

LGBTQ YOUTH IN MONTANA

BY DAPHNE HERLING

Despite notable strides in acceptance and understanding there is still a lot of work to be done so Montana's sexual minority youth can stand tall in who they are – without worrying about bullying, violence, job security and lack of legal protections. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth have higher rates of suicide, mental health problems and substance abuse, to name a few of the public health problems seen in this population. Data on LGBTQ youth are limited and likely to remain so until current state and national leadership yields to younger generations who show stronger support for inclusivity and acceptance.

Sexual minority youth encounter stigmatization and discrimination in schools, at home and in their communities. Up to 30 percent of youth who revealed their sexual identity to their families were victims of verbal and/or physical violence.¹ There is a startling difference among LGBTQ youth from positive, accepting families compared to those completely rejected by their families. Rejected youth were more than eight times more likely to attempt suicide; almost six times more likely to report



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high levels of depression; more than three times more likely to use illegal drugs; and more than three times more likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.²

LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk of homelessness. Between 20 and 40 percent of youth who become homeless are LGBTQ, and these youth often cycle through foster homes, group homes and the streets.³ Yet there are few programs specifically geared to help families of LGBTQ youth resolve violence and abusive situations.⁴

LGBTQ youth have higher suicide rates than heterosexual youth. A low sense of belonging, social alienation and feeling like an outsider are all linked to

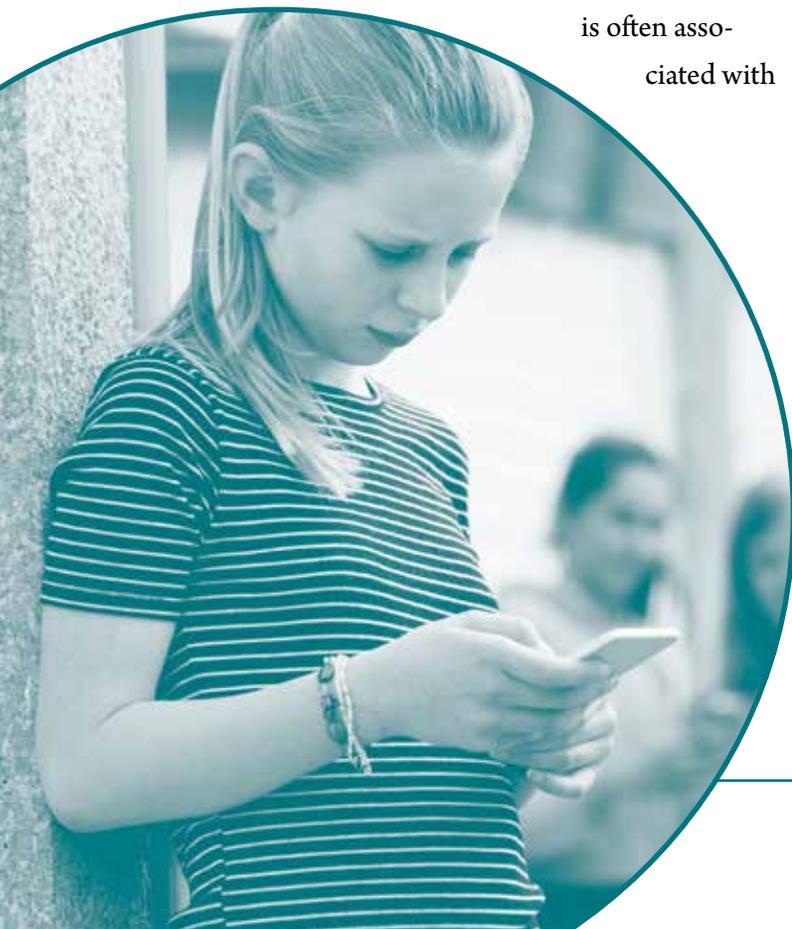
suicide. Further, suicide is often associated with

teenagers and socially stigmatized groups making it likely that LGBTQ youth are in this outsider group. Building their resiliency by giving them a sense of group belonging, especially at school, would reduce their risk of suicide.⁵

Sixty percent of LGBTQ students doubted they would graduate high school because of the hostile climate in their school. More than half felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation. Just under half commonly avoided school bathrooms, locker rooms and gym classes because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable in those spaces. Almost one-quarter were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation, and almost all heard homophobic remarks or name calling. LGBTQ students who experienced victimization had lower grade point averages than other students, and were three times as likely to have missed school because of safety concerns.

LGBTQ students attending rural or small town schools, which would include most Montana schools, experienced the highest levels of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression.⁶ On a positive note, almost all students could identify at least one school staff member who they believed was supportive of LGBTQ students.

In 2011, 13 percent of incarcerated adolescent males were gay and about 23 percent of incarcerated females were lesbians. These estimates are greater than what is found in the general population. LGBTQ youth are twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to



be held in detention for non-violent offenses (truancy, running away from home), but there is no difference between these two groups when looking at violent offenses (weapons charges, drugs).⁷

DATA ON LGBTQ YOUTH

One of the underlying principles of KIDS COUNT is using good reliable data to inform decision makers and help create policies that support children and their families. In some cases, such as when reporting on LGBTQ youth, reliable data is scarce. Most of the data regarding LGBTQ youth is based on national research and there is little that is specific to Montana LGBTQ youth.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a national school-based survey of student behaviors found that 2 percent of students identified as gay or lesbian, 6 percent identified as bisexual and 3 percent were not sure of their sexual identity. The confusion some youth experience around sexual identity is a

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theme throughout much of the research on LGBTQ youth. The YRBS also contains information on a variety of risk behaviors that can be categorized as alcohol- and drug-related; violence-related; tobacco-related; and sexual activity related. Students who identify as LGBTQ disproportionately engage in these types of risky behaviors, in many cases at rates twice as high as students who identify as heterosexual (Table 1).

Table 1. Prevalence of risk behaviors among LGB students.

	Percent of surveyed risk behaviors with higher prevalence among students who:	
	Identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.	Have had sexual contact with same sex or both sexes.
Alcohol- and drug-related risk behaviors (n=19) ¹	95%	89%
Violence-related risk behaviors (n=18) ²	89%	83%
Tobacco-related risk behaviors (n=13) ³	85%	77%
Sexually-related risk behaviors (n=6) ⁴	83%	67%

¹ E.g., drinking alcohol or binge drinking regularly; using illicit drugs.

² E.g., participating in fights; being injured in fights.

³ E.g., smoking cigarettes regularly; using chewing tobacco regularly.

⁴ E.g., being sexually active before age 13; being sexually active with more than one partner.

Source: CDC. *Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts and Health-Related Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9–12 — United States and Selected Sites, 2015.*

Table 2. Youth's associations with risk behaviors, by perceived sexual orientation.

	Among students who were:	
	Teased/called names due to being perceived as LGB.	NOT teased/called names due to being perceived as LGB.
Did not go to school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to/from school.	20%	6%
Felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row.	58%	28%
Reported having had 10 or more alcoholic drinks in a row within a couple of hours, during the past 30 days.	12%	6%
Ever took prescription medicine without a doctor's prescription.	24%	12%
Were offered, sold or given an illegal drug on school property.	38%	29%
Described their grades in school as mostly Cs or below.	32%	21%
Received help from a resource teacher, speech therapist or other special education teacher at school.	23%	14%

Source: OPI, Montana YRBS. *Victimization and Sexual Orientation Report, August 2017.*

In 2015, Montana included only one question related to LGBTQ issues in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, addressing whether students have been teased or called names because someone thought they were lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB)? Nearly 11 percent of Montana high school students reported being teased or called names for that reason. Further, due to the stigma associated with being part of a sexual minority, youth who find themselves within these 11 percent show stronger associations with a range of risk behaviors compared to youth who have not been bullied due to being perceived as LGB (Table 2).

Policies and programs do exist that have improved outcomes in health, safety and academic achievement for sexual minority youth. However, it is important to

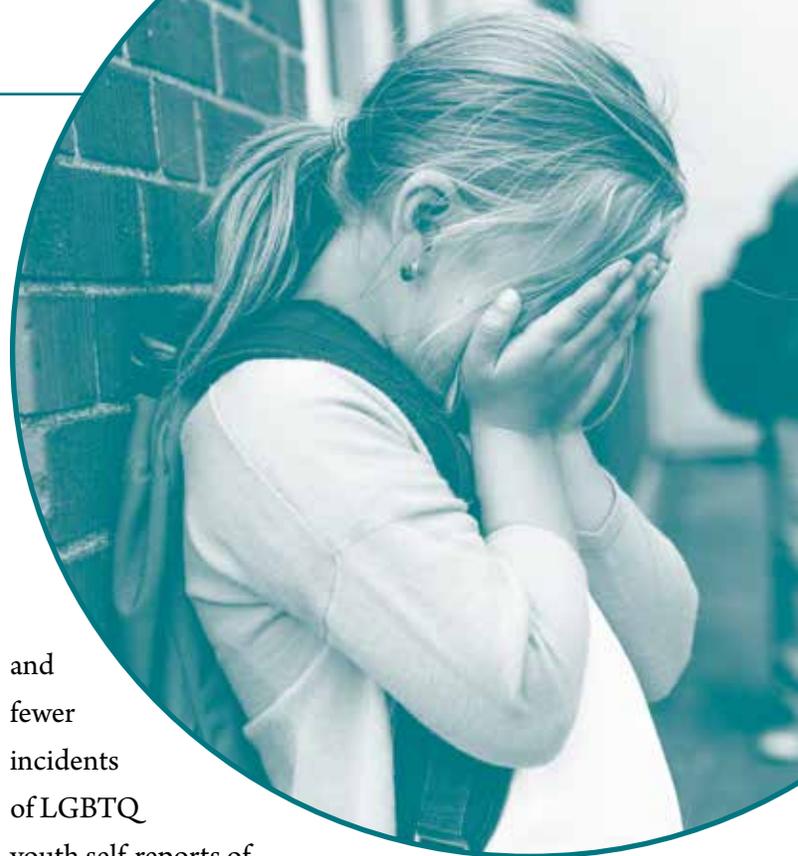
note that the research on services and treatment for LGBTQ youth, including adaptations of evidence-based programs, is still being developed. Despite anecdotal reports of success, there are just a few rigorous evaluation studies that have been conducted to determine the efficacy of interventions specifically targeting LGBTQ youth.

For the most part Montana schools have supportive policies for LGBTQ students, as do most schools nationally. However, Montana falls way behind with teachers receiving professional development on how to teach students about different sexual orientations or gender identities. The state also falls behind in the number of schools with a gay/straight alliance or similar clubs, in identifying safe

spaces for LGBTQ students and on all school staff receiving professional development on preventing, identifying and responding to student bullying and sexual harassment. Montana did slightly better than the national average in having a designated staff member with whom students could confidentially report bullying or harassment.

Secondary schools in Montana do as well as schools nationally in helping all students, not just LGBTQ students, who are victims of bullying. These school practices are mostly focused on educating staff. The need for this type of education is especially clear when it comes to supporting LGBTQ students. Forty-four percent of LGBTQ students reported hearing negative remarks from teachers or other school staff; and 48 percent of the time neither school staff nor other students ever intervened when hearing homophobic remarks. Students who did report harassment or assault said that school staff either did nothing, took no action and/or told the student to ignore it. Twenty-seven percent of students were told to change their own behavior.⁸

Social support from peers is the strongest protective factor for LGBTQ youth. While family acceptance and support also decreased emotional and psychological distress, it was not as strong as peer support. There is a significant correlation between the presence of a gay/straight alliance (GSA) at a school



and fewer incidents of LGBTQ youth self-reports of homophobic victimization, fear for safety and hearing homophobic remarks.⁹ However, only 16 percent of Montana schools had any type of LGBTQ support group, compared to 27 percent nationally.

The federal Equal Access Act (EAA) guarantees that students at public schools have a right to form a GSA and schools must treat all clubs equally. GSAs have prevailed in 17 federal lawsuits brought under the EAA and the U.S. Department of Education has affirmed a student's right to form GSAs.

Basic demographic data is not collected on sexual minorities in America. Information regarding sexual

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orientation is not included in programs serving at-risk youth, or on clinical intake forms. In fact, no major federally supported survey routinely allows respondents to share both their sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁰

Data specific to LGBTQ youth in Montana is scarce and consulting the websites of state agencies in search of information about services for sexual minority youth does not yield anything helpful. Without such data, evidence based policies cannot be enacted. Many agencies are undoubtedly serving LGBTQ youth, but sufficient data is not being collected to track them.

The challenges faced by LGBTQ youth have their roots in personal and institutional biases and prejudices that are often the results of a fear of “otherness” couched in religious dogma. In the 2017 Montana Legislative session, a bill to add civil rights protections for LGBT people to the Montana Human Rights Act died in committee.

Despite this, there is much to celebrate as American attitudes around sexual identity evolve. Undeniably, many LGBTQ youth cope well with their challenges and become healthy and productive – indeed highly successful – adults. But the lack of data specific to LGBTQ youth makes progress hard. Programs and policies need to be based

on facts and robust evaluations need to be conducted on programs geared to help sexual minority youth. Policy makers can do much more to protect these vulnerable young people – but lack the political will to do so, despite research that shows support for such actions – in Congress, in state and local governments, and within all public service systems. ■



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