

Report: Few studies look at well-being of LGB youth of color

October 3 2016, by Alexis Blue

While research on lesbian, gay and bisexual youth has increased in recent years, these studies often fail to look at the experiences of young people of color, according to a new report in the *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*.

This omission may lead to wide gaps in understanding the experience of sexual minority youth who also are part of a racial or ethnic minority, says University of Arizona researcher Russell Toomey, lead author of the report.

Studies that do look at gay, lesbian and bisexual youth—also known as sexual minority youth—of color tend to focus on negative outcomes, such as sexual risk-taking behavior and alcohol and tobacco use, rather than normal developmental [experiences](#). This is according to researchers' review and analysis of 125 reports on sexual minority youth of color, age 25 and younger, published since 1990.

"Adolescence is a time of identity development—when we figure out who we are—and most of the research really hasn't paid attention to the fact that the youth have multiple identities that they're juggling at the same time," said Toomey, assistant professor in the John & Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences in the UA College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

"Studies focus on [young people](#)'s sexual identity but they totally ignore racial or ethnic identity, which is also becoming very salient and

important during adolescence," Toomey said. "Very few studies have merged those two and examined how an LGB-identified person might have to navigate sexual identity in the context of their culture or vice versa."

Toomey conducted the literature review with collaborators Virginia Huynh, professor at California State University, Northridge; Samantha K. Jones, researcher at the University of Missouri; Sophia Lee, a graduate student at San Diego State University; and Michelle Revels-Macalinao, a graduate student at California State University, Northridge.

Given that [lesbian](#), gay and bisexual teens are coming out at younger ages and given that the nation's demographics are changing, with the U.S. Census Bureau projecting that the nation's Hispanic population will nearly double by 2050, it's critically important to consider the intersection between sexual orientation and race-ethnicity, Toomey said.

Also important, Toomey said, is looking at the normal, everyday experiences of teens with multiple oppressed identities.

"The literature's focus has really been on understanding negative outcomes among LGB youth of [color](#), and we're not focused on any of their normative experiences as people," he said. "This particular adolescent population has really been framed as a 'risk population,' and we need to start to understand their experiences with family and school contexts to really understand how to prevent or reduce some of those negative outcomes."

Toomey and his collaborators also found that the experiences of women and transgender individuals were largely invisible in the reports they analyzed, with the majority of studies looking solely at men. This signals another area where more research is needed.

"It will help us to understand the complexities of young people growing up in the U.S. today if instead of 'siloing' their experiences we try to examine their holistic experience," Toomey said. "Paying attention to the multiple layers of youths' lives will help us to better understand how to reduce disparities in health and well-being by targeting intervention and prevention in more culturally appropriate ways."

More information: Russell B. Toomey et al. Sexual minority youth of color: A content analysis and critical review of the literature, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/19359705.2016.1217499](https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2016.1217499)

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