

Lesbian, gay and bisexual teens singled out for punishment

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Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adolescents are about 40 percent more likely than other teens to be punished by school authorities, police and the courts, according to a study by Yale University researchers.

Published in the January 2011 issue of the journal *Pediatrics*, the study is the first to document excessive punishment of LGB youth nationwide.

"We found that virtually all types of punishment—including school expulsions, arrests, juvenile convictions, adult convictions and especially police stops—were more frequently meted out to LGB youth," said lead author Kathryn Himmelstein, who initiated the study while she was a Yale undergraduate. The research was supervised by Hannah Brueckner, professor of sociology and co-director of the Center for Research on Inequalities and the Life Course at Yale.

The study was based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and included about 15,000 middle and high school students who were followed for seven years into early adulthood. The study collected details on participants' sexuality, including feelings of sexual attraction, sexual relationships and self-labeling as LGB. Add Health also surveyed participants about how frequently they engaged in a variety of misbehaviors, ranging in severity from lying to parents, to using a weapon.

Add Health included detailed questions about school expulsions and contacts with the criminal justice system.

Himmelstein, who now teaches math at a public high school in New

York City, said that adolescents who identified themselves as LGB were about 50 percent more likely to be stopped by police than other teenagers. Teens who reported feelings of attraction to members of the same sex, regardless of their self-identification, were more likely than other teens to be expelled from school or convicted of crimes as adults.

"Girls who labeled themselves as lesbian or bisexual were especially at risk for unequal treatment," said Himmelstein. "They reported experiencing twice as many police stops, arrests and convictions as other girls who had engaged in similar behavior. Although we did not explore the experiences of transgender youth, anecdotal reports suggest that they are similarly at risk for excessive punishment."

The study showed that these disparities in punishments are not explained by differences in the rates of misbehavior. In fact, the study showed that [adolescents](#) who identified themselves as LGB actually engaged in less violence than their peers.

"The painful, even lethal bullying that LGB youth suffer at the hands of their peers has been highlighted by recent tragic events," Himmelstein notes. "Our numbers suggest that [school](#) officials, police and judges, who should be protecting LGB youth, are instead singling them out for punishment based on their sexual orientation. LGB teens can't thrive if adults single them out for punishment because of their sexual orientation."

Brueckner added, "The study provides the first and only national estimates for over-representation of LGB youth in the criminal justice system. We simply did not have any good numbers on this before. We need more research on the processes that lead to this to help us identify ways to make our institutions more equitable with respect to policing all [youth](#), regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation."

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