



SUPPORTING LGBT LIVES:

A STUDY OF THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF LESBIAN,
GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Key Findings



The Supporting LGBT Lives Study

Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of the Mental Health and Well-being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People (Mayock et al, 2009) is the most significant and comprehensive study of LGBT people and their lives in Ireland to date, and it has a special emphasis on young people. The online survey gathered data from 1,110 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, and face-to-face interviews were carried out with 40 people.

The study was commissioned by **BeLonG To Youth Services** and **GLEN** (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network), funded by the HSE's **National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP)**, and conducted by the **Childrens' Research Centre**, Trinity College Dublin, and the School of Education, University College Dublin.

The report was launched by the Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney in February 2009.

This document was compiled by the commissioners and outlines some of the key findings of the study which have been extracted from the full research report. The figures relate to the participants in this study and are not necessarily representative of all LGBT people in Ireland. The full report of the study is available at www.glen.ie and www.belongto.org and includes sections on LGBT peoples' experiences in school and in the workplace, LGBT people and health-related services, and how LGBT people develop resilience to the difficulties they experience.

Minority Stress

The concept of *minority stress* is used in the report as a way of understanding how the experiences of stigmatisation, discrimination, social exclusion and harassment can have negative mental health consequences for members of minority groups such as LGBT people. Minority stress places people at higher risks of developing mental health problems.

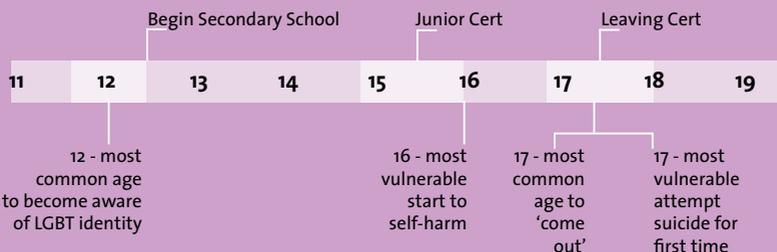
The report documents the minority stress experiences of LGBT people in Ireland - experienced as a result of negative societal reactions to minority sexual orientations or gender identities. The report clearly demonstrates that it is social and structural factors that account for elevated mental health risks among the Irish LGBT population. The research also shows that being LGBT *per se* is not indicative of or correlated with mental health problems, and finds that the greater the support, inclusion and equality for LGBT people, the lesser the minority stress.

Key Findings: LGBT People ‘Coming Out’

- **12 years:** the most common age that an LGBT person discovers their sexual orientation or gender identity for themselves (average is 14)
- **16 years:** the average age of first self-harming among the most vulnerable LGBT people
- **17 years:** the most common age to start ‘coming out’ to others (average is 21)
- **17.5 years:** the average age of first suicide attempt amongst the most vulnerable LGBT people
- **5 to 7 years:** number of years young LGBT people conceal their identity from others
- This 5 to 7 year period coincides with puberty, school and a critical period of social, emotional and vocational development
- The period prior to coming out to others was particularly stressful because of fear of rejection and isolation
- There are 3 common LGBT-specific stresses: fear of rejection when considering coming out; negative school experiences; and experiences of harassment and victimisation

“Coming out is probably one of the most extreme and difficult things you can do. Before you come out you have to deal with it all yourself and it took me six years to. And I couldn’t be myself for those six years and it is, again, it’s called in the closet because you are in the closet. No one can see you; they see this door because no one’s ever opened up the closet to look inside” (Gay, Male, 17)

Timeline for Events for LGBT Young People during Secondary School Years (age in years)



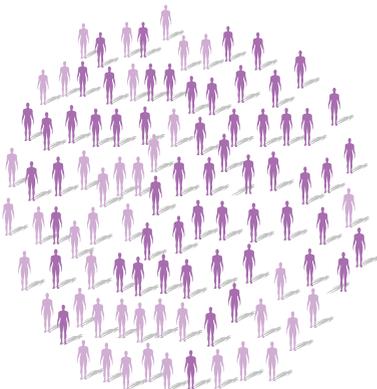
* Coming Out is the term used to describe the process of realising one’s LGBT identity and the decision to disclose this to others such as family, friends and colleagues.

Key Findings: LGBT People's School Experiences

- 58% reported homophobic bullying in their schools
- Over 50% had been called abusive names related to their LGBT identity by fellow students
- 40% were verbally threatened by school peers
- 25% were physically threatened by school peers
- 34% reported homophobic comments by teachers
- 20% missed or skipped school because they felt threatened or were afraid of getting hurt at school because they were LGBT
- 5% left school early because of homophobic bullying

"I lost a close friend to suicide earlier this year as he couldn't face coming out and the jeering he was getting for being suspected of being gay. Yet the school he was in did NOTHING in the way of policy afterwards so it could potentially and probably will be repeated. I was also sent to a counsellor in the hope it would "talk me out of being bisexual" and got a warning that if I dated girls in college or had gay friends my parents will not pay for my education"
(Bisexual, Female, 18).

"I left school because of the hurt and suffering I got in school, and the teachers didn't care, as I think it was a case of "well they call him gay and he probably is gay, so why should we step in, cos they aren't saying anything wrong" attitude towards gay people... even though I wasn't out at school. I was forced to leave at my junior cert, due to the abuse I got ... jumped on, called puff, queer etc" (Gay, Male, 23).



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Key Findings: Day-to-Day Victimization of LGBT People

- 80% had been verbally abused because of their LGBT identity
- 40% had been threatened with physical violence
- 25% had been punched, kicked or beaten because of their LGBT identity
- 25% of those who had ever worked had been called abusive names at work because they were LGBT
- 15% had been verbally threatened and 17% physically threatened by work colleagues
- 10% missed work because they were afraid of being hurt or felt threatened because of their LGBT identity

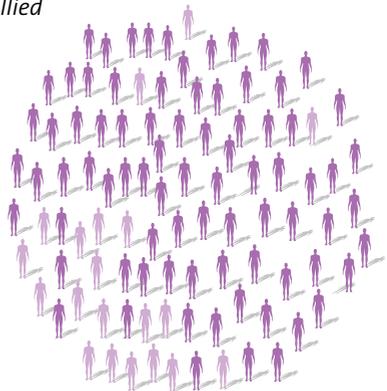
*"I'm sure people knew I was gay you know, I did walk up through (rural village) and people would be calling faggot and stuff like that. It did kill me a lot hearing you know the words and stuff and I was afraid as well, I felt very alone inside and the drink was my best friend"
(Gay, Male, 24).*

Key Findings: Risks to LGBT People's Mental Health

- 27% had self-harmed and 85% of these did so more than once
- 40% of females and 20% of males had self-harmed
- 18% had attempted suicide and 85% saw their first attempt as related in some way to their LGBT identity
- 24% of females and 15% of males attempted suicide at least once
- Over a third of those aged 25 years and under had thought seriously about ending their lives within the past year.
- This indicates that a significant sub-group of LGBT young people in particular are at risk for suicidality

*"I've been suicidal many times...It's not because I'm a lesbian but because of how I've been treated in my life as a lesbian. School was terrible and then to get bullied badly in work was horrible"
(Lesbian, Female, 28)*

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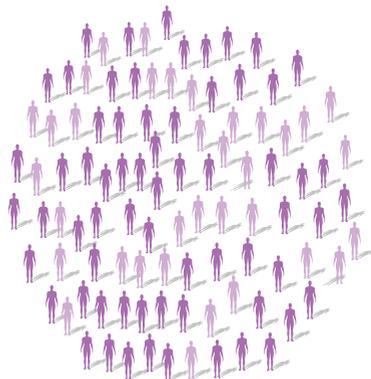
Key Findings: Well-Being and Good Mental Health

- Minority stress exposes a significant percentage of LGBT people to suicidality.
- Given adequate support most LGBT people develop resilience to the stress caused by stigmatisation, harassment and discrimination, and live happy and satisfying lives.
- 81% of participants are *now* comfortable with their LGBT identity, and the majority have good self-esteem and are satisfied with their lives.
- Over two thirds have come out to all their immediate family and their friends.
- Support of family (parents in particular) and friends as well as positive experiences in communities, schools or workplaces are critical for LGBT people's well-being and good mental health
- Mental health resilience (i.e. the ability to cope with minority stress) was related to:
 - Acceptance and support from family and friends
 - A positive turnabout or life event, such as the transition out of secondary school
 - Support from LGBT community organisations and services
 - Developing a positive LGBT identity, good self-esteem and positive coping strategies
 - Positive school or work experiences

"I am proud to be a lesbian but it took me a long time to accept my sexuality and it would have been easier to accept if society was a little more understanding" (Lesbian, Female, 26)

"I am happy to conclude by saying that I am now a very content, confident, well-adjusted gay man, fully out and very happy to be gay. I have grown and thrived with the love and support of my friends and two of my sisters ... being gay was never my problem but how people reacted to me being gay was certainly part of what made life very hard in the past" Gay, Male, 35)

Over **2/3** have come out to all their immediate family and their friends.



Summary Findings: LGBT Young People

- Most young people know they are LGBT at age 12 and start coming out at age 17
- The period between knowing you are LGBT and telling others can be particularly stressful for young people
- For a significant minority of LGBT people, the adolescent years are a time of particular vulnerability for depression, self-harm and suicidal behaviour
- Acceptance and support when coming out is critical to good mental health and well-being
- Friends and family, but parents in particular, have a crucial role to play in supporting young LGBT people as they come out and this support acts as a protective buffer against LGBT-specific stresses they may encounter
- Schools have an important role to play in protecting and supporting young LGBT people. The research reveals that homophobic bullying is not being effectively addressed.
- Appropriate and accessible youth services, personal support services and family support services have the potential to provide vital supports to young people and their families.
- With appropriate support and protection from minority stress, the majority of LGBT people learn to cope with that stress and report that they are happy, comfortable with their identity and satisfied with their lives

*“So I told them both I was gay and my father straight away stood up and went over to me, pulled me off my seat, gave me hug and said, do you know what, that doesn’t matter one bit, and he was great, and my mother was like, em, they still love me, d’you know, it doesn’t matter”
(Lesbian, Female, 31)*



Recommendations

The report made recommendations for a comprehensive approach to LGBT mental health promotion and suicide prevention across a number of sectors and areas, including:

- Health and mental health policy
- Health professionals
- Programme and service development and delivery
- LGBT young people and education
- LGBT young people in the community
- LGBT people in the workplace
- Future research

Further progress is needed and is possible to eliminate the causes of LGBT people's minority stress and the associated risks of self-harm and suicide. Improving the visibility and status of LGBT people is key and must underpin all efforts to support the mental health and well-being of LGBT people in Ireland. Families, schools, health services and community agencies all have a crucial role to play in protecting LGBT people from harm and in supporting their mental health and well-being.

The full list of the recommendations are available in the *Supporting LGBT Lives* report which available on the BeLong To website (www.belongto.org) and the GLEN website (www.glen.ie)

GLEN – Gay and Lesbian Equality Network.

The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network - GLEN is a policy and strategy focused non-governmental organisation which aims to deliver ambitious and positive change for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Ireland, ensuring full equality, inclusion and protection from all forms of discrimination.

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BeLongTo Youth Service

National Youth service for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people aged between 14 and 23. The Service began with the support of the Department of Education & Science and is now funded partly by the Office of the Minister for Children.

T. +353 1 670 6223
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Transgender Equality Network Ireland

Transgendered and Transsexual people throughout Ireland. There are LGB groups in many parts of the country that work with schools in addressing LGB issues.

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