SYSTEMS OF TRAUMA:
LGBTQ+ TRAUMA

ISSUE BRIEF SUMMARY

Family & Children's Trust Fund OF VIRGINIA

When systemic oppression is upheld at the societal and community levels, we see the impact within our relationships and ourselves. Accordingly, because the societal expectations of the gender binary support a system where LGBTQ+ individuals are viewed as less valuable, violence against LGBTQ+ people continues to be tolerated.

Note: The acronym LGBTQ+ will be utilized in this brief for brevity. We acknowledge the difficulties in including all identities within any chosen acronym. The aim is not to intentionally disregard the experiences of individuals outside of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities.

Visit fact.virginia.gov/issue-briefs for the full LGBTQ+ Trauma Brief and more.

GLOSSARY:

Sex - Usually assigned at birth based on primary sex characteristics such as one's genitals. While this is often referred to as a female and male binary, there are a variety of chromosome pairings that include intersex individuals.

Intersex - An individual whose sex assigned at birth does not match their chromosomal make up, hormonal levels, or genitalia.

Gender Identity - Refers to the way an individual perceives themself. Existing on a continuum, there are multiple possibilities including: woman, man, agender, genderfluid, etc.

Gender Roles - A societal prescription of traits and characteristics that are expected of someone based on their perceived gender identity.

Cisgender - When an individual's gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth. For example, a female assigned at birth who identifies as a woman.

Transgender - An individual whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity. For example, a transgender woman who was assigned male at birth.

Gender Binary – A classification system for gender that assigns individuals into one of two categories: man or woman.

Non-binary - Individuals who do not identify within the gender binary. This could mean a lack of gender (agender) or identifying with multiple genders at varying times (genderfluid).

Gender Pronouns - Pronouns are the part of speech that we use to refer to another person when not using their name. Ex. she/her, he/him, they/them, ze/zir, etc.

HISTORICAL LGBTQ+ TRAUMA

Historical trauma affects entire communities. It refers to cumulative emotional and psychological harm, as a result of group traumatic experiences, transmitted across generations within communities and families. Experiences of historical trauma within a community, such as the government's (lack of) response to the HIV crisis, coupled with individual traumatic experiences can contribute to survival strategies that both reflect a community's resilience while also reflecting heightened risks for experiencing community level stressors. There is a long documented history of LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships existing, whether they were accepted or persecuted. Across the globe, many individuals freely expressed themselves through same-sex relationships and presentation of gender. As European colonization began, colonizers brought with them rigid ideals of masculinity and femininity that were frequently derived from biblical interpretation.[1] Criminal codes crafted in European countries to prohibit the free expression of sexuality and gender identity were enforced broadly.

LGBTQ+ YOUTH

Social transition for transgender youth has been found to be beneficial.[2,3] This form of transition includes allowing youth to use a name, pronouns, and gender expression that matches their gender identity. Often, fears of having youth detransition later in life are cited for preventing social transition; however, most youth who socially transition continue to identify that way for many years.[4] Over a five year period, only 7% of youth detransitioned, including 1.3% who eventually retransitioned back to their transgender identity. In 2015, the U.S. Transgender Survey of 28,000 individuals found only 8% reported some form of detransition.[5] Of those who reported detransition, 62% reported that it was temporary due to financial, family, or societal pressures.

No adverse outcomes have been associated with allowing social transition during childhood or adolescence.[6] While those who socially transitioned during adolescence reported higher rates of suicidality compared to those who socially transitioned in adulthood, these results were no longer significant when adjusted for harassment experienced in K-12 education due to gender identity. These results suggest that social transition in adolescence is not harmful on its own, but rather, the harm is the product of an unsupportive school environment. Preventing youth from socially transitioning decreases their autonomy and can lead to damaged relationships between the youth and their caregivers.[7]

Family acceptance or rejection of LGBTQ+ youth is strongly associated with lifelong impacts. When LGBTQ+ youth experience high levels of family acceptance, they report higher levels of support, self-esteem, and general health outcomes.[8] They are half as likely to report suicidal thoughts or attempts and have a lower risk of substance use.[9,10,11] Conversely, LGBTQ+ youth who are rejected by their families report higher rates of stress and poor mental health.[12,13] Often, LGBTQ+ youth dealing with rejection from their family are forced to leave home, resulting in higher rates of youth homelessness and entry into the foster care system.[14,15]

A stable and supportive relationship with an adult is one of the most important protective factors against adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).[16] If a child's guardians are unable to provide a resilience-building relationship, that child's school staff is uniquely positioned to provide that support. Positive teacher-student relationships have resulted in improvement in school, as well as in social development.[16] While studies are limited, school connectedness among students with multiple ACEs was found to be correlated with lower suicide risk and psychological distress.[17]

GLOSSARY continued:

Sexual Orientation - Refers to who an individual is interested in developing a sexual relationship with.

Lesbian - A woman or non-binary individual who is attracted to other women and/or non-binary people.

Gay/homosexual - An individual who is attracted to individuals of the same gender.

Bisexual - An individual who is attracted to two (or more) genders.

Pansexual - An individual who is attracted to people regardless of their gender.

Queer - Often used as an umbrella term to include anyone who doesn't identify as straight/heterosexual. This term has been reclaimed after a history as a slur.

Questioning – An individual who is in the process of exploring or discovering their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Asexual - An individual who does not experience sexual attraction. They may still be romantically attracted to others.

68.7% of LGBTQ+ students experience verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation and 56.9% based on their gender expression.[18]

When broken down by race, Black LGBTQ+ students more frequently reported feelings of being unsafe at school and Indigenous LGBTQ+ students reported the highest rates of victimization.[18] Additionally, LGBTQ+ students in rural environments or the Southern United States reported more hostile school climates and were the least likely to have LGBTQ+ school resources or supports compared to urban and suburban schools or other regions.[18]

When LGBTQ+ students feel safe and supported within their school environment, they have better educational outcomes. Students who reported having a Gay-Straight Alliance/Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at their school were less likely to miss school due to safety concerns and experienced lower levels of discrimination.[18] These students also reported a higher number of supportive school staff and felt a greater sense of belonging to their school community. When

42.5% of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe due to lack of acceptance for their gender expression.[41] 59.1% of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe in school due to lack of acceptance for their sexual orientation.[18]

students reported 11 or more supportive staff at their school, they were less likely to report that they may not graduate high school and were more likely to plan for post-secondary education, compared to peers who had five or less supportive staff. LGBTQ+ students who reported an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum also had higher GPAs and were more likely to pursue post-secondary education. Transgender and non-binary students who were in schools with supportive transgender/non-binary policies or guidelines were less likely to experience discrimination or miss school and felt a greater sense of belonging.[18] Studies have shown that when detailed policies that are inclusive to LGBTQ+ students are present, school staff is more supportive and more likely to intervene when hearing anti-LGBTQ+ comments.[19] These policies are also associated with LGBTQ+ students feeling safer at school and less at risk for suicide and substance use.[20,21]

LGBTQ+ FAMILY VIOLENCE

The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control published a study utilizing the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey that found bisexual women experienced higher rates of sexual victimization compared to individuals of other sexual orientations.[22] Almost half of bisexual women (46.1%) had experienced rape in their lifetime compared to 17.4% of heterosexual women and 13.1% of lesbian women. Additionally, bisexual women experience stalking at twice the rate of heterosexual women. In 2015, the largest survey of transgender people in the U.S. reported that 47% of respondents had been sexually assaulted in their lifetime.[5]

The 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey revealed that bisexual men and women were the most likely to experience intimate partner violence (IPV) compared to those of other sexual orientations. Incidents of severe physical violence through IPV were higher among bisexual women (49.3%) when compared to lesbian (29.4%) and heterosexual women (23.6%).[22] A 2013 analysis in California reported gay men were two and half times more likely to experience IPV within the past year and in their lifetime compared to heterosexual men.[23] The 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found lesbian, gay, and bisexual high school students experienced higher rates of IPV (13.1%) when compared to their heterosexual peers (7.2%).[24] The same survey in 2017 found that transgender students were more likely to experience dating violence (physical and sexual) compared to their cisgender peers. Over half of transgender respondents in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey reported experiencing IPV in their lifetime.[5] Additionally, 34% of those who reported being sexually assaulted were assaulted by their current or former partner.

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