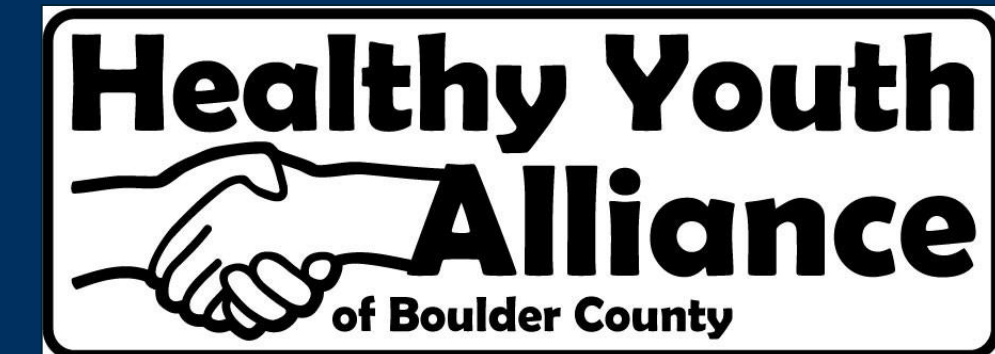


# Hard Numbers: An Analysis of Harassment of LGBTQ Youth in Boulder County, Colorado

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## Introduction

Research reveals health disparities between youth who self-identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning (LGBQ) and those who identify as being heterosexual.<sup>1</sup> Literature also suggests that LGBQ youth experience higher rates of harassment.<sup>2</sup>

In 1991, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) developed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) to monitor health risk and preventive behaviors among youth.<sup>3</sup> However, sexual orientation data are not widely collected via the YRBS. The national survey does not contain a sexual orientation question, and only a few state and local surveys have one.<sup>4</sup>

Since 2003, the Boulder County, Colorado, YRBS has included a question on sexual orientation, allowing for the exploration of these disparities. Thus, the YRBS initiative in Boulder County (a county of 294,000 that is 15% rural)<sup>5</sup> illuminates local social injustice by providing seldom-quantified data linking sexual orientation and harassment.

## Methods

A two-stage cluster design without replacement was used for sample selection. The sampling frames were regular Boulder County public high schools and classrooms. There were 2,491 usable surveys for an overall response rate of 77%.

The 2009 Boulder County high school YRBS questionnaire consisted of 108 questions from the CDC's national YRBS standard and optional questionnaires, as well as questions from other YRBS instruments.<sup>6-9</sup>

The survey was administered in November 2009 through a collaborative effort among Boulder County's two school districts, community organizations, and its public health department.

Surveys were weighted by grade and gender and are representative of the surveyed schools in the county. The data were also adjusted for student non-response.

Data were analyzed in SAS<sup>®</sup> v9.2 and SUDAAN<sup>®</sup> v10.0.1.<sup>10, 11</sup> Prevalence estimates and 95% confidence intervals were calculated. Chi-square tests were used to determine statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) by sexual orientation.

## Results

Weighted demographics of the survey population are shown in Figure 1. Among these students, 9.3% identified as being LGBQ.

Figures 2 through 5 show prevalence estimates with 95% confidence intervals of harassment and violence measures stratified by sexual orientation. Compared to heterosexual students, LGBQ students had significantly higher prevalence rates of harassment-related experiences.

## Demographics

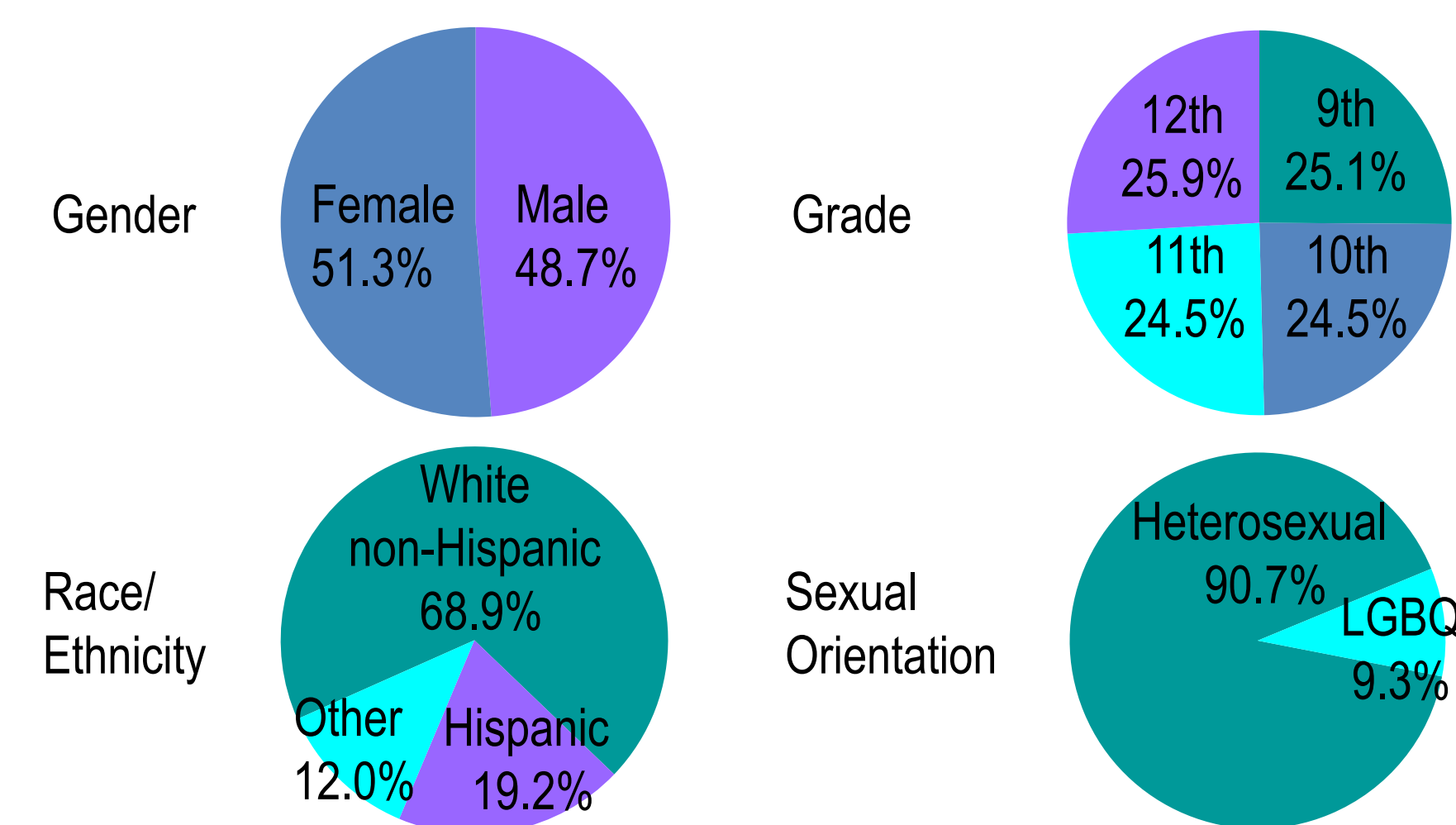


Figure 1. Demographics of Boulder County high school YRBS population, 2009.

## Harassment

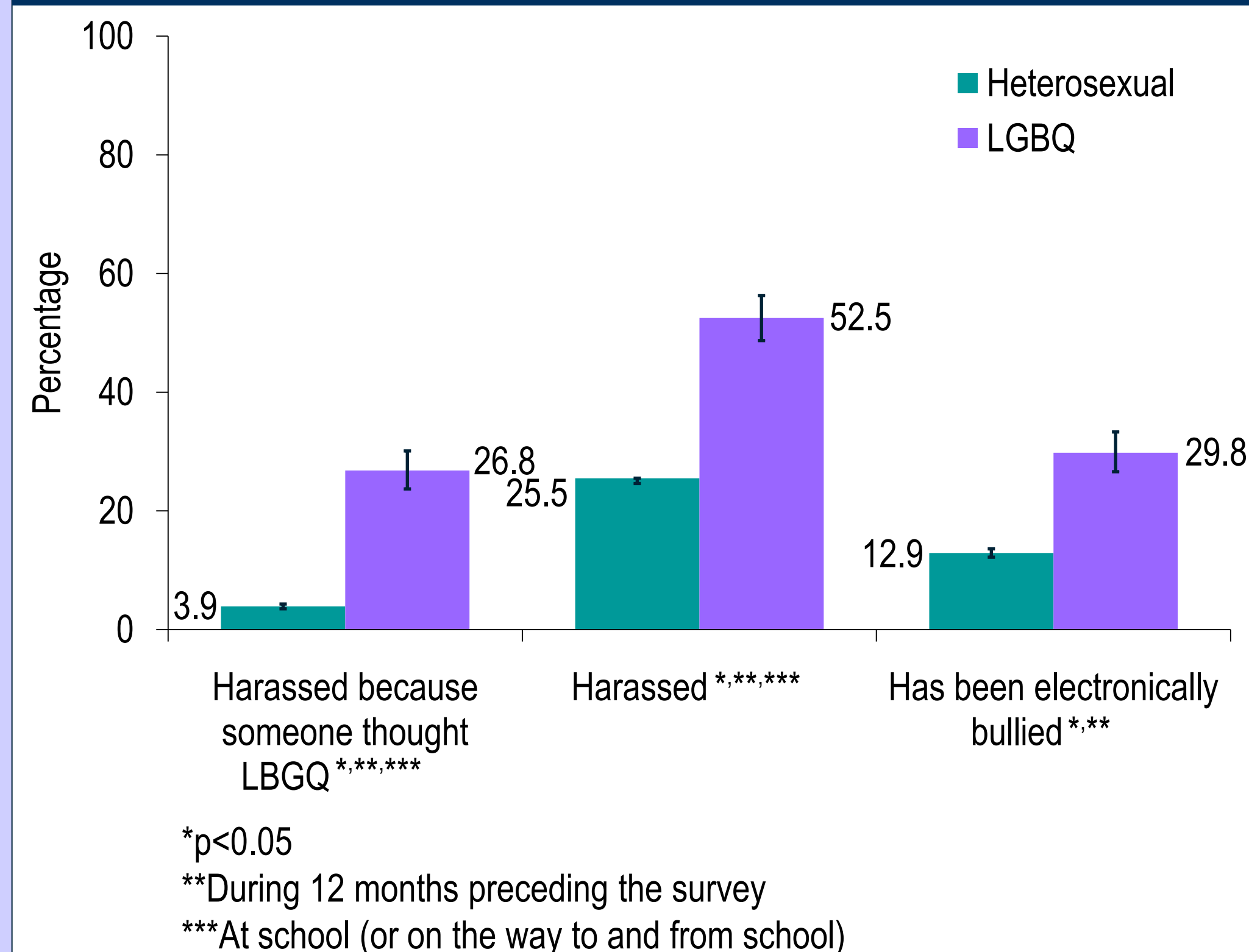


Figure 2. Prevalence of harassment among Boulder County high school students by sexual orientation, 2009.

## Safety

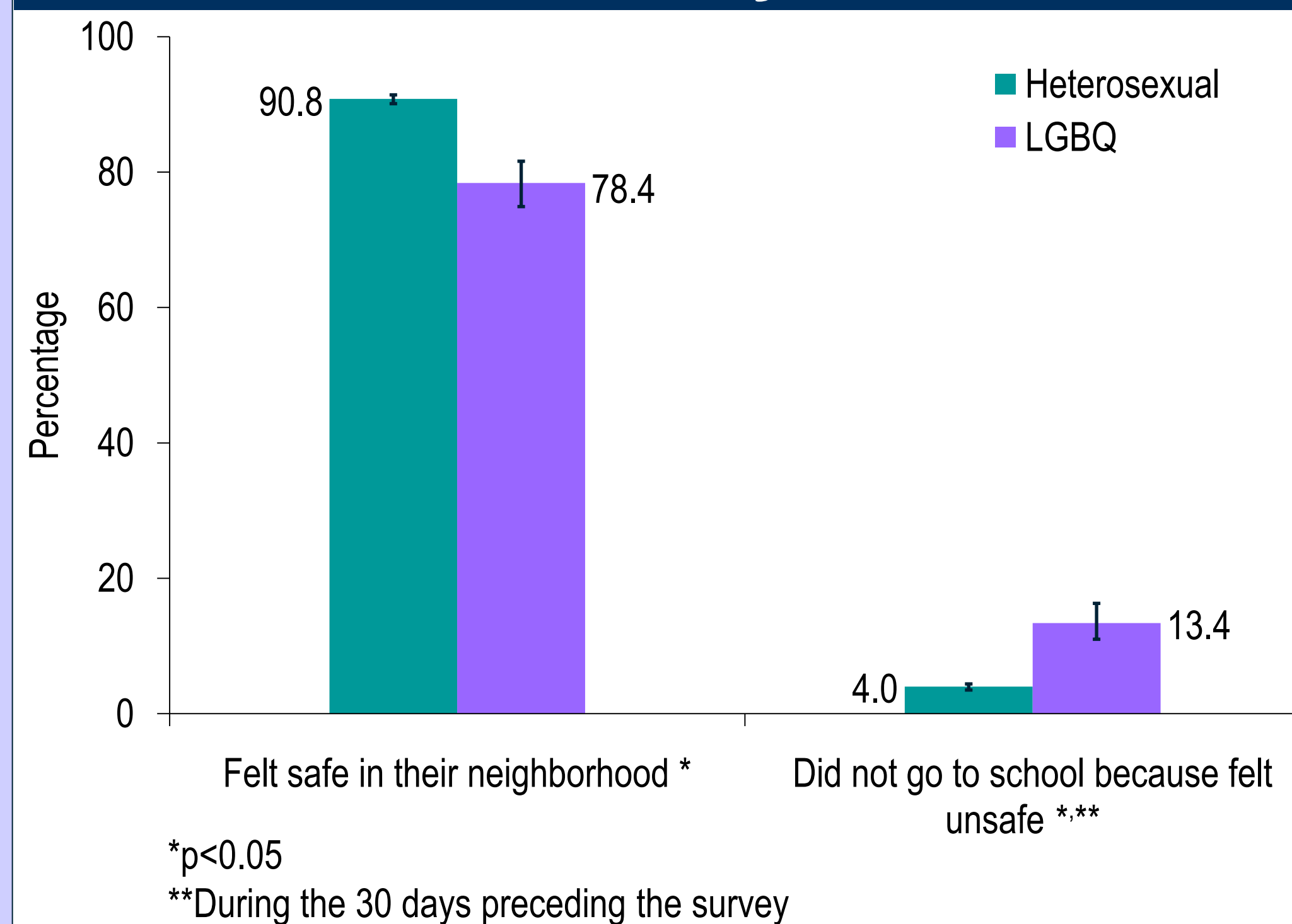


Figure 3. Prevalence of personal safety among Boulder County high school students by sexual orientation, 2009.

## Physical Violence

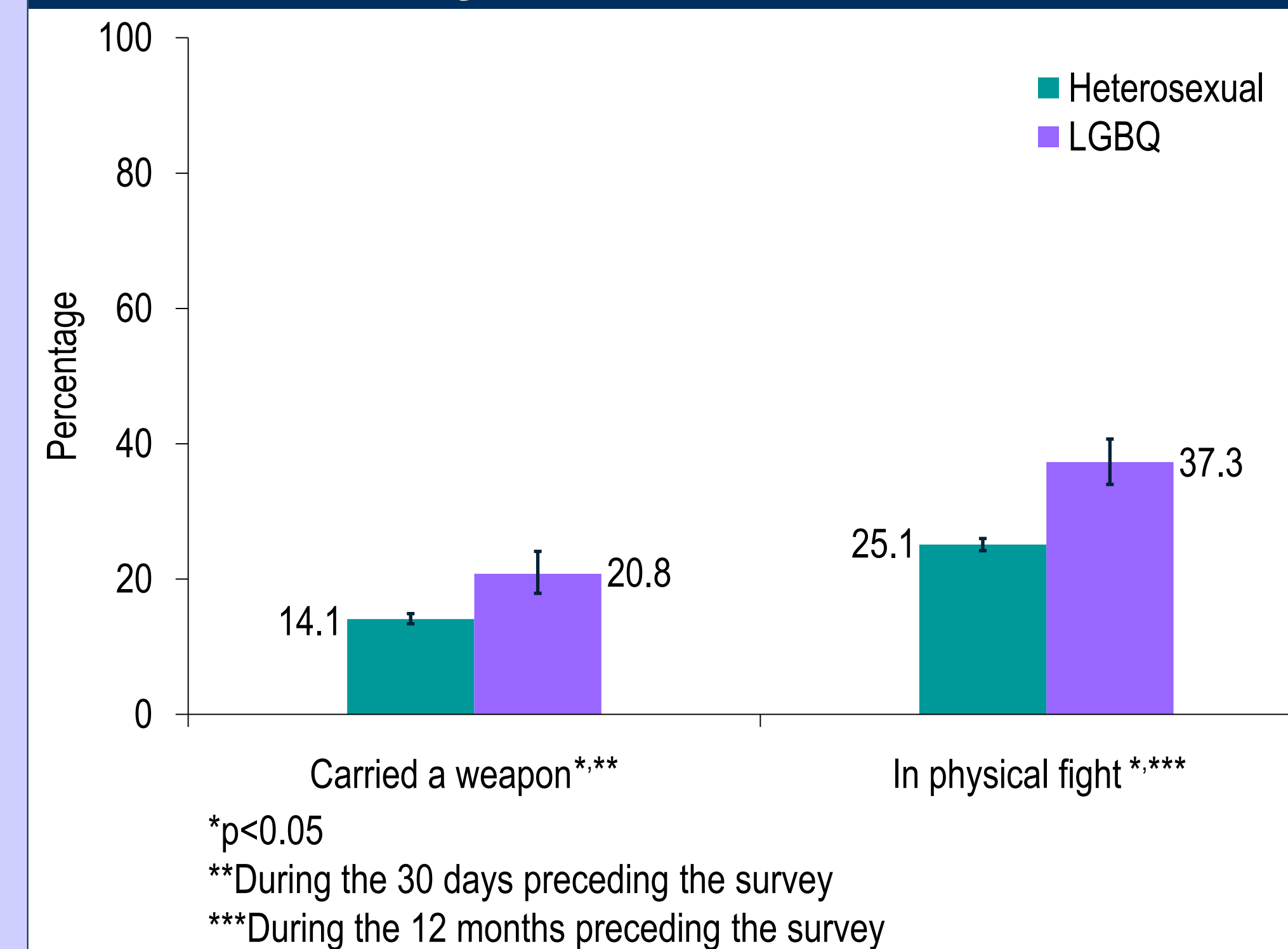


Figure 4. Prevalence of physical violence among Boulder County high school students by sexual orientation, 2009.

## Sexual Violence

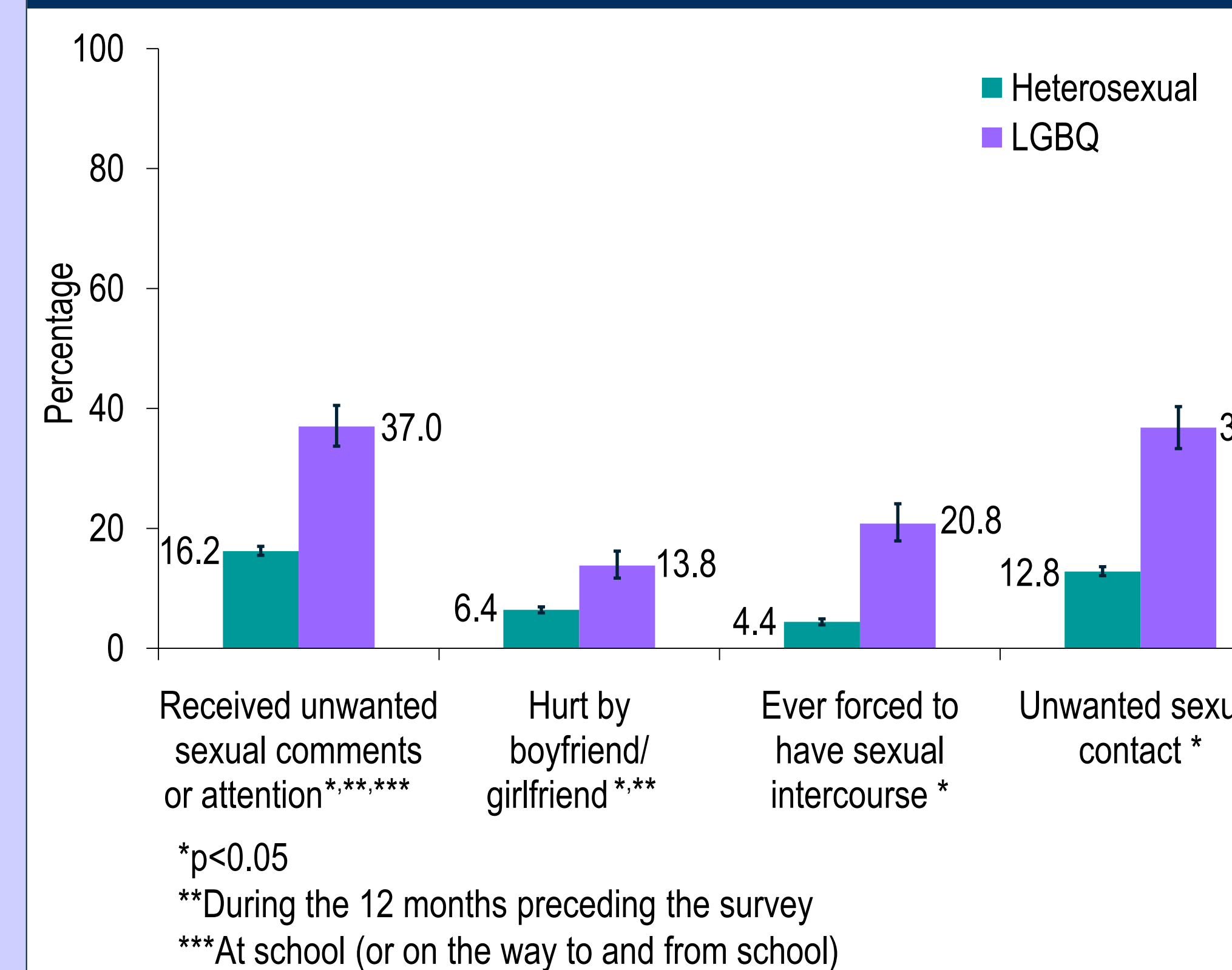


Figure 5. Prevalence of sexual violence among Boulder County high school students by sexual orientation, 2009.

## Conclusions

This analysis shows that LGBQ youth have much higher prevalence rates of harassment and violence victimization than do their heterosexual counterparts. It reinforces the need to implement interventions in schools and in the community to mitigate these disparities.

The Boulder County YRBS allows for analysis by sexual orientation and is a representative sample of Boulder County high school students.

The analysis is unadjusted and does not include youth who are enrolled in the county's alternative high schools or are not enrolled in school.

## Recommendations

As shown by these results, harassment of LGBQ youth is pervasive, and interventions are needed that:

- Implement evidence-based strategies starting in elementary school.
- Implement integrated, permeating programs that promote community and school climate change.
- Focus on systemic (vs. individual) violence.
- Provide LGBQ youth support services.
- Define sexual orientation-based violence as chronic (vs. episodic).
- Collect LGBQ data.

### Model Program

Boulder County Public Health uses these YRBS data to guide its OASOS\* program, which addresses harassment of LGBQ youth through support, advocacy, and education.

OASOS collaborates with the community to advocate for LGBQ youth and their families.

It also develops, implements, and enforces non-discrimination policies in local and state academic, government, and community organizations.

In addition, the program offers crisis intervention and support services to LGBQ youth and the adults in their lives.



\* OASOS - Open and Affirming Sexual Orientation and gender identity Support

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