



**Tennessee Suicide  
Prevention Network**

*"Saving Lives in Tennessee"*

## Suicide and GLBT Youth

- There exist numerous obstacles to research in the field of GLBT youth suicide risk. These include stigma surrounding both the subjects of suicide and homosexuality, lack of consistently applied and accepted terminology, lack of racial/ethnic minority representation in existing studies, and the possibility that individuals who are willing to reveal their sexual orientation may be more likely to disclose suicidal tendencies as well. Additionally, death records and hospital data do not record sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- Precise numbers on the connection between sexual orientation and suicide risk vary, but a 2011 CDC study found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Young people who were questioning or uncertain about their sexual orientation were three times as likely to attempt suicide.
- Nearly half of young transgender people seriously consider suicide, and in a 2007 study one quarter reported having made a suicide attempt.
- Suicide attempts by LGB youth and questioning youth are 4 to 6 times more likely to result in injury, poisoning, or overdose that requires treatment from a doctor or nurse, compared to their straight peers. Additionally, it has been that many suicide attempts among GLBT youth occur within one year of disclosure of sexual orientation to parents.
- Generally speaking, the suicide risk factors and warning signs for GLBT youth are largely the same for other young adults, but the GLBT adolescent is subject to several unique risk factors. An early, forced, mistimed, or forestalled coming-out process puts such an individual at increased risk. LGB youth whose families strongly reject them are 8.4 times as likely to have attempted suicide as LGB peers who report no or low levels of family rejection.
- Understanding the family and school background is crucial to assessing suicide risk; depending on the support they offer and their overall safety, these environments can become major protective factors or the GLBT youth's greatest threat. A 2009 study out of San Francisco State University found that GLBT teens who were rejected by their families were more than eight times the risk for a suicide attempt. Teens in rural communities or those with lower adult educational attainment typically experience hostile, even dangerous school climates.
- The 2013 National School Climate Survey issued by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that 55.5% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 37.8% because of their gender expression. Most avoid school functions and extracurricular activities whenever possible because they feel unsafe or uncomfortable. 71% are regularly exposed to homophobic remarks and harassment; most incidents are never reported because the victims doubt that anything will be done about it or worry that the harassment will get worse. 62% of the GLBT students who reported an incident said that school staff did nothing in response. Most of the students surveyed and most reported that there are policies at their schools that are effectively or deliberately anti-GLBT.
- A study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* estimated that each episode of victimization a young GLBT person experiences, such as physical or verbal harassment or abuse, increases their likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average.
- A 2008 study found that substance abuse among GLBT teens at double the rate for heterosexual teens. Questioning youth who are less certain of their sexual orientation report are at even higher risk than straight or openly gay teens for substance abuse, as well as depression.
- While the number of GLBT resources available to schools has increased in recent years, many mental health providers, physicians, and school faculty do not have accurate information about GLBT suicide risk; consequently their response to troubled and/or suicidal youth may be ineffective, cause further psychological damage, and/or discourage further disclosure attempts.
- Most states—Tennessee among them—do not have enumerated anti-bullying laws designed to protect students based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Sources: *American Journal of Public Health*, *Child Welfare*, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, *Pediatrics*, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, Suicide Prevention Resource Center, and the Trevor Project.

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