

# GLBTQ Youth: At Risk and Underserved

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender\* and questioning (GLBTQ) youth face tremendous difficulties in a society where heterosexuality often seems the only acceptable orientation, and homosexuality is regarded as deviant. 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. In recent years, some programs offer GLBTQ youth the skills and support they need to develop into healthy adults.

## Awareness of Sexual Orientation Comes Early.

- Research suggests that sexual orientation is likely determined during early childhood.<sup>2</sup>
- 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.<sup>2</sup>
- Same-sex sexual behavior is more common among adolescents than among adults although few adolescents are likely to label themselves as lesbian or gay. They are fearful of rejection and discrimination and also may be uncertain or unaware 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.<sup>2</sup> Because many youth do not self-identify as gay, experts say it is important to talk about specific same-sex sexual behaviors rather than sexual orientation when discussing sexual risk taking.<sup>3</sup>

## Open GLBT Identity Can Mean Family Rejection and Can Make School Dangerous.

- After coming out to their family, or being discovered, many GLBT youth are thrown out of their home or mistreated or made the focus of the family's dysfunction.<sup>4</sup>
- Service providers estimate that 25 to 40 percent of homeless youth may be GLBT.<sup>2</sup> These rates may be conservative since many GLBT youth hide their orientation out of fear.<sup>2</sup>
- In one nationwide survey, over 83 percent of GLBT students reported verbal harassment at school. Seventy-four percent of transgender students reported sexual harassment. Over 21 percent of all GLBT youth reported being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon at school because of their sexual orientation.<sup>5</sup>
- The consequences of physical and verbal abuse directed at GLBT 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.<sup>4</sup>

## GLBT 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.<sup>2</sup>
- Up to 46 percent of GLBT youth of color experience physical violence related to sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup> Over 48 percent of youth in one survey were verbally harassed in school regarding sexual orientation and race/ethnicity.<sup>5</sup>
- Even though past traditions often affirmed homosexuality, many GLBT youth in modern Native American communities face humiliation and violence because of their sexual orientation.<sup>2,6,7</sup>
- 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.<sup>8</sup>
- Asian American and Pacific Islander GLBT youth often feel that they have shamed their families when they diverge from cultural expectations to marry and have children.<sup>7</sup>
- African American GLBT youth often face discrimination from white gay communities and rejection from homophobic black communities.<sup>9</sup>

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

- Positive community support and role models for GLBT adolescents are minimal, and many adults fear discrimination, job loss, and abuse if they openly support GLBT youth.<sup>10</sup>
- Many GLBTQ youth report relying on television to learn what it means to be lesbian or gay. In one study, 80 percent of GLBT youth ages 14 to 17 believed common media stereotypes depicting gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine. Half believed that all homosexual people were unhappy.<sup>2</sup>
- GLBT youth often internalize negative societal messages regarding sexual orientation and suffer from self-hatred as well as social and emotional isolation. They may resort to substance use in attempts to manage stigma and shame, to deny same-sex sexual feelings, or as a defense against ridicule and violence.<sup>2</sup>
- A study of public high school students found that GLB students were significantly more likely to use crack cocaine, cocaine, anabolic steroids, and inhalants than were their heterosexual peers.<sup>11</sup>

## GLBT Youth Are in Danger of Attempting Suicide and Taking Sexual Risks.

- 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.<sup>12</sup>
- In a recent survey, 33 percent of GLB high school students reported attempting suicide in the previous year, compared to eight percent of their heterosexual peers;<sup>13</sup> in another study, gay and bisexual males were nearly four times more likely to attempt suicide.<sup>14</sup>
- In one study of 15- to 22-year-old men who have sex with men, 90 percent reported sex with at least one man, and 23 percent, with at least five men, in the previous six months. Overall, 41 percent reported unprotected anal sex; 17 percent of men of mixed race/ethnicity who reported black background were HIV-infected. HIV prevalence was also higher among African Americans (14 percent), men of mixed or other race/ethnicity (13 percent), and Hispanics (seven percent) than among whites or Asian Americans (three percent each).<sup>15</sup>
- In one study, nearly 17 percent of bisexual women reported unprotected vaginal or anal sex with a man during the last two months.<sup>16</sup>

## But Some Positive Trends Exist.

- In a recent poll, more than half of adults supported protecting the civil rights of GLBT people.<sup>17</sup> In another survey, 95 percent of youth supported expanding current hate crimes laws to cover gender and sexual orientation.<sup>18</sup>
- A recent study of GLBT 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.<sup>19</sup>

\* Transgender individuals manifest characteristics, behaviors, or self-expression which, in their own or others' perceptions, are commonly associated with persons of a different gender.<sup>1</sup>

## References

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