

GLBTQ Youth

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender* and questioning (GLBTQ) youth face tremendous difficulties in a society where heterosexuality often seems the only acceptable orientation, homosexuality is regarded as deviant, and variation from cultural concepts of “normal gender” often evokes hostility or violence. Research shows that homophobia and heterosexism greatly contribute to GLBTQ youth’s high rates of attempted and completed suicide, violence victimization, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and HIV-associated risky behaviors. However, some programs offer GLBTQ youth the skills and support they need to develop into healthy adults.

Awareness of Sexual Orientation and Gender Comes Early.

- Research suggests that sexual orientation is likely determined during early childhood.² Prospective studies indicate that many gay and lesbian youth self-identify at about age 16, and that their first awareness of homosexual attraction occurred at about age nine for males and 10 for females.²
- Awareness of the biological differences between boys and girls occurs by age three. Regarding gender identity—a person’s innate sense of maleness or femaleness—transgender people report experiencing conflict over their gender assignment throughout childhood and adolescence.³
- Same-sex sexual behavior may be more common among adolescents than among adults, although few teens define themselves as lesbian or gay. These youth may fear rejection and discrimination or they may be uncertain of their sexual orientation. In a representative sample of 1,067 teens, for example, only one youth self-identified as gay although five percent had engaged in same-sex sexual behavior.²

Open GLBTQ Identity Can Mean Family Rejection and Make School Dangerous.

- After coming out to their family or being discovered, many GLBTQ youth are thrown out of their home, mistreated, or made the focus of their family’s dysfunction.⁴
- Service providers estimate that 25 to 40 percent of homeless youth may be GLBTQ.² These rates may be conservative since many GLBTQ youth fear disclosing their orientation or gender identity.^{2,3}
- In one nationwide survey, over 84 percent of GLBTQ students reported verbal harassment at school. Over 39 percent of all gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth reported being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon at school because of their sexual orientation while 55 percent of transgender youth reported physical attacks because of their gender identity or gender expression.⁵
- The consequences of physical and verbal abuse directed at GLBTQ students include truancy, dropping out of school, poor grades, and having to repeat a grade. In one study, 28 percent of gay and bisexual youth dropped out of school due to peer harassment.⁴

GLBTQ Youth of Color Face Additional Challenges.

- Unlike racial stereotypes that family and ethnic community can positively reframe, many ethnic minority communities reinforce negative cultural perceptions of homosexuality.²
- Up to 46 percent of GLBTQ youth of color report experiencing physical violence related to their sexual orientation.⁵ Nearly 45 percent of youth in one survey were verbally harassed in school regarding sexual orientation and race/ethnicity.⁵
- Even though past traditions often affirmed fluid gender expression and/or homosexuality, many GLBTQ youth in modern Native American communities face humiliation and violence because of their sexual orientation and/or gender expression.^{2,6,7}
- In many Latino communities, *machismo* and Catholicism contribute to homophobic attitudes that hamper efforts to reach Latino gay and bisexual youth with HIV prevention information.⁸

* An umbrella term for all who challenge the boundaries of biological sex and culturally determined gender expression; those who choose not to conform to their culture’s gender norms, including transsexuals, cross dressers, Two-Spirit people, drag performers, and people who do not identify with their biological sex.¹

- Asian American and Pacific Islander GLBTQ youth often feel that they have shamed their families when they diverge from cultural expectations to marry and have children.⁷
- African American GLBTQ youth often face rejection by both white gay communities and homophobic black communities.⁹

GLBTQ Youth Lack Positive Role Models, Use Substances to Help Cope.

- Positive community support and role models for GLBTQ adolescents are minimal, and many adults fear discrimination, job loss, and abuse if they openly support GLBTQ youth.¹⁰
- Many GLBTQ youth report relying on television to learn what it means to be lesbian or gay. In one study, 80 percent of these youth ages 14 to 17 believed media stereotypes that depicted gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine. Half believed that all homosexual people were unhappy.²
- GLBTQ youth often internalize negative societal messages regarding sexual orientation and suffer from self-hatred as well as from social and emotional isolation. They may use substances to manage stigma and shame, to deny same-sex sexual feelings, and/or as a defense against ridicule and violence.²
- Studies of high school students found that those who suffered harassment because of their real or perceived sexual orientation were more likely than non-harassed youth to use crack cocaine, cocaine, anabolic steroids, and inhalants.^{11,12}

GLBTQ Youth may Take Sexual Risks and/or Attempt Suicide.

- Studies establish links between attempting suicide and gender nonconformity, early awareness of sexual orientation, stress, violence, lack of support, school dropout, family problems, homelessness, and substance use.¹³
- In a recent survey, 33 percent of gay, lesbian, and bisexual high school students reported attempting suicide in the previous year, compared to eight percent of their heterosexual peers;¹⁴ in another study, gay and bisexual males were nearly four times more likely to attempt suicide than were their straight peers.¹⁵
- In one study of 15- to 22-year-old men who have sex with men, 23 percent reported having had at least five male sex partners in the past six months and 41 percent reported unprotected anal sex. Seventeen percent of men of mixed race/ethnicity and black background were HIV-infected, as were 14 percent of African Americans/blacks, 13 percent of men of mixed race/ethnicity, and seven percent of Hispanics. HIV prevalence among whites and Asian Americans was three percent each.¹⁶
- In one study, nearly 17 percent of bisexual women reported unprotected vaginal or anal sex with a man during the last two months.¹⁷

Some Positive Trends Exist.

- In one recent poll, more than half of adults supported protecting the civil rights of GLBTQ people.¹⁸ In another survey, 95 percent of youth supported expanding current hate crimes laws to cover gender and sexual orientation.¹⁹
- A recent study of GLBTQ youth who received gay-sensitive HIV prevention education in school showed they engaged in less risky sexual behavior than similar youth who did not receive such instruction.²⁰

References

- ¹ Lambda Legal and National Youth Advocacy Coalition. *Bending the Mold: An Action Kit for Transgender Youth*. New York, NY: Lambda Legal; Washington, DC: NYAC, [2005].
- ² Ryan C, Futterman D. *Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling*. [Adolescent Medicine State-of-the-Art Reviews; v.8, no. 2] Philadelphia: Hanley & Belfus, 1997.
- ³ Mallon GP, editor. *Social Services with Transgendered Youth*. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1999.
- ⁴ Savin-Williams RC. Verbal and physical abuse as stressors in the lives of lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: associations with school problems, running away, substance abuse, prostitution, and suicide. *J Consult Clin Psychol* 1994; 62:261-69.
- ⁵ Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. *The 2003 National School Climate Survey: The School Related Experiences of Our Nation's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth*. New York, NY: GLSEN, 2004.
- ⁶ Day SM. American Indians: reclaiming cultural and sexual identity. *SIECUS Report* 1995; 23(3):6-7.
- ⁷ Wade S *et al*. Cultural expectations and experiences: three views. *Open Hands* 1991 (Winter):9-10.
- ⁸ United States Conference of Mayors. *HIV Prevention Programs Targeting Gay/Bisexual Men of Color*. [HIV Education Case Studies] Washington, DC: The Conference, 1996.
- ⁹ Pittman KJ *et al*. Making sexuality education and prevention programs relevant for African American youth. *J Sch Health* 1992; 62:339-44.
- ¹⁰ Morrow DF. Social work with gay and lesbian adolescents. *Social Work* 1993; 38:655-60.
- ¹¹ Garofalo R *et al*. The association between health risk behaviors and sexual orientation among a school-based sample of adolescents. *Pediatrics* 1998; 101:895-902.
- ¹² California Safe Schools Coalition. *Safe Place to Learn: Consequences of Harassment Based on Actual or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Non-Conformity and Steps for Making Schools Safer*. San Francisco, CA: The Coalition, 2004.
- ¹³ Remafedi G. Sexual orientation and youth suicide. *JAMA* 1999; 282:1291.
- ¹⁴ Massachusetts Dept. of Education. *Massachusetts High School Students and Sexual Orientation: Results of the 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey*. Boston, MA: The Dept. 1999.
- ¹⁵ Garofalo R *et al*. Sexual orientation and risk of suicide attempts among a representative sample of youth. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 1999;153:487-93.
- ¹⁶ Valleroy LA *et al*. HIV prevalence and associated risks in young men who have sex with men. *JAMA* 2000; 284:198-204.
- ¹⁷ Norman AD *et al*. Lesbian and bisexual women in small cities: at risk for HIV? *Public Health Reports* 1996; 111:347-52.
- ¹⁸ Human Rights Campaign. *Greenberg Poll Finds Americans Increasingly Support Equal Rights for Gays and Lesbians*. Washington, DC: The Campaign, 1996.
- ¹⁹ MTV. *Fight for Your Rights, Take a Stand Against Violence: MTV Nationwide Poll*. New York: MTV, 1999.
- ²⁰ Blake SM *et al*. Preventing sexual risk behaviors among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents: the benefits of gay-sensitive HIV instruction in schools. *Amer J Public Health* 2001; 91:940-46.



Written by Meg Earls

Revised edition, July 2005 © Advocates for Youth