

Students binge drink less in locales with more affirmative LGBTQ school climates

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Both heterosexual and gay/lesbian students report less binge alcohol consumption when living in states or cities that have greater proportions of schools with programs and policies that support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, according to new research from the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health.

These findings, published online today and scheduled for the March print issue of the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, suggest that LGBTQ-affirmative schools are associated with lower binge-drinking frequency for nearly all [adolescents](#), irrespective of their sexual identity. This research was funded in part by the National Institutes of Health and the IMPACT LGBT Health and Development Program at Northwestern University. Data were collected with assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"School environments have a powerful influence on adolescents' health," said lead author Robert W.S. Coulter, M.P.H., a doctoral student in Pitt Public Health's Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences. "In particular, schools that are more affirming of LGBTQ students may be less stressful environments or foster healthy emotional resilience for all students, thereby making them less likely to turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism."

Mr. Coulter and his colleagues analyzed data collected from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey from more than 50,000 students in eight states or cities nationwide. Students were asked about how many days in the past

month they had at least one alcoholic drink and how many days they had at least one drink on school property. The questionnaire also assessed binge drinking by asking how many days in the past month the students had five or more drinks in a row, within a couple of hours.

The team determined each jurisdiction's overall school climate toward LGBTQ students using the School Health Profile survey. Jurisdictions were considered more affirmative of LGBTQ students if they had greater proportions of schools that have gay-straight alliances or similar student clubs and "safe spaces" for LGBTQ adolescents; prohibit harassment based on real or perceived sexual orientation; encourage staff to attend professional development activities about safe and supportive school environments for LGBTQ adolescents; provide LGBTQ-inclusive sexual health curricula; facilitate access to LGBTQ-competent health services outside of school; and facilitate access to LGBTQ-competent social and psychological services outside of school.

Living in jurisdictions with more affirmative LGBTQ school climates was associated with significantly fewer binge drinking days for gay/lesbian and heterosexual students, compared with living in jurisdictions with less LGBTQ-affirmative school climates.

Living in jurisdictions with more affirmative LGBTQ school climates also was significantly associated with fewer drinking days at school for adolescents unsure of their sexual orientation.

"By nurturing LGBTQ-affirmative school climates through inclusive policies and programming, schools may reduce certain alcohol use behaviors for gay/lesbian students, heterosexual students and students unsure of their sexual orientation," said Mr. Coulter.

However, LGBTQ-affirmative school climates were not associated with reduced binge and other alcohol drinking behaviors for bisexual

adolescents.

"One potential explanation for this finding is that LGBTQ-affirmative school policies and programs may not adequately address the needs of bisexual students as much as they do for gay/lesbian students," Mr. Coulter said. "This is concerning because bisexual adolescents had the greatest number of drinking and [binge drinking](#) days when compared to other sexual-orientation subgroups, and bisexuals composed a larger segment of the population than gay/lesbian adolescents or adolescents unsure of their [sexual orientation](#)."

"Future studies should explore how school climates can be more affirmative of bisexual adolescents—and public health researchers and practitioners should design, implement and evaluate interventions specifically aimed at preventing and reducing alcohol use for bisexual adolescents."

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

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