Suicidal Behavior among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

Suicidal Behavior among LGBT Youth

Because no reliable data exist, we do not know whether LGBT youth die by suicide more frequently than their straight peers. Sexual orientation and gender identity are not included on death certificates so aggregated national death data do not include this information. In addition, many LGBT youth do not disclose this information to family members and friends; as a result, sexual orientation and gender identity often do not show up in psychological autopsy interviews. While many studies find that more LGBT youth think about and attempt suicide than their straight counterparts, most LGBT youth do not attempt suicide.

- Many studies have found that LGB youth attempt suicide more frequently than straight peers. Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found LGB high school students were more than twice as likely as their straight peers to have attempted suicide. A study by Hatzenbuehler (2011) found that LGB youth were over five times more likely than their straight peers to have attempted suicide in the past 12 months.

- Numerous studies confirm that LGB youth have higher rates of suicidal ideation than their straight peers; for example, the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that youth who self-identified as GLB or reported any same-sex sexual contact were more than three times more likely to report having seriously considered suicide in the last year (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). A study by Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that 47.3% of GB adolescent boys and 72.9% of LB adolescent girls reported suicidal ideation, compared with 34.7% of non-GB adolescent boys and 53% of non-LB adolescent girls.

- Little research has been done about transgender individuals, but in one study of adults and young adults, 30.1 percent of transgender individuals reported having ever attempted suicide (Kenagy, 2005). Evidence from another study found that one fourth of transgender youth reported suicide attempts (Grossman and D’Augelli, 2007). For US adults overall, 4.6 percent of adults and young adults report having ever attempted (Kessler et al., 1999).

Risk and Protective Factors among LGBT Youth

LGBT youth share many risk factors for suicide with straight youth, but have additional risk factors and often more severe risk factors. It is important to note that being an LGBT individual is not a risk factor in and of itself; however, the stressors that LGBT individuals encounter — such as discrimination and harassment — are associated with suicidal behavior and risk factors for suicide.

- A key risk factor for suicide death is previous attempts, and LGB youth attempt more frequently than non-LGB youth. All attempts should be taken seriously, and youth who have attempted need follow-up care.

- Most people who die by suicide have a mental illness and/or a substance use disorder. Fergusson et al. (1999) found that LGB youth had higher rates of major depression, anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, and co-occurring psychiatric disorders than their straight peers.

- D’Augelli (2002) found high rates of victimization among LGB youth from community settings: more than three quarters reported verbal abuse and about one in seven reported physical attacks, and victimized youth reported more mental health problems. Several studies linked bullying in school to suicidal behavior in LGB youth, particularly those youth with cross-gender appearance, traits, or behaviors or who expressed their sexual orientation at an early age (Haas et al., 2011).

- Hatzenbuehler (2011) demonstrated the importance of positive social environments, defined by factors such as gay-straight alliances and school policies to protect LGB students. He found that the risk of attempting suicide was 20%
greater for LGB youth in negative social environments than those in positive social environments. In comparison, for heterosexual youth, the risk for attempting suicide was only 9% greater in a negative social environment.

- Ryan et al. (2009) found that family acceptance had a positive impact on LGB youth. On the other hand, LGB youth who experienced severe family rejection were more than eight times more likely to report having attempted suicide than LGB peers from families with little or no rejection.
- Eisenberg and Resnick (2004) found that family connectedness, caring adults, and school safety served as protective factors from suicide attempts for LGB individuals.

**Implications for Suicide Prevention**

Because some of the risk for suicidal behavior among LGBT youth stems from the social and cultural environment, many experts recommend a cultural competence approach that accepts or affirms LGBT individuals. Providers can be most effective when they understand and help address the stressors that LGBT youth face as a minority. See [http://www.hrc.org/issues/cultural-competence.htm](http://www.hrc.org/issues/cultural-competence.htm) and [http://sprc.org/training-institute/lgbt-youth-workshop](http://sprc.org/training-institute/lgbt-youth-workshop).

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center recommends that youth-serving agencies

- implement in-service staff training about the issues faced by LGBT youth, particularly the higher rate of suicidal behavior, victimization, and family rejection;
- learn the warning signs of suicide and how to respond;
- establish policies and protocols for appropriate response to suicide attempts, self-injury, and suicides; and

**Important Resources for Suicide Prevention**


National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a free, 24-hour hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or distress. Call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). Learn more at [http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/).

The Trevor Lifeline at 866-488-7386 offers crisis intervention, a place to talk, and suicide prevention services to LGBT and questioning youth. The service is free, confidential, and available 24/7 in the U.S.


Family Acceptance Project offers key information about how families can help support their LGBT children at [http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/publications](http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/publications).

If you or someone you know is suicidal, please contact a mental health professional or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

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The National Center for the Prevention of Youth Suicide, a program of the American Association of Suicidology, works to reduce the rate of youth suicide attempts and deaths. AAS is the oldest national organization devoted to understanding and preventing suicide. Learn more at [www.suicidology.org/NCPYS](http://www.suicidology.org/NCPYS).