for sexual minority youth when compared to their heterosexual peers who have similar levels of victimization (Russell and Joyner 2001, Bontempo and D’Augelli 2002). Verbal and physical abuse may even be associated with running away and prostitution for sexual minority youth (Savin-Williams 1994).

While literature exists on mental health and other risk-related outcomes of in-school homophobic victimization, there is little on how sexual minority youth actively *respond* to these incidents. Reporting harassment, threats, and violence to a formal authority (such as school officials or police) was uncommon; strategies for addressing victimization included modifying their behavior, hiding their sexuality, verbally confronting the harasser, and, rarely, fighting back (Pilkington and D'Augelli 1995, Grossman *et al.* 2009, Kosciw *et al.* 2010). Only a 'handful' of the thousands of students in Kosciw and colleagues' (2010, p. 37) study mentioned 'resorting to physical retaliation to deal with victimization' (which the authors describe as 'disturbing'), but small samples of queer youth also produce a number of respondents who report doing so (see, for example, Grossman *et al.* 2009). This calls into question the alleged rarity of such responses. In one well-publicized case, African-American lesbian students in Philadelphia formed a gang and sexually harassed their peers in order to counteract the homophobic bullying they faced in school (Johnson 2008). Studies such as these suggest the willingness to respond to victimization with violence may depend on various demographic, social, or cultural factors.

Do sexual minority youth have more risk-associated or problem behaviors than their peers?

Extant literature suggests sexual minority youth have higher risk profiles than heterosexual youth: they are at higher risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts, as well as increased alcohol, marijuana, and other drug use (DuRant *et al.* 1998, Faulkner and Cranston 1998, Garofalo *et al.* 1998, Russell and Joyner 2001, Massachusetts Department of Education 2004, 2007, Goodenow *et al.* 2006, King *et al.* 2008, Robinson and Espelage 2011, Button *et al.* 2012). They also have lower levels of school belongingness (Robinson and Espelage 2011), higher frequency of skipping school due to feeling unsafe (Garofalo *et al.* 1998, Massachusetts Department of Education 2004, 2007, Goodenow *et al.* 2006, Button *et al.* 2012), and elevated absences in general (Faulkner and Cranston 1998, Birkett *et al.* 2009, Robinson and Espelage 2011). Adverse outcomes such as depression, suicidality, and lower educational attainment are linked to sexual minority youth's perceptions of prejudice, experience with victimization, and perceptions of low social support (Henrickson 2008, Teasdale and Bradley-Engen 2010).

Representative samples of youth suggest sexual minority youth are also at increased risk for some forms of delinquency and violence. For example, results of the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey have consistently shown that sexual minority youth are more likely than their peers to carry weapons to school, fight at school, and/or to engage in more fights and weapons carrying in general (DuRant *et al.* 1997, Faulkner and Cranston 1998, Garofalo *et al.* 1998, Massachusetts Department of Education 2004, 2007). Representative samples of youth in other locales produce similar findings (DuRant *et al.* 1998, Russell *et al.* 2001, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011, Button *et al.* 2012). Recent Massachusetts YRBS reports have also found that sexual minority youth were significantly more likely to have been in a gang (Massachusetts Department of Education 2004, 2007). These studies note potential limitations in operationalizations of variables; for example, it is unclear who the instigators of the fights were, if they were defensive in nature, and the time order of the behaviors. Definitional and methodological issues underlie much of the research on sexual minority youth, starting with who is classified as 'sexual minority' depending on the variables collected (Savin-Williams 2001b).

Despite the seemingly bleak picture for sexual minority youth, most of them are *not* at risk, but rather, certain events 'unique' to their experience may be associated with negative

outcomes. In other words, is it ‘coming out,’ victimization based on sexual orientation, gender atypical behavior, and/or being rejected by family which leads to adverse outcomes (Savin-Williams 2001a, Russell 2005)? Just as sexual minority youth face unique challenges, it is likely they have unique protective factors and avenues for resiliency, such as peer support (Russell 2005, Varjas *et al.* 2008). Indeed, youth in schools with a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or other support group for LGB students were half as likely to report being threatened or injured at school, or skipping school due to fear (Goodenow *et al.* 2006). Other social support also has protective effects: parental support can moderate homophobic teasing’s harmful effects on depression-suicidal feelings and alcohol/marijuana use (Espelage *et al.* 2008); mentoring is associated with increases in post-secondary educational involvement for sexual minority youth (Gastic and Johnson 2009); and social support is linked with lower victimization, substance abuse, and suicidality for all students, regardless of sexual orientation (Button *et al.* 2012).

Current study

This study moves beyond prior research by providing a descriptive picture of how a gang- and crime-involved sample of young gay men manage and respond to homophobic bullying and harassment in schools. Specifically, it sheds light on their use of fighting to respond to their victimization. Although extant criminological literature on bullying suggests a link between bullying victimization and gangs, delinquency, and violence, literature on *homophobic* bullying in schools has focused on associated psychological problems, suicidality, substance abuse, and negative school outcomes. Although this literature also provides evidence that some sexual minority youth respond to harassment with defensive violence, it does not provide a portrait of how these conflicts arise, why violence is utilized to respond, or why those particular youth choose to respond with violence. This study helps to fill these gaps in our knowledge.

Methods and sample

Sampling strategy

I recruited 53 respondents by utilizing a snowball sampling design, in which willing participants refer additional participants to the researcher. This is a common method to access underground populations (Lofland *et al.* 2006). I sampled in Columbus, Ohio, which is the only city where I had connections to gay gang- and crime-involved men. I obtained the initial group of eligible participants by contacting men previously known to me when I lived in Columbus, during which time I volunteered for and utilized services of several LGBT advocacy organizations. I also gained respondents by accessing social networking websites such as MySpace to view user profiles and then contact men whose profiles suggested gang membership or involvement in criminal activity, and by approaching non-eligible (gay, but not gang/crime-involved) individuals who had connections to eligible participants and asked them to speak to their friends on my behalf in the same manner in which I asked eligible participants to refer friends. These varied recruitment strategies allowed me to tap into different friendship networks (and gangs).

Interviews

I asked a series of screening questions to confirm eligibility before beginning each interview. Gay identity² and either gang membership or involvement in criminal activity,

determined through self-nomination, made a man eligible to participate. Participants also had to be at least 18 years of age, primarily for reasons related to human research subjects protections.

In-depth interviews were conducted, as these allow respondents to speak for themselves without researchers imposing artificial concepts or categories on them (Becker 1967, Wright and Bennett 1990). In each interview, I asked the participant about his background, his relationships and sexual identity, his gang and/or criminal experiences, his experience with the criminal justice system, and what it meant for him to 'be a man,' among other topics. The interview instrument is unique to this study, but includes some questions used in prior research that have been adapted or borrowed verbatim (Miller 2001, Esbensen 2003, Edin and Kefalas 2005, Copes and Hochstetler 2006, Miller 2008). I also drew inspiration from my own lived experience as a queer person and the many conversations I have had over the past 10 years with other self-identified LGB individuals. My indigenous knowledge (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) of gay culture, gang/criminal justice system argot, and Columbus's geography helped me to ask follow-up questions that tapped concepts or experiences to which other researchers might not be attuned and to gain rapport with respondents. As a result, interviews were very conversational in nature.

I conducted the interviews between November 2009 and January 2012,³ in locations of each respondent's choosing. Respondents were paid 15 dollars for participating and were reimbursed for gas or bus expenses, if they had to travel to the location. Interviews lasted between approximately 45 minutes and 2 hours and 45 minutes, were audio recorded with consent, and were then transcribed verbatim. Names contained herein are pseudonyms; each participant came up with a 'code name' that was not an existing nickname or alias. Many chose common first names, but others chose stylized names such as Aga, Dollars, and Hurricane.⁴

Method of analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, I then analyzed the data using an inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which allows themes to emerge from the data. Because I conducted all of the interviews, I had an idea of some of the major themes before I began coding. I used a basic word processing program to code the data. Transcripts were coded in their entirety, but the majority of the examples presented in this paper originated from two separate, non-consecutive questions on the interview instrument. These were: (1) What was school like for you? (2) Have you ever physically fought because someone called you a fag or a faggot? Because interviews were transcribed and coded on an ongoing basis that was concurrent with data collection, I kept emerging themes in mind while in the field and attempted to delve deeper into those topics during subsequent interviews. The question regarding fighting due to being called a fag or faggot was not on the original interview instrument, but I began to regularly ask it after this theme was present in many of my early interviews. Also, no question on the interview instrument was intended to explicitly tap homophobic bullying or harassment in schools; these themes simply arose in respondents' narratives and I asked follow-up questions to gain detail. It is difficult to determine if each instance discussed herein fits Olweus's (1993) definition of bullying; however, many respondents described repeated instances of homophobic harassment or victimization over time, both direct and indirect, often by several classmates. I am also generally unable to assess size or strength differences between respondents and their harassers, but it should be noted that homophobic bullying is expressly meant to reinforce a power differential by marking another person as someone with lower status, usually because of his gender

atypicality or gay sexual identity. In light of these definitional concerns, I often refer to respondents' victimization as 'harassment,' but many did experience homophobic 'bullying' as defined by Olweus (1993).

Sample characteristics

At the time of the interview, 52 participants lived within Columbus's metropolitan statistical area, and one lived directly north of Columbus's MSA in a very small town. They ranged in age from 18 to 28, with an average age of 21.5. The majority (89%) were men of color. Forty-eight respondents identified as a member or an affiliate of a gang, crew, clique, set, posse, or organization at some point in their lives. The remaining five men had also engaged in repeated criminal activity as part of a group, but denied their groups were gangs. Table 1 presents additional information regarding the sample characteristics.

Experiences with homophobic bullying and harassment in schools

Homophobic teasing

While a few men in my study reported being teased by classmates for a variety of factors such as having an accent or being poor, teasing and bullying due to a respondent's gender presentation and/or perceived sexual orientation was much more likely. Over 60%

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of sample ($n = 53$).

Mean age (Range: 18–28)	21.5
Race	
Black/African-American	77%
White	11%
Latino	2%
Biracial	9%
Country/state of origin other than Ohio	42%
Parents are immigrants	9%
Immigrated to US with parents	4%
Employment status	
Employed (legally or off-books)	45%
Unemployed	49%
Receiving SSI benefits	6%
Education	
High school/GED or some college	75%
In high school at time of interview	17%
Less than high school; not enrolled	8%
Fathered children	19%
HIV status	
HIV Positive	11%
HIV Negative	87%
Unsure	2%
Gang membership	91%
Gang-involved at time of interview – Mean age	21.4
Gang joining – Mean age	16.2
Average length of time in gang, in years	4.0
History of CJ Contact	
Arrested	77%
Incarcerated (Range: 2 days–8 years)	55%
Foster care (Range: 3 months–13 years)	28%

reported being teased in school because of their sexuality or perceived sexuality, often leading to a fight on or off of school grounds. With the exception of several arts-alternative schools in Columbus, respondents said their school environments were not particularly welcoming of gay or gender atypical students. In general, they did not dislike school itself; they disliked classmates who teased them. For example, JD noted that while he did enjoy school, he did not appreciate his classmates' constant 'pickin'' and 'teasin', in which they often called him a fag. Brandon reported no problems in school at all, with the exception of being called a faggot 'all the time.' Casper also enjoyed school for the most part, but said he had 'problems,' which he usually 'solved:'

Like, problems as far as me being . . . My sexuality, and things. But like, when I was in elementary school and stuff, it wasn't really no problem, cuz I didn't know too much about it. But like, towards my 7th and 8th grade year, it was just like, problems with certain people. [. . .] Problems with like, as far as me hangin' out with the girls, and not hangin' out with the guys, and junk like that. [. . .] Yeah, they would say somethin' to tick me off, and I would go there, take it there [fight], yeah. [. . .] [They called me] the normal names. Fag, homo, boy-lover, all that.

Other men also reported teasing in school based on their behavior that was perceived to be unusual for boys. Those with gender atypical behaviors identified these as the reasons they were targeted for homophobic teasing, even before they began to identify as gay:

Ricky: No, I did not enjoy school. I grew up with kids calling me gay-gay, which, I don't know what that was, but it was weird. Like, growing up, cuz they said I had a switch, I never knew what a switch was.

Jordan: I didn't really like high school, cuz I felt like . . . It was, it was a really awkward time for me, because I didn't really identify as gay, even though I knew I was, and I was still pretty religious, and just, a lot of like, conflict, and I felt like a freak, and I didn't really fit in with people. [. . .] I think [I knew I was gay] way back, like when I was in, like, kindergarten, because, I don't know, I remember just being . . . Well, I don't know, I feel like I was always very influenced by females growing up, like I always liked, like I guess, like, girl things, and I always hung out with girls, all the time. And then whenever we'd play something, I'd want to be, like, the girl in it. [. . .] I got teased a lot, because I was pretty like, feminine, and like, into like really girly things, so they'd be like, 'Oh, you're gay.'

Oz: I really didn't realize [that I] was gay until like, I was around 12 or 13, and people were sayin', oh, you know, people were sayin' I was really really feminine when I was in school[I]. And they was like, 'Oh, [Oz], you're gonna be gay, you're gay' and I'm like, 'No, I'm not gonna be gay.' [. . .] But I always had a feeling, like, 'Maybe I am!'

Hurricane: I was always picked with, growin' up through school because like I said, people saw my, my feminine side.

By contrast, because his gender presentation was normative for a boy, King thought his high school classmates perceived him to be 'weird,' 'odd,' or 'just young' because of his 'sorta feminine' behavior, but not necessarily gay. For boys whose 'feminine' behaviors or styles were visible, assumptions were made about their sexual orientation, and they were teased as a result.

Despite the fact that the majority of respondents (including those above) knew they were attracted to males before their teen years, they felt pressure to conceal their sexual interests to schoolmates for a period of time. Otherwise, they thought they would face ridicule or actual physical violence. Max says he spent time with 'straight people' in high school because he did not want to be 'known' as gay, or for his mother to find out. In a striking comment on his behavior despite saying he was 'born gay,' he stated, 'before I knew what it was, I knew how to hide it.' Girls were sometimes used to aid in the 'cover-up':

Dollars: I dated a girl in middle school, and that was because people were starting to suspect, so I needed a cover-up! (laughs) [...] I used her as a cover-up, pretended I was still straight, because the school I went to, the kids there didn't believe in homosexuality. [...] You get beat up, and that's it, every day after school.

Kevin: [F]or me, it was a cover-up, because I knew that I did not like girls like that. I knew that I only wanted to be with dudes, but so people would not say, 'Oh, you're a fag,' or, 'Oh, you're gay,' or, 'You like guys,' or you know, shit like that. I said, 'Okay, I'm straight. I have a girlfriend. Do you see her? She's right here.'

These suppressions of the self had some negative psychic consequences for Reese, who says he 'hated' school:

I'd say from like 13 to 18 I was like, always real angry because I wanted to come out but I was afraid to, because I didn't know how people would react, because I only had met like, maybe six gay people in my life. So, there wasn't very many people out there, and I didn't want to be like the really oddball, so I didn't come out, I just stayed hidden. [...] If I had a chance before, like in the past to come out sooner, I would have, because it makes you more comfortable and makes you more stronger.

Internalized cultural messages regarding appropriate gender presentation and sexuality presented a dilemma to respondents: they could be themselves, with negative social consequences, or hide their identity, with undesirable personal consequences. In light of these choices, Reese was among several men who waited until they left school to come out, precisely due to the homophobic harassment they faced or expected to face.

Responding to homophobic bullying and harassment with violence

A common strategy used by respondents to address homophobic bullying and harassment was to fight the student(s) engaged in the harassment. This strategy served several purposes, among them, to address disrespect and to curtail future harassment. Being called a faggot, whether or not a respondent had come out as gay, necessitated at least a verbal response:

Marcus: There were those people in school where they would say stuff, and at first I was like, sayin' stuff back, cuz I'm like, 'You're not gon' sit there and disrespect me, and think that it's okay, cuz it's not.' [...] I wasn't in denial about it, but it was still a touchy thing, and like, I just felt that it was real, real disrespectful.

Greg: Because that was like, kind of an insult, especially cuz at the time, I was confused, and this was before I even came out, so like, I'm assumin' people knew before I did, and so I took it very offensive.

Derrick: You're not gonna, you're not 'bout to sit here and call me out my name and I'm bouta just sit here and let you call me outta my name and I ain't gon' say nothin' or do nuttin'. That's just how I feel.

Consistent with my previous research on this sample's responses to anti-gay harassment and threats of violence (Panfil, 2013), these verbal altercations could escalate to physical violence if the perpetrator of the harassment maintained his course of conduct, even after being confronted. The repeated verbal harassment respondents endured, coupled with the disrespect inherent in the use of homophobic epithets, provided them with a justification to fight back. Marcus, Greg, and Derrick all ended up physically fighting with the students who verbally harassed them. Derrick reported more than 20 fights because he was called a fag or a faggot; Marcus reported five or six; and Greg reported over 10 (though some of these fights were outside of school). Including Greg and Marcus, five respondents who fought their school harasser faced arrest, court, fines, and/or convictions as a direct result

of these fights. Others faced intervention from the juvenile justice system due to fighting and unruliness, but it was not clear that their fights with homophobic classmates lead directly to this intervention.

Verbal altercations and physical fights due to homophobic harassment occurred even among friends. After Johnny came out in high school, his best friend became upset and wanted to fight him because of it, so they fought. Brandon noted that although 'faggot' hurt the most out of all the names he had been called, it especially hurt when it came from 'friends that I was arguin' wit, that I thought was close to me.' The flip-flopping between friendship and homophobic insults was worthy of a physical fight for some. Mini explained:

It's the simple fact that you sayin' [fag] in front of everybody else. Like, you think that you're all that, but you're not, because if we was together, it'd be a different story, you'd be tryna [date] me! [...] But when you're around somebody, it's a different story. No, that's not gonna go down, so I'm finna fuck you up! [...] Especially if we're friends. [...] Cuz there been some dudes, like, one day we're in school we can really clown, or like, after school, we're smoking or whatever, or we're chillin' or whatever, like, nothin' sexual, you know, just friends or whatever, and then when we're at school, it's a different story when you're around your friends, like, your niggas or whatever. No! Cuz, no! No. You was just over at my house. [...] So, it really piss me off when somebody act like they're somebody else when they're around they friends.

Underlying Mini's comments is the perceived difficulty with making and keeping friends as an 'out' gay student. Although boys are socialized to publicly police the masculinity and sexuality of other boys (e.g., Pascoe 2007), gay students expect their friends to be allies, regardless of sexual orientation. Unsurprisingly, respondents deemed it unacceptable to engage in homophobic harassment in order to avert one's own potential homophobic victimization.

Relatedly, Casper and Jayden each made a point to tell me that the boys from school who called them 'faggot' eventually came out as gay themselves; several others suggested their harassers may have been gay. That is, respondents suspected their peers' homophobic conduct was a strategy to deflect suspicion regarding their own sexuality (for historical references to this strategy, see Wackerfuss 2008). Oz recounted that a classmate who had given him 'certain looks' also pantomimed having anal sex with him, with the use of a banana, for the amusement of his friends. Oz suggested this blatant instance of sexual harassment occurred because his peer may have been trying to get more 'comfortable' with his own sexual interests. Jeremy presents another case in point of homophobic harassment by a peer he suspected was gay:

Yeah, so he was talkin' all that stuff in school, so I told him I would whoop his ass on the train, and we got on the train, and all my friends was there, errbody was there, and he was just still makin' jokes, like, 'I ain't gonna touch, I ain't gonna fight you, I'ma turn, I'ma catch your gay, duh duh duh,' so I slapped him. And me and him started fightin'. (pause) I won that one! (laughs) Errbody was sayin' that I won that one. [...] And then when we got to school, he started showin' me re-, he started, he ain't said nothin' else slick to me, he started speakin' to me. At first, I coulda sworn he likked me, but I moved [from Chicago to Columbus], so I wouldn't never know! (laughs) But, I think he started to get a little ... Cuz he bought me some lunch, and I was just like ... It just don't sit right. Buyin' me lunch when me and you just got into it like, two or three days ago.

Regardless of this boy's romantic interests, Jeremy saw it necessary to prove his unwillingness to tolerate disrespect: He initiated a fight outside of school, instead of asking for intervention from school officials. He then sought spectators who could buttress his claim of a successful fight and, therefore, a claim to the very masculinity that was challenged by another male. As described, this fight did curtail future homophobic

harassment. Jeremy did not report any fights in his new school; however, a theme present in my data was the need to continue fighting as one transferred schools, moved up in grade, or encountered new students. As respondents presumed the only way to avoid continued verbal and physical harassment from peers was to fight the person(s) who were aggressing upon them, this pattern occurred over and over in new schools for some.

'Building a reputation'

Homophobic bullying was sometimes compounded by being the 'new kid' in school, moving up to middle or high school, or dealing with other new students. Although many of the moves discussed by respondents arose from their families changing residences, some changed schools often due to numerous foster care placements or suspensions/expulsions. Regardless of reason, a new school represented a place where a student would have to adjust and/or 'prove' himself in order to prevent or curtail harassment on the basis of his same-sex sexual orientation, whether he was out or not. Anderson (1999, p. 10) notes that 'repeated displays of "nerve" and "heart" build or reinforce a credible reputation for vengeance that works to deter aggression and disrespect.' In addition, frequent school transitions are a predictor of youth violence (Herrenkohl *et al.* 2000).

As retaliation for outing him to his classmates, Silas beat up his own friend because he did not want 'any problems' in his new school. When Jeremiah was asked how many times he thought he had fought over someone calling him a fag, he provided a number which directly corresponded to the number of schools he had attended:

I went to three different high schools . . . Three times. No, middle schools . . . Probably about 5 or 6 . . . Or 7 times! (laughing) Sorry. Probably about 7 times. I don't know, like, in elementary school, middle school, you get, like, they throw them out there so quick (snaps fingers), and like, even though back then, people didn't know what it meant, like, even a gay boy knows they're gay back then, and even though the other little straight boys don't really know what they're doin' when they call somebody a faggot, gay boys will fight at that age over that, really fast. [. . .] It's been a lot of fights, cuz as soon as the word comes out, like, I would swing. [. . .] Like, my parents allowed me to fight over that, so. That was somethin' that I was allowed to fight over. [. . .] Once I had their permission, it was a wrap! [. . .] But once you fight one person at the school over it, they don't do it no more. Like, not wit me, anyway, they didn't. They left me alone. So it always takes, like, it depends, like, every time I switched schools, it took for me to fight at least one person.

Just as Jeremy initiated a fight and won in order to avoid future harassment, Jeremiah's repeated displays of 'nerve' and 'heart' secured him some safety in each new school. At that time, Jeremiah's family did not know he was gay; however, it is clear they perceived homophobic masculinity challenges to be serious enough to utilize violence as a conflict resolution strategy.

A 'reputation' could also be built over time. Fewer problems were encountered as respondents moved from elementary school to middle school and then from middle school to high school with the same peers. For Nate, school was 'good,' with the exception of the teasing he faced. He said his last fight occurred during his sophomore year of high school after incremental improvements in his interactions with classmates:

I mean, mainly like, my worst I had, umm, growin' up would probably be like . . . Umm, I'd probly say elementary school, cuz I wasn't like, out, but I was like, iffy about it, and I guess people seen that, and you know, the names, the f word, the g bomb, stuff like that, name-callin', stuff like that. But like, middle school, I gained more [confidence], and still the name callin', like, here and there, you know. But high school, high school was like, pretty much cool, cuz like, I guess people, more people knew me, and they was like, 'Aww, yeah, he's already gay, we know that,' and I knew people, so it was really nothin'. [. . .] Like, in elementary school, or middle school, it was just like, a bad word, and I just felt like, oh, they

like . . . Like, callin' a girl a b word. I just felt like I had to get them back, and like, it hurt my feelings, so I had to like, fight 'em. And like, you're not gon' call me that word. It's like, it's rude and disrespectful. But like, in high school, I really didn't hear the word too much, and if I did, it'd probly be like an outsider, like, somebody changed schools, or like, after a week, they prolly never said it again cuz they knew me.

Nick communicates the emotionally-charged nature of retaliatory violence: He felt he 'had' to personally 'get them back' for their disrespect by fighting and inflicting physical pain, instead of seeking the formal sanctions school officials could provide. Hurricane presents another example of this, and of improvement over his school career. Although he initially did not fight despite 'always being picked with' and instead endured the teasing until it became intolerable, he attributes his respite from teasing in high school to his constant fighting in middle school:

The reasons that I fought is because I was defending my honor. And you will never try to hurt my pride walking in school, and I'm already going through this lifestyle, being a Black African-American male, first off, secondly, I'm not doing too good in school so they're looking at me and that's a bad point, so I'm like, okay. Then you look at me because I'm gay. Okay, you're giving me too much grief. Three strikes, I'm, no. [. . .] I'm here to get an education just like you, so if you don't [like that], you can go on to the next person or we can go ahead and fight and get it over with. [. . .] Umm, yeah, people teased me a lot, and I didn't like it, and it came a point in time, I felt, if you didn't like what I said or what I'm about, do somethin' about it. Perfect example. I beat this girl up because she told everybody in the school that I was gay. [. . .] And if [when I punch you], you hit the floor, it's over, cuz I'm not gonna stop. Huh, you shouldn't have showed me that weakness. You can't take a punch? Ohh, huh, huh, see if you can take off this next ten. (laughs) I've never been the type to pick the fight. I mean, I even gave a little bit of lip back. I had to learn how to be more, how do you say . . . I wasn't afraid to come out. After I started getting taunted enough, I opened up my mouth and started speakin' up for myself, like, 'No, you got me fucked up!' (laughs) But, it didn't get better until I got into high school, because by the time I had got into high school, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, I had built my reputation, so everybody that I was in middle school with transferred to the high school that I went to or whatnot.

In order to negotiate the social prohibitions against bullying, Hurricane framed his violence in terms of retaliation for disrespect, which is acceptable and expected (Ferguson 2000). His chosen pseudonym is a reference to his fighting dexterity and ruthlessness, which became parts of his reputation for vengeance. Although Hurricane was one of few respondents to explicitly mention his race in relation to his school career, others presumed the homophobia they had encountered in Black communities was connected with religiosity (see, for example, Griffin 2001).

Independent of school mobility, respondents explicitly articulated their expectations regarding the utility of fighting in building a reputation as someone who would not tolerate disrespect and verbal abuse, and who was therefore not a good candidate for further harassment:

ATL: Yeah, I done fought, I done got into a, you know, when I was in high school, there's a lot, there's this game, you know, how boys walk around and pick, you know, 'faggot,' 'faggot' this, 'faggot' that, yeah, it went from there. Me and my sister, and I couldn't take it no more, I really couldn't take it. [. . .] And, but, even though I got jumped, even though I got beat up, me and my sister both, you know, they'll learn that, you know, faggots fight too, they'll defend theyself too.

Jeremy: [I]f you get yo ass whooped, now you gon' be lookin' like, 'Okay. I just got my ass whooped by a fag, so maybe I should think about it!' [. . .] Just cuz you're straight, I'm not gonna back down.

When their masculinity was challenged, respondents marshaled normative masculine resources such as fighting to correct peers' attempts at subordination (Messerschmidt

2000). With these statements and actions, respondents repudiated cultural stereotypes of gay men as passive victims; indeed, they actively challenged their harassers' assumptions and behavior, even if they did not emerge victoriously from the conflict.

In these narratives, 'a reputation' could mean that one is quick to fight anyone who picks on him, is merciless in fighting, and/or is a person undeserving of harassment. These examples also underscore other themes in this paper, such as the unwillingness to tolerate repeated disrespect and the belief that defending oneself from homophobic harassment is necessary, even if he is unsure of his sexual orientation. In the next two sections, I detail the lives of two respondents to further illustrate the themes presented thus far. These in-depth examples are also meant to illustrate other co-occurring stressors in my respondents' lives that may contribute to their violent responses to homophobic bullying and harassment.

'Really angry': Joe's story

Joe was born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States with his parents at the age of three. He stated that his mother 'abandoned' him when he was six, and after spending a few months in foster care, his father gained custody of him. Joe reported being sexually 'touched' against his will by older children in his foster care placements, and said his father actually blamed him for his own victimization because he did not fight back against those who molested him. Joe summed up his young life by stating, 'It's pretty much been an abusive childhood when I was growin' up. Verbally, mentally, and physically, of course. It's been rough.'

Joe claimed that despite trying to be a 'good boy,' he started going 'downhill' at a 'very young age.' He started spending time with a group of boys with whom he stayed out late and got into 'a whole lotta trouble.' At age 12, Joe was briefly involved with a drug-selling gang, but was 'jumped' by the gang because they thought Joe's father had found out about him carrying drugs for them. He left the gang after he was beaten and then nearly sexually assaulted by the group's leader, who was several years older than he. Joe continued to carry mace for protection.

When asked how school was for him, Joe described low academic achievement, and proceeded to tell me about the incident that led to his first arrest and (one-day) incarceration:

I always used to clown around, I always used to be the kid who would always talk, and, like, report card time would always come, my dad would always, just like, beat me, because they was always bad. [...] Uhh, when I was in 6th grade, I also went into court for actually, oh my gosh, for actually just like ... Getting really angry with children in school. I actually took in a lighter and an aerosol can and started spraying it. And everybody just like, ran away from me cuz I was like, so mad, cuz I didn't know what sexual orientation I was at that time, so they was always teasing me that I was gay, and I got really tired of it, and I just like ... Just started sprayin'! (laughs)

After picking him up from juvenile detention, Joe's father reacted violently:

[He] came and got me, and we went home, and he started really just throwin' me across the room, like, literally throwing me. Uhh, throwin' punches, smacks, anything. And then when I found out that I had gotten court for it, he really just like, seriously just beat the crap out of me. I'm talkin' about with a belt, his tool belt, his steel toe boots, umm ... (nervous laugh) His steel toe boot, and what else did he use? Cuz he used something else hard ... (pause) Oh! This scar on my eye, he hit me in the, uhh, face with a, with a freakin' hammer! Yeah. So, I'm, I'm like, 'Oh my God, what did I do so bad,' and then like, a week later, he apologized. He said, 'You were just a human.' What the hell ever, you meant to do that! That's what I thought, that's what I was thinkin' in my head, like, 'You meant to do it. There's no sorry for it.'

Despite being physically abused for his arrest, Joe continued to fight back against students who bullied him for his perceived gayness. When asked how many times he fought in school for this reason, he estimated five or six. He described what would typically happen:

Joe: Umm, pretty much there would be a whole group of people, they would all laugh at me, and they'd be like, 'Hey, you is a fag, you a fruit,' or somethin' like that, and I'd just turn around and, I mean, I would just let it ride off for a few days. But if they continuously do it, I mean, I'll just get, like, real angry, and just wanna throw, like, a textbook at 'em. And then they just wanna all come over here and jump me, I fight the biggest one, and unfortunately, I mean, me being so miniature and little, I lost. But still! I fought. I mean, the next time, I had caught the big dude by himself, and I like, seriously like, threw another textbook at him, cuz he kept calling me names, and he seriously, like, put his bookbag down, in his locker, and just started to try to beat the crap out of me. I had mace in my back pocket, and I maced him, and like, I started beatin' the crap out of him, kickin' 'em, just tryna claw the life outta him, just tryna mess his face up. Principal came and he got me off of him, sent me to the office, and almost expelled me.

VP: Have you fought over being called a fag outside of school, or just in school?

Joe: Just in school, I think. I mean, I was never really worried about it at home, even though my dad would always call me it.

This description is unique in that Joe's experience can be categorized clearly under current definitions of bullying: his victimization occurred repeatedly, over time, at the hands of at least one classmate who was larger and stronger than he. To neutralize this power differential, Joe used weapons at his disposal. He also derived self-respect from his willingness to retaliate, even though he initially lost the fight and subsequently faced sanctions from his school.

As is clear from his narrative, Joe did not receive support from his classmates or his father for his perceived sexual orientation. Despite knowing he was attracted to boys his 'whole life,' Joe did not start to think of himself as gay until age 13 after a sexual 'experience' at school with a same-aged peer. He subsequently shared his coming out story with me:

Joe: Everybody had these [assumptions], cuz of the way I dressed and everything, [I] really didn't care, so 10th grade I said, you know what, I don't really care. I'm going out as me, I'm gonna be me, and I'm not gonna hide anything. But I knew that I had to hide it to my parents. So I just went to school, and I told everybody, 'Yeah, I'm gay, so?' [...] But time had came when I got gay-bashed, that I had, I wanted to leave the school, cuz it was some people from the school who gay-bashed me. And I wanted to leave the school, and the only way I could do it was to tell my parents the real reason. [...] I told [my mom] over the phone in the counselor's office, and I just told her, 'I'm gay.' She's like, 'Honey, if you were a purple alien with one eye in the middle, I wouldn't give a damn.' So I'm like, 'Oh, okay.' (laughs) [...] [My dad would] just always, like, tease and talk about me, and you know, all that stuff. But, he swears up and down that he loves me.

VP: But he calls you a fag?

Joe: He doesn't call me a fag, not anymore. Not anymore. It's just... Ughh, he's just so annoying the way he... I mean, any conversation that we have, it's always, it always turns around into my sexuality. He likes to change the subject to everything, and I hate it when he does it. It just like, seriously, it's nerve-wracking.

Only after a serious incident of bullying did Joe seek teacher intervention, but he was then met with a difficult choice: in order to be protected, he had to reveal his sexuality to his father, risking further injury at home. It is precisely these scenarios that provide incentive for handling conflicts interpersonally, perhaps by fighting back, than reporting them to a teacher or parent.

Joe's story illustrates the homophobic harassment and negative life experiences faced by many respondents. These experiences include neglect, abuse, foster care placement, and lack of parental support regarding his sexuality. Although Joe's father presumably encouraged him to fight to defend himself by admonishing him for failing to fight back against the boys who molested him, he then punished Joe for fighting back against peers who bullied him for being gay. Joe's willingness to fight his tormentors *and* to become involved with delinquent behavior and gangs in the first place may have originated from similar factors; namely, his negative early life experiences, some of which had nothing to do with his sexual orientation. For example, findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study suggest child maltreatment is associated with delinquency, violence, and gang membership (Smith and Thornberry 1995, Thornberry *et al.* 2003). Negative life events (such as school suspensions), a lack of parental supervision, early problem behaviors (such as reactivity and impulsivity), and having delinquent friends have received consistent support as risk factors for gang joining (Klein and Maxson 2006). Repeated homophobic bullying, which attacks an individual's masculinity and sexuality, coupled with a lack of intervention and social support, then produces a direct motivation to fight back.

Joe's story is also illustrative of a theme present in many narratives: adolescence as a period of turbulence, identity exploration, and change. The coming out process, combined with trouble in school and age-related 'growing pains,' led several respondents to run away from home, drop out of high school, and/or become involved with drugs. Gang membership presented an additional complication. For example, Greg suggested having few friends in his young life, moving schools, and wanting to be 'Mr. Popular' led him to join a gang. He then began talking back to teachers, failing to complete his school work, skipping school, disrupting class, and fighting classmates due to gossip and disrespect, such as calling him a faggot. He disclosed his sexuality to his mother during the time he was gang-involved, in response to which she hit him. He noted this was 'when everything first fell apart' with his family. Greg ended up dropping out of high school in the eleventh grade in what he called 'a failure move' and was still without a GED at the time of the interview. I further explore the connection between fighting in school, gang membership, homophobic harassment, and familial support by discussing Darius's story.

'I didn't have nobody': Darius's story

Growing up in Chicago, Darius lived with extended family members for at least six years during his mother's incarceration for drug-related and violent charges. After she returned home from prison, Darius bounced back and forth between his mother and other family members. He explained he was 'always picked on' in school but was not 'the violent type' until his freshman year, when he 'just got tired of it and had to start fightin' people back.' He told me that his fights in high school were primarily gang-related, as he had joined a gang in ninth grade after gaining more freedom to be outside. To be sure I understood what sort of a group it was, he said, 'It was an actual gang-gang, like, the shoot, kill, fight, all that typa gang.' When asked why he joined, he replied: '[C]uz it was like, I was by myself. I didn't have nobody, my family wadn't there, so I needed some protection, so I just went to go join a group of a lot of people I didn't know.'

Darius knew he was attracted to other boys at age 8 or 9, but tried to suppress these feelings. In high school, he spent time with his gang during the day, sometimes fighting, sometimes selling drugs, and publicly dating girls. However, unbeknownst to most of his peers, Darius joined several popular gay dating sites and became sexually active with

males. Beginning in his freshman year, he sold sex to adult men at night in order to earn some money. He then started to have problems in school as a result of his gang involvement. He quipped, 'I was smart, but I was bad. And that ain't no good mix.'

During his sophomore year, Darius was expelled from school and sent to an alternative school for participating in a violent gang fight, which spilled out into the street. During the conflict, Darius sustained serious injuries (which resulted in visible facial scars), and a member of his gang was killed. Despite sometimes referring to his gang as a 'family,' he noted they did not come to visit him in the hospital; only his mother did. He remembered, 'I had a headache every day, and I thought about it, like, if I wouldn't never joined this gang, I coulda just went through like a regular student, but I didn't have nobody, so it was like, if I did get into it wit somebody, I was gettin' jumped on.' He was kicked out of the gang soon after, and believes this occurred because his fellow gang members learned he was gay. He found himself alone in an anti-gay conflict, without his gang to back him up and without any friends in his new school:

[S]o this was a new student, and he was, errybody let him know, I guess they filled him in, like, 'Okay, this the gay boy of the school. These are all the gay people in the school.' [...] So, I'm goin' to my class, I sit down, I do a lil work, and then like, you know like, when you just hear, when you hear people talkin' and you just know stuff directed towards you, I was just sittin' there ignorin' it and all this stuff, then he actually gets up and comes over there, and he looks at me, and I look at him, and I start laughin', and he was like, 'Heh, faggot.' And I was like, 'Huh?' I be like, 'Wut chu just say?' Like, 'Faggot.' I'm like, 'Okay,' cuz I'm not the type to argue, I'm like, 'Okay, I'm gay, they letchu know that, you're happy, and you're new.' Like, so, I always get that from new people. And he's lookin' like, 'Wit cho faggot ass,' and he's like, 'You want a dick to suck on?' I looked at him, like, 'Wait. What? I want what? I don't even do that.' He's like, 'How? You gay, nigga. Yo ass gay, you like dudes, you like dick.' I'm like, 'Nigga, just cuz you're gay doesn't mean you like certain stuff, so this and that,' and it was in my math class! And my math teacher was a real nice white, umm, white lady, she was niiiice, I loved my math teacher, she's like, 'Oh my god,' it's just so... It was like, okay, I got tired of it, like, I, my temper is not good, like, I can sit there for like 5 minutes and letchu talk, and I thought he was gonna leave, or something, and he just stood right there, so I just got up, and we ended up fightin'. [...] And that was it, like, e'er since they saw me fight him, and he ended up in the hospital and stuff, cuz I grabbed the stapler, and I was like, hittin' him wit it, bam, and then I was like, pressin' the staples in his ear, like, boop, boop, boop, like I was staplin' papers, bam, bam, cuz you know, you can open it, and I'm just sittin' there hittin' 'em, bow, bow, so they lookin' like, 'Oh my god, you puttin' staples in his...' So. And then, [the school] was 'bout to kick me out, but they saw, like, it wasn't, like, that wasn't my cause, he caused all this to happen. So, they just gave me 10 days. And I was able to come back. But, they gave me all my work, and now, that just, that was it! The whole school was locked. That's when everybody start respectin' me, they don't respect gay people, cuz they think gay people are not gonna take up for theirself, but when you take up for yourself and do stuff for yourself, then you see the respect. Once you respect others, too, cuz I respected everybody, I was always disrespected, but once I spoke up for myself, it was like, okay, that's when everybody started respectin' me.

Just as gay youth encounter homophobic challenges when they enter a new school, enacting homophobic harassment is a way for newcomers to perform masculinity, as evidenced by Darius's claim that he 'always' faces this from new students, as well as Nick's claim that only new students called him homophobic epithets in high school. Darius also mentioned that he suspected this boy was actually gay because of the sexually explicit manner in which he issued the challenge. This challenger was particularly offensive because he attacked Darius's sexual identity and his masculinity by alleging that Darius enjoys being penetrated by another male. As with Hurricane and Joe, Darius took drastic measures to address harassment instead of relying on intervention from his teacher, whom he makes a point to mark as White and as immobile during the conflict. Darius later

said this was the only fight in his alternative school, because his fellow students' perceptions of him changed. After this violent fight, they knew Darius would not tolerate homophobic harassment, even if other gay youth would: 'They look at me like, "Okay, he's gay, but he knows how to fight, so we're just gonna leave him alone, and pick wit the next gay person!"' Implicit in this statement is the assumption that gay youth will continuously face homophobic harassment until they stand up for themselves, a theme present in other narratives.

Shortly after this fight, Darius came out to his parents, who lived separately. Although his mother had suspected it and was 'okay' with it, Darius's father did not speak to him for three months afterwards and has not brought up the subject since. However, Darius is sure he made the right choice to come out and make friends more like himself:

It's just, every time I got dropped out, I was like, okay, where do I go now? Got kicked out of school, it's like, okay, where do I go now? Alternative school. Got kicked out the gang, it's like, okay, I ain't got nobody to hang wit no mo', I'm by myself, next turn, the gay scene! (laughs) I was gay! Like, okay, it was time for me to start livin', tellin' the truth. That's when I just said, 'Okay, I am gay,' start hangin' out with people I'm comfortable around.

Perhaps especially telling is that Darius's narrative of fighting to combat sexual harassment stemmed from his claim that members of the Black community are 'very violent with gay people.' Thus, he said being gay is 'the last option you wanna tell somebody.' For young men like Darius who fear losing ties to their families of origin and the respect of peers in their ethnic or racial communities, the decision to come out and befriend other gay youth is wrought with uncertainty: they may gain support from one community, but lose acceptance in another. This is consistent with prior research that suggests queer youth of color may feel the need to 'choose' between their sexual identity and their racial identity (McCready 2003, Daley *et al.* 2008).

It is clear that Darius joined a gang for protection and a sense of belonging, which are common reasons for youth to join gangs (Decker and Curry 2000, Esbensen and Peterson Lynskey 2001, Maxson and Whitlock 2002, Thornberry *et al.* 2003). As with Joe, Darius's decisions to become involved in gangs and violence were related to his life experience, which likely carried over to his willingness to defend himself from homophobic verbal and sexual harassment. Lack of parental supervision and early problem behaviors (such as reactivity, aggressiveness, and impulsivity) have received consistent support as risk factors for gang joining (Klein and Maxson 2006). Darius also possesses several risk factors for violence, including parental criminality (Herrenkohl *et al.* 2000) and early parent-child separation (Farrington 1989). However, Darius describes the repeated, direct challenges to his masculinity and sexuality as the factor that led him to give in to his 'temper' and fight back.

Discussion

The examples presented herein provide a descriptive portrait of a sample of gang gay- and crime-involved men's experiences with homophobic bullying and harassment in schools, and the ways they manage and respond to these events. These data confirm prior findings that homophobic language and harassment in schools is pervasive and begins early. Although the harassment subsided in high school (see Plummer 2001), respondents attributed this in large part to their willingness to 'fight back' against their harassers. Specifically, fights were enacted in an attempt to curtail future harassment by addressing disrespect and building a reputation as someone who was not to be bullied. Other studies of sexual minority youth suggest their greater likelihood of violent behaviors, such as fighting, represents defensive actions that result from homophobic victimization

(e.g., DuRant *et al.* 1998, Russell *et al.* 2001); however, this presumption was largely unexplored. This study moves beyond prior studies by detailing how, under what circumstances, and why gay youth choose to 'fight back' against homophobic victimization. In so doing, it lends support to the suggestion that sexual minority youth's externalizing behaviors (such as aggression) and fighting are defensive in nature. These acts defended against threats not only to the physical self, but also to reputation and status. Respondents clearly and directly attributed their 'need' for retaliation to the disrespectful actions perpetrated by schoolmates.

It is also evident that a number of additional factors influenced their decisions to fight back, including low official intervention, lack of consistent social support, and pre-existing risk factors for violence. These combined with repeated and often long-term homophobic harassment wherein core aspects of their identity were denigrated and attacked (sometimes before they even identified as gay) to produce scenarios conducive to violent interpersonal conflict resolution. However, the exact contribution of each factor remains uncertain, especially in light of bullying's independent effects on aggression and violence. Additionally, because these respondents are involved in violence, delinquency/crime, and gangs far beyond their responses to homophobic victimization, the question remains: Would other sexual minority youth not involved in these activities respond similarly? For example, although DuRant and colleagues' (1997) study found a relationship between same-sex sexual activity and weapons carrying, this relationship was no longer significant after controlling for other health risk and problem behaviors. That is, sexual minority youth who engage in delinquent and violent behaviors likely possess elevated risk profiles, just as other youth who engage in these behaviors do.

Indeed, youth who possess multiple risk factors across several domains (individual, peer, family, school, and community) are at a higher risk of engaging in delinquency, violence, and gangs due to the cumulative effects of risk (Thornberry *et al.* 2003). Esbensen *et al.* (2009, p. 326) found the presence of seven risk factors to be a 'tipping point': the odds of engaging in either gang membership or violence were twice as great for youth with seven risk factors as compared to six. In addition, although there were unique predictors associated with violent offending, all of the predictors of gang membership were also predictors of violence. Gang membership then facilitates youths' involvement in violent activity; gang youth self-report substantially more violence than nongang youth, or even youth with delinquent peers (Battin *et al.* 1998, Thornberry *et al.* 2003, Esbensen *et al.* 2010). Hawkins *et al.* (2000) also note that some of the risk factors which predict youth violence, such as early parent-child separation, dropping out of school, and frequent school transitions, may themselves be related to other factors which predict violence; thus, the direct effects of these risk factors are not always clear.

Where appropriate, I have discussed respondents' reasons for joining their gangs or their relationships with fellow gang members. Although a thorough analysis of respondents' reasons for gang joining is beyond the scope of this paper, one clarification is necessary: No respondent reported joining a gang specifically to protect himself against homophobic bullying or harassment, despite evidence of this occurring elsewhere (Johnson 2008). However, the reasons respondents volunteered for joining, such as wanting protection and a sense of belonging, likely hold special significance for gay youth. My findings and prior research suggest LGB youth face unique stressors during adolescence, such as homophobic bullying and negative peer, familial, and societal reactions to their non-normative sexual identities. Sexual minority youth of color may face yet additional stressors. Future research with my sample will explore their reasons for gang joining, their experiences in their gangs, and their experiences as gay men of color.

Although I am able to create chronologies for respondents' experiences with homophobic bullying, coming out, and gang joining, my study is cross-sectional in nature. Retrospective accounts may obscure the actual time order of these occurrences and, therefore, the relationships between them. However, I have included markers in the examples to illustrate the time order provided by the respondent. I have also presented information on risk factors for violence and gang membership to suggest how these pieces might fit together in the lives of participants who have responded to homophobic bullying and harassment with violence. These discussions are meant to contribute to the descriptive portrait, rather than conclusively attribute a respondent's behavior to any particular risk factor(s).

Some final notes regarding homophobic language and bullying are necessary. Although many respondents mentioned using homophobic epithets (such as 'fag' or 'queen') with other 'out' sexual minority youth in their friendship networks, no respondent reported engaging in homophobic harassment in school. Several respondents did admit to 'bullying' others in school, but there is no indication they bullied peers who were gay or perceived to be gay, and were also not the same youth who experienced homophobic bullying themselves. Indeed, research suggests gay males are less likely than heterosexual males to bully others (Berlan *et al.* 2010).

Recommendations for policy and future research

Because my findings regarding the pervasiveness of homophobic language and harassment in schools are largely consistent with extant research, my recommendations for educators and policymakers are 'fairly obvious and familiar' (Henrickson 2008, p. 80). GLSEN (2011) suggests several steps policymakers should take to improve school settings for sexual minority students: Implementing school bullying and/or harassment policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression; supporting Gay-Straight Alliances; providing training to school staff so they can better respond to homophobic harassment in school; and increasing students' access to LGBT-inclusive curricular resources. Indeed, these changes have measurable effects for sexual minority students. School anti-bullying programs and the presence of Gay-Straight Alliances are associated with lower rates of suicidality and victimization (Goodenow *et al.* 2006, Kosciw *et al.* 2013); having LGBT-supportive educators is associated with decreased victimization and absenteeism, as well as higher GPAs and self-esteem (Kosciw *et al.* 2013). Although not discussed in this paper, respondents also perceived that positive activities, mentors, and support for LGBT youth would increase these youths' functioning and resiliency; several even expressed wanting to create community centers and engage in outreach efforts.

In light of states reviewing their Safe Schools legislation, this research is timely. For example, although Ohio passed a version of the Comprehensive Safe Schools Act in 2012, it did not specifically enumerate protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Equality Ohio 2012). Without these, anti-bullying bills are essentially without teeth in their ability to protect and mandate services for bullied sexual minority or gender atypical youth, and lack guidelines for appropriate interventions with students who engage in homophobic bullying. The finding that some gay students find it necessary to respond to continued homophobic harassment with violence speaks to the need for enumerated anti-bullying bills.

Perhaps less 'obvious and familiar' are the suggestions for future criminological research which arise from this study. The majority of criminological research presumes heterosexuality (Collier 1998) and therefore has little to say about gay males' involvement with delinquency/crime, violence, and gangs. The fact that this study raises as many questions as it answers is indicative of our relative paucity of knowledge regarding sexual

minority youth within the fields of criminology and criminal justice. Sexual minority youth likely are represented in many studies of youth violence and gangs, but the requisite questions have not been asked. Future research needs to include data on sexual orientation in order to make useful comparisons, both between sexual minority and heterosexual youth, and among different sexual minority subgroups. Only then will the complex relationships between risk factors, delinquency/crime, violence, and gang membership become more apparent. Researchers also need to be mindful of possible intersections, such as those of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and location, as sexual minority youth of color face stigmatization on the basis of their race *and* their sexuality. Future criminological research should explore not only the specific challenges faced by sexual minority youth of color, but also the unique challenges facing all sexual minority youth, such as the coming out process. Adolescence is a period of transition and identity exploration for all youth, but sexual minority youth have the added complication of their sexual identities being devalued by society and even by their own families (Troiden 1989, D'Augelli *et al.* 1998). Useful prevention or intervention strategies will be gleaned when we shed light on sexual minority youths' experiences with victimization *and* their patterns of offending

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Notes

1. The studies described herein use varying definitions to classify youth as non-heterosexual. These include youth who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning; youth who are romantically attracted to same-sex peers; and youth who have had same-sex sexual contact. For inclusiveness, I use the term 'sexual minority' unless otherwise specified in the study being discussed.
2. Although some men told me during the interview that they occasionally date or have sex with women and would identify as bisexual, they were still eligible to be interviewed, regardless of whether they identified as gay, bisexual, or as some other term that suggested sexual minority status. For parsimony, I refer to my respondents as 'gay' men.
3. I also spent additional time with participants to better understand their lives. As this paper does not utilize data from fieldnotes, I do not discuss my fieldwork; however, over 225 hours of fieldwork were completed.
4. Several pseudonyms were changed after the interviews when I realized the respondent had given me an existing nickname, part of his real name, or a name extremely close to his real name. If I could not contact the respondent to select a new name, I attempted to capture the 'feel' of the original code name. Because I was granted a waiver of signed informed consent, the code name is the only name attached to any of their responses. I also obtained a Confidentiality Certificate from the National Institute of Health. This Certificate protects my respondents from being prosecuted for anything they tell me, and protects me from being forced to turn over notes and transcripts or from being subpoenaed to testify against them in any court proceeding. At the start of the interview, I also gave participants a list of referrals for various GLBT-centered services, including counseling, suicide prevention, alcohol/drug treatment, and HIV/STD testing.

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