

Hazing in K-12 Education

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Introduction

ABSTRACT

This poster presentation describes the presence of hazing behaviors in the K-12 school environment, its prevalence, the impact on students and strategies to address it. Various authors suggest zero-tolerance policies as an approach to confront hazing practices, however, such policies in schools have been eliminated by multiple states, including Illinois. The arguments in favor and against zero tolerance policies are outlined. This project seeks to encapsulate current hazing concerns in K-12 education and provide recommendations to consider in future interventions and research.

PROJECT SIGNIFICANCE

Hazing is frequently associated and portrayed as an issue impacting college-aged individuals, typically within a fraternity or sports team environment.

This notion may overshadow or erase the stories of students in K-12 schools who also experience hazing and deserve to have them recognized as such.

Definition, Prevalence & Impact

HAZING DEFINED

"Hazing is often viewed as ritualistic harassment, abuse, or humiliation requiring individuals to perform meaningless tasks as a way of initiating them into some type of social group"

(Essex, 2014)

"Hazing is any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them regardless of a person's willingness to participate"

(StopHazing.org)

"Subtle hazing involves behavior that emphasizes a power imbalance between new members and other members of the group. It typically involves activities or attitudes that breach reasonable standards of mutual respect"

(Essex, 2014)



KEY ASPECTS OF HAZING:

- Expected and often ritualized activity to obtain group membership
- Power imbalance between new and existing members
- Components of embarrassment and humiliation

Hazing extends beyond athletics and can occur in any organization (i.e. band, choir, etc.)

PREVALENCE

25% of young people were hazed before age 13

47% of students were hazed before they entered college

22% of students report that a coach or advisor was involved in hazing activities

(Essex, 2014, p.236-237)

Gershel et al. (2003) surveyed over 1,000 adolescent athletes in 6-12 grade within three suburban New York City school districts and found...

- 17.4% experienced hazing practices
- No difference in frequency by gender
- Experienced across sports and grade levels
- 13.3% of 6th graders reported hazing
- Boys more likely to experience a physical act

IMPACT OF HAZING

- Bodily injury (i.e. alcohol poisoning from binge drinking, bruising, bleeding); *possibility that severe injuries could result in death*
- Psychological and/or emotional harm
- Lawsuits and liability for those involved
- Distrust among group members (*the exact opposite of hazing's supposed intention*)

(StopHazing.org)



Explore
The Illinois Hazing Statute
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 720 ILCS  
 Sec. 12C-50.  
 Hazing  
 ✕

# How to Address Hazing?

## Awareness & Education

- Further training and education for school personnel to recognize hazing behaviors and intervene
- Educate students about hazing and teach them bystander intervention skills to address their peers



- Joint effort and ownership of the problem among members of the school community (school administration, parents, teachers)
- "we must engage in deep and hard conversations both in school and in the larger community about the meanings of masculinity and the ways in which it is expressed" (Stein, 1999, p. 51)

## Community & Culture



## Policy

- Clearly define what hazing is and how school districts will address incidents
- There is discussion whether zero tolerance policies are effective and should be implemented to address hazing concerns





## Recommendations

- More studies and scholars should weigh in on strategies to address hazing in the K-12 school environment and clarify what is best practice
- Upcoming studies should reflect current laws eliminating zero-tolerance policies in schools and present alternative strategies to combat hazing
- The potential role of teachers, faculty and other school staff in challenging and changing the cultural narrative surrounding initiation rituals and hazing should be considered

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## Reference List

## Hazing in K-12 Education: Academic Poster Reflection

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When news broke about a hazing investigation at my high school, like most parents, students, and community members, I was shocked at the possibility of something of that nature occurring where I grew up and went to school. My perception was hazing was mostly an issue among male college student athletes or fraternity members, and this possible incident at Niles North was shocking because of its rarity. When discussing potential topics for my James Scholar Project with Carol Wilson-Smith, it surprised me when she mentioned hazing at the K-12 level happens all the time. This piqued my interest in researching hazing experiences and prevention efforts at elementary, middle and high schools.

Initially, it was difficult finding sources related to hazing occurring during an individual's K-12 education; most of the scholarly articles focused on hazing among college-aged students. The Essex (2014) piece provided a brief overview of hazing, focusing heavily on the necessity of school officials to prevent and intervene with hazing because of a school's potential liability when these incidents occur. Furthermore, the article discussed solutions to hazing. The solutions included the school community taking responsibility to address hazing, zero-tolerance policies, and mandating student reports when a hazing incident occurs. In order to best implement the student reporting system, Essex (2014) recommends school administrators create and promote a channel for students to communicate concerns. The major goal of these strategies is to ensure student safety. A school environment should promote a safe atmosphere where students mutually respect one another's worth and dignity. This sentiment was almost perfectly echoed by Niles North's superintendent, "[what] we want everyone to take away from this is to reinforce how critical it is that each member of our school community treats each other with the respect and dignity that we all deserve" (Isaacs, 2017). Considering respect and dignity of others is a core value of social work, I appreciate this being highlighted as something important and something that should be present across institutions, and I believe most people would agree that mutual respect and dignity among students or any group of people is desirable. It is one thing to make a public statement about these community standards; however, I wonder how Niles North plans to reinforce respect and dignity on a day-to-day basis and what adjustments will be made. It is one thing to say these were the takeaways of this event, but what will change in the school environment or with student interactions? I believe to practically employ respect and dignity in the school environment the school as a whole—students, teachers and administration—will need to be on the same page about the definitions of these terms, when these standards are being violated and how to address such instances. Without a structure in place, everyone in the school environment will be acting on their own personal definitions and values about respect and dignity, leaving the actual expectations unclear.

During the course of my research, the studies I could find in my desired age-group, K-12 students, explored hazing and team sports. In one study, Gershel et al. (2003) conducted a survey among approximately 1,000 middle school and high school-aged athletes regarding their experience with team hazing. Beyond the amount of student athletes they found to have experienced hazing across age, gender and sport-type, one especially interesting finding was the

lack of students who would identify their experiences as hazing. Gershel et al. highlighted one major reason why the teenagers in their study did not identify their experiences as hazing—not knowing what hazing was (2003, p. 335). If an individual does not have a clear definition of hazing in mind, it will be difficult for them to identify that as their experience. Stein's (1999) article also seemed to focus on the sports arena for this age group, and mainly discussed the impact gender and masculinity has on the continued practice of hazing within athletics. Additionally, she took a strong stance against zero-tolerance policies and the modern tendency to couple hazing with "bullying." These studies did not offer insight into the hazing which occurs within other group/organization settings during middle or high school. Something I tried to emphasize throughout my poster presentation, even though I included this athletic article, was hazing occurs across groups and is not strictly tied to the athletic environment.

One thing I found a bit difficult during this process was deciding what I wanted to highlight on the presentation. I felt as though I had to restrain myself to not put absolutely everything on the e-poster and focus on the core information. In addition to what I have on my e-poster, I would have liked to have provided a space specifically dedicated to news story links about hazing incidents in K-12 schools to further illustrate its prevalence. I believe it was very powerful when Essex (2014) devoted a part of his paper to demonstrate this point; however, in that particular paper, the focus was on incidents where lawsuits were filed against educators. I think it would provide the same powerful message to my audience to have included this and to emphasize the frequency and nature of the hazing incidents among high school and middle school students. I would also want to delve more into Stein's (1999) emphasis on gender and the role masculinity plays in these behaviors. I believe a topic of this nature may be more suited for a dialogue than an informative poster.

In the future, I hope there are more studies and articles published regarding the hazing experience of younger adolescents, and these studies can help inform schools and communities about the best practice to address hazing. Future studies should take into account the movement of multiple states to ban zero tolerance policies in schools when it comes to their recommendations for best practice. School faculty, parents, students and community members need to gain a greater awareness of this problem within this age group. Hazing should be discussed, defined, and assistance for students clarified at Niles North High School and across all schools.

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