

# Equity

Practice Update from the National Association of Social Workers

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## PROMOTING POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS FOR LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS: SURVEY FINDINGS

As social workers know, adolescence can be a challenging time for many young people. Recent studies confirm, however, that adolescence can be a particularly hard time for youths that either identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual or are youths questioning their feelings of same-sex attraction or desire for same-sex behavior (Reid & Tomaszewski, 2001). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youths experience health and mental health concerns similar to their heterosexual peers, while also having to deal with the additional stressors of being identified as a sexual minority youth (stressors such as social isolation and stigma). (Ryan, 2001). Research has shown that, as a group, LGB youths appear to be at increased risk of a large number of health and mental health outcomes. For example,

- the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health showed that youths who report same-sex attraction or behaviors also reported higher levels of emotional distress, greater use of alcohol and marijuana, and earlier sexual debut than their heterosexual peers. (Resnick et. al., 1997)
- CDC reported that in 2000, 49 percent of all new AIDS cases were identified among young men who have sex with men (MSM) ages 13 to 24. For young women the same age, 45 percent of all AIDS cases reported were transmitted through sexual contact (CDC, 2002).
- research indicates that adolescent females who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or questioning are at an increased risk of unintended pregnancy (Saewyc, Bearinger, Blum & Resnick, 1999).

NASW has supported the health and mental health needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths through ongoing advocacy for access to medical, mental health, and community support services (NASW, 2000). To expand the profession's response to the myriad of health and mental health concerns faced by adolescents, NASW entered into a formal collaborative relationship with the Healthy LGB Students Project (HLGBSP). The HLGBSP will enhance and build the capacities of social workers and other allied health/mental health care providers (school nurses, counselors, and psychologists) to serve LGB adolescents on topics of health and mental health through a coordinated school health model (Reid, & Tomaszewski, 2001). The first year focused on relationship building between collaborative partners (American Counseling Association, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Nurses, American Psychological Association, National Association of School Psychologists, School Social Work Association of American, and NASW) and school personnel and the identification of expert content consultants. The second and third years of the project (2000–2002) focused on assessing the training and education needs of professionals regarding LGB youths. Years four and five (2002–2004) will focus on providing training activities in collaboration with the professional associations.

## Healthy Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Students Project (HLGBSP)

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is working in collaboration with the American Psychological Association (APA) to assist schools in meeting the needs and improving the health outcomes of lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB), and questioning youths (Q) through the Healthy Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Students Project (HLGBSP). The program goals include helping school personnel develop the tools to better assist students with health and mental health concerns, address harassment, and positively affect the school climate. The HLGBSP is funded through a cooperative agreement between the American Psychological Association and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Division of Adolescent and School Health.

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## **THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

The needs assessment targeted school health and mental health professionals, including school social workers, regarding the level of knowledge and active provision of health-related services to lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths. Conducted by APA staff in collaboration with NASW, the needs assessment included four components: (1) interviews with key informants, (2) review of the professional literature, (3) a youths of color expert panel, and (4) survey of the profession.

### **Key Informants and Review of the Literature**

The interviews with key Informants, who included three social workers from diverse practice settings, identified 17 qualitative themes related to school health and mental health professionals and LGB youths<sup>1</sup>. The review of the professional literature, conducted by researcher, Caitlin Ryan, MSW, Research Institute on Sexuality, Social Inequality and Health Human Sexuality Studies, San Francisco State University, analyzed the primary and secondary journals for the professions of school counseling, nursing, psychology, and social work for topics on LGB youths and health/mental health. Across disciplines, the analysis found few articles addressing LGB youths in published articles in refereed journals.

### **The Youths of Color Expert Panel**

The LGB Youths of Color Expert Panel included several participants from the field of social work, notably Larry Ferguson, MSW, director of behavioral health care at the Progressive Health Care Center in Washington, DC; Vincent Guilamo-Ramos, PhD, assistant professor at Columbia University School of Social Work and member of NASW National Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues; and Barbara Silverman, MSW, director of mental health services at the Erasmus High School Student Health Center in New York. The panel identified barriers to meeting the needs of adolescents of color who also identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual or engage in or desire same-sex relationships. Emerging themes included challenges for this population in disclosure of sexual orientation; a tendency for these youths to not seek services from school-based health professionals; and, the perceived relevance of conventional health information and messages. Findings were incorporated into HLGBSP materials and training activities and will be developed and pilot-tested during years four and five.

### **Survey of the Profession**

In fall 2000, the HLGBS Project disseminated a survey instrument to members of the NASW School Social Work Section ( $N = 1,000$ ). Because the survey was intended only for high school-based school social workers, and Section membership data do not identify members by practice site, APA and NASW attempted to over sample the membership. The intention was to reach the goal of receipt of 250 completed surveys. The final number of completed surveys from social workers was 185: 112 from (primarily) middle school-based social workers and 64 from (primarily) high-school-based social workers. These surveys were included in an overall data-set of 914 completed surveys by school health and mental health professionals, the majority representing middle school or high school-based counselors, social workers, nurses, and psychologists (Anderson et al., 2001)

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<sup>1</sup> A complete list of the themes, entitled *Themes Regarding Knowledge and Provision of Health Related Services to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth*, can be found on the project's Web site, [www.apa.org/ed/hlgb.html](http://www.apa.org/ed/hlgb.html).

## **THE SURVEY FINDINGS**

The following are highlights from the survey of social workers and allied health and mental health school-based professionals. The findings from questions addressing direct services present comparison data from the aggregate of all four disciplines (social workers, counselors, nurses, and psychologists) and data solely from social workers. The findings from queries regarding school climate and training or education barriers/needs focus solely on school social workers.

### **Direct Services**

Across disciplines, school-based health and mental health providers believe that LGB or questioning students are at a greater risk (than their heterosexual peers) of health and mental health concerns, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and harassment. In addressing direct services questions, social workers (SWrs) consistently responded at a rate higher than the aggregate group (allies) when measuring their involvement with LGB or questioning students.

- Seventy-one percent of social workers have counseled an LGB student for being harassed (allies = 61 percent) whereas; nearly 50 percent reported an intervention with a harasser of an LGB student (allies = 37 percent).
- Less than the majority (43 percent) of school social workers have counseled a student on safer sex or HIV testing (allies = 32 percent), although the majority (SWrs = 71 percent; allies = 64 percent) agree that their role should include providing this information.

### **School Climate**

In general, the majority of school social workers agree that the lack of training, knowledge, and skills; access to relevant materials; and negative staff attitudes and students' fears of disclosure are major barriers in their schools to providing services for LGB youths.

- More than one-half of the social workers (52 percent) identified a lack of administrative support for addressing issues regarding LGB youths in schools, with 95 percent agreeing that school staff both lacked training about the need for the knowledge about, working with LGB youths.
- Sixty percent of school social workers agree (to strongly agree) that school climate tolerates harassment of LGB youths; and a greater proportion (81 percent) either agree or strongly agree the LGB students fear disclosure to a school professional.
- Finally, social workers believe that fear of objections from the student's parent or guardian (74 percent) and fear of community opposition (74 percent) create barriers in services to LGB or questioning students.

### **Access to Education and Training**

Although many respondents did not receive training in college or graduate programs to best prepare them to provide services for LGB students, those who did believe the content was not adequate.

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- Forty-one percent had formal training on sexual development that included LGB or questioning youths; 36 percent received formal training on identity development.
- Whereas 55 percent received formal training on health concerns of LGB youths, only 29 percent received formal training on the HIV/AIDS prevention needs of LGB youths.
- Training received through work experience, or “on the job” training (OJT), in providing services to LGB students, scored slightly higher.
- Forty-three percent of school social workers received OJT on sexual development and 41 percent on identity development. Although the same number (55 percent) received OJT on the health concerns of LGB youths, only 40 percent received training on HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infection (STIs) prevention needs.

### **Social Worker Training and Referral Needs**

Respondents believed that resource information and continuing professional education and training are central to efforts to build support for LGB youths.

- Information or training on intervention methods on harassment and discrimination is very to extremely important to 79 percent of school social workers; 77 percent identified training on strategies to improve school climate as very to extremely important.
- Counseling and meeting the mental health concerns of LGB students is very to extremely important to 70 percent of respondents; 53 percent identified information on LGB identity development information as very to extremely important.
- Concerns about community response led 61 percent to identify macro-level issues as very to extremely important in overall training content.

### **Next Steps**

In general, social workers in school-based settings are more likely (than their colleagues) to self-identify as having both recognized and intervened in gender-based harassment and having addressed risk-reduction content with students. Social workers consistently responded that doing so is part of their professional role. Respondents also identified lack of administrative support, as well as overall school and community climate, as barriers to services for and on behalf of LGBQ students. School-based social workers overwhelmingly agreed that training content on these macro issues, as well as content specific to the health and mental health needs of students, are important “next steps” to help to build positive school environment for all students.

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