

Harassment and Mental Distress among Adolescent Female Students by Sexual Identity and BMI or Perceived Weight Status

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BACKGROUND

- Adolescent sexual minority girls are at greater risk of overweight or obesity than adolescent heterosexual girls.
- Concordantly, adolescents who are sexual minorities or with overweight or obese body mass indices (BMIs) experience elevated rates of bullying and harassment and associated mental distress.
 - Sexual minority girls are more frequently harassed and report more depression than heterosexual girls.
 - Bullying and harassment related to body size may occur at greater rates for girls than boys.
 - An individual's perception of their weight may also influence their experiences of harassment and mental distress.

CURRENT STUDY

The current study uses nationally representative data from the female sub-sample (n=7,757) of the **2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey** to examine whether sexual minority females with overweight BMIs or who perceive themselves to be overweight may experience double jeopardy for harassment and mental distress. Our research questions were:

- How do harassment and mental distress indicators vary across body size and sexual identity among adolescent females?
- How do harassment and mental distress indicators vary across weight perception and sexual identity among adolescent females?

METHODS

We created two independent, four-level combination predictor variables:

Sexual Identity/ BMI Group

Heterosexual/ Normal Weight

Heterosexual Identity
5th ≤ BMI < 85th percentile

Sexual Minority/ Normal Weight

Lesbian or Bisexual Identity
5th ≤ BMI < 85th percentile

Heterosexual/ Overweight

Heterosexual Identity
BMI ≥ 85th percentile

Sexual Minority/ Overweight

Lesbian or Bisexual Identity
BMI ≥ 85th percentile

Sexual Identity/ Perceived Weight Status Group

Heterosexual/ Perceived Right Weight

Heterosexual Identity
Perception: "About the right weight"

Sexual Minority/ Perceived Right Weight

Lesbian or Bisexual Identity
Perception: "About the right weight"

Heterosexual/ Perceived Overweight

Heterosexual Identity
Perception: "Slightly" or "very overweight"

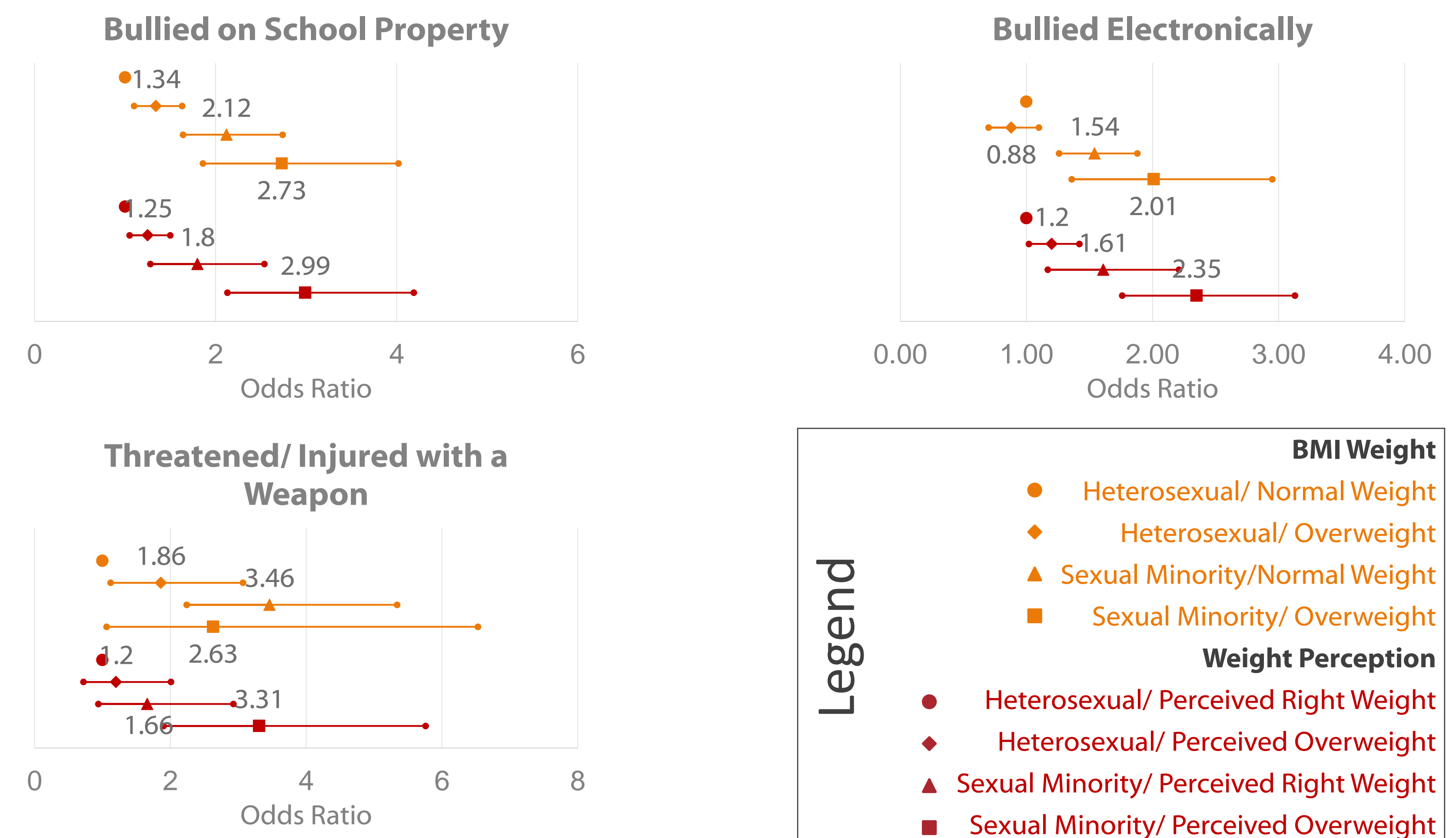
Sexual Minority/ Perceived Overweight

Lesbian or Bisexual Identity
Perception: "Slightly" or "very overweight"

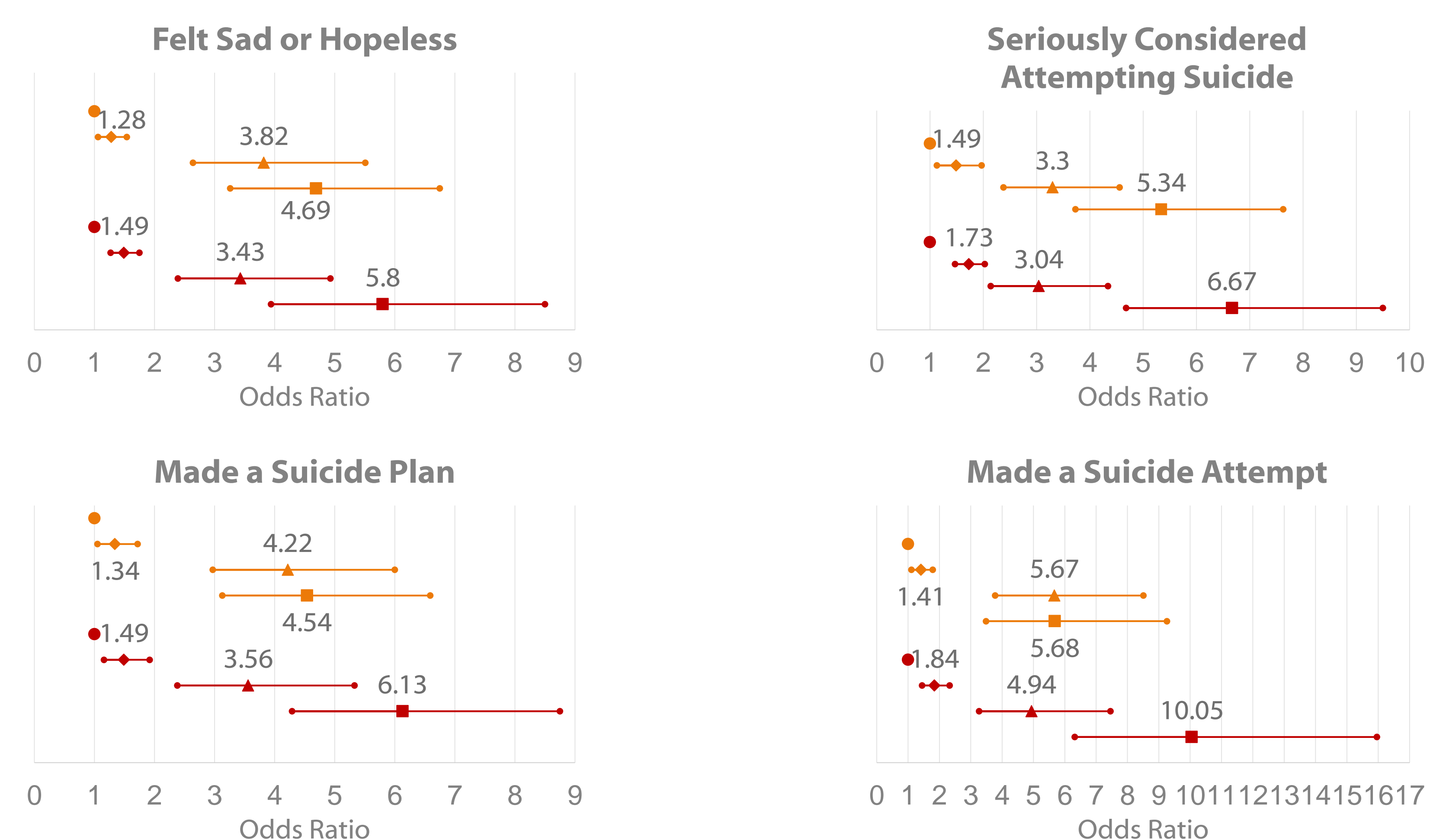
We created seven, binary dependent variables. Three based on measures of harassment: (1) **bullied on school property**, (2) **bullied electronically**, and (3) **threatened or injured with a weapon on school property**; and four based on measures of mental distress: (1) **felt sad or hopeless**, (2) **seriously considered attempting suicide**, (3) **made a suicide plan**, and (4) **made a suicide attempt**. Then, we used a series of multivariable logistic regression models to estimate adjusted odds ratios (AORs) for associations across the independent variable groups for the harassment and mental distress outcomes, controlling for race/ ethnicity and age. In these comparisons, **Heterosexual/ Normal Weight** and **Heterosexual/ Perceived Right Weight** served as the referent groups. Additional post-hoc logistic regression analyses changed the referent to other groups (see **Handout A** for full results tables).

RESULTS

Harassment



Mental Distress



SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Overweight BMI was associated with increased bullying and mental distress among heterosexual females; however, **regardless of weight status, sexual minority females were more likely to experience bullying and mental distress than heterosexual females**. Across sexual identity/ perceived weight status groups, **sexual minority females who perceived themselves as overweight were more likely to report mental distress** than all other groups. Professional development may be needed to enable school staff to foster a supportive climate for sexual minority and female students with overweight BMIs, and suicide prevention efforts may be improved by addressing positive identity and body image with adolescent girls.

CONTACT INFO

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