

Homosexual Students Find Their Voice

By Lauren Djakovac

A recent survey of over 3,000 young Australians has found that homophobic abuse and violence has risen since a landmark study by La Trobe University began 12 years ago. Associate Professor Lynne Hillier, at the university, believes that while the level of abuse is disturbing, it's partly to do with today's adolescents feeling confident enough to be out and report what is happening – compared with previous surveys in 2004 and 1998.

The *Writing Themselves In* report surveyed 3,134 same sex attracted and gender questioning (SSAGQ) young people across the country, between the ages of 14 and 21 years.

Of these:

- 57% were female, 41% were male, and a small group (3%) were gender questioning (GQ).
- Almost 1 in 5 came from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.
- 1 in 5 came from rural and remote areas.
- 71% were living in the family home.

Abuse

Although the 2010 survey revealed 79% of young people felt more positive about their sexual feelings than in 2004, shocking

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statistics were revealed regarding abuse respondents received because of their sexuality.

- 61% reported verbal abuse (up from about 50% in 2004) and 18% physical abuse (up from 15% in 2004).
- 69% reported ‘other’ forms of homophobia, including exclusion and rumours.
- 80% of abuse takes place at school – this figure being higher than in previous surveys. 40% reported abuse at social occasions and 24% said they experienced abuse at home.

The School Experience

Of the adolescents surveyed, 41% attended school - with 65% attending a Government school, 18% a Catholic and 12% other Christian schools.

The survey revealed impacts on school career were particularly severe when young people felt they had no support at school. For more than half of the participants, homophobic abuse impacted on a range of aspects of schooling.

- More than 1,000 teenagers described their school as homophobic and only 14% described their school as supportive.
- 40% attended a school with no social or structural support features for sexual difference.
- ¼ of young people attended a school where they knew there was policy-based protection from homophobia and discrimination.
- 12% wanted their school to simply become aware that same sex attracted or gender diverse people exist and form part of the school community.

In terms of education, the most serious impacts were:

- 29% are not able to concentrate in class.
- 20% miss classes.
- 21% miss days at school with marks dropping for 20%.
- 18% hide at recess and lunch and/or don't use change rooms (16%) and toilets (9%).
- 13% dropped out of sport and other activities.
- 10% of young people left their school to go to another.
- 8% left school altogether.

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Sexual Behaviours

2010 data demonstrates the pregnancy rate for SSAGQ teenage girls is double that of their heterosexual peers, and researchers believe it's partly related to young women having unprotected heterosexual sex to appear ‘normal’ to their peers. Furthermore, the rate of sexually transmitted infection (STI) is higher among homosexual teenagers.

- 10% of the 15-18 year old females surveyed said they have become pregnant.
- Young men (56%) were more likely to have had exclusive same sex sexual encounters than young women (28%), while 21% of women have sex exclusively with men.

- 5% of SSAGQ young people said they have been diagnosed with an STI.
- 51% used a condom during last penetrative sex - a figure lower than in 2004.
- 28% said they had never had sex.

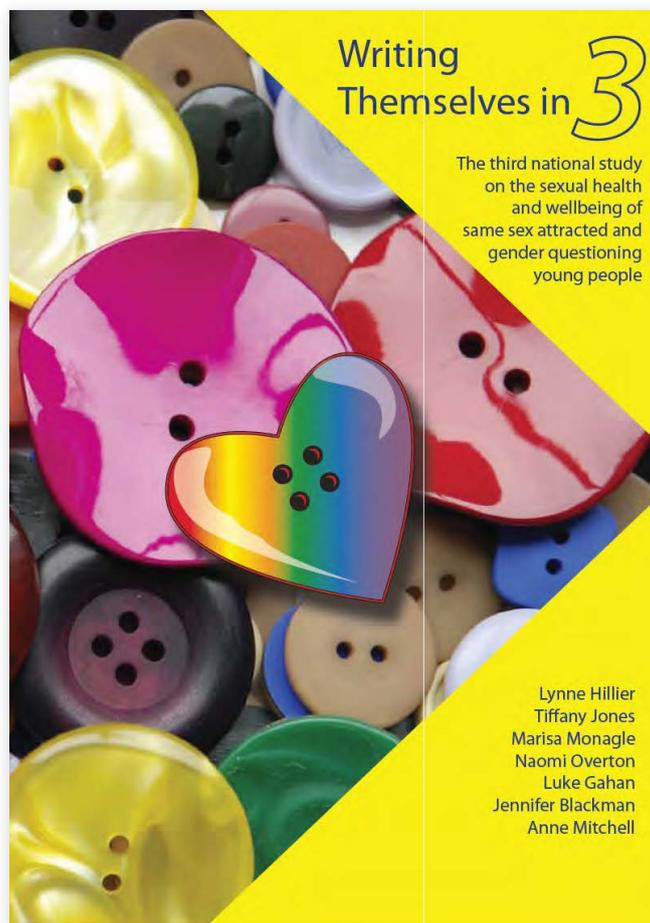
Negative Health Indicators

The report found strong links between being abused and self-harm, including cutting and excessive drug use. Professor Hillier states “young people who have been physically assaulted are several times more likely to attempt suicide than those who have suffered no abuse”. Those who reported suicidal thoughts and attempts did so because they either found life too difficult or because they felt their loved ones would be better without them.

Parental rejection, having a religious background or attending a religious school, and living in a rural area were all risk factors for self-harm and attempted suicide. Conversely, students who knew their school was supportive and had policies to protect them from homophobia were less likely to have mental health issues.

- Almost double the number of young people who had been verbally abused (40%), in comparison with those who had experienced no abuse had thought of self harm (22%). While, three times those who had been physically abused (62%) had thought of self harm.

It was found drug use is significantly related to abuse - with those reporting no abuse being least likely to use drugs excessively, followed by those who were verbally abused and finally those who were physically assaulted.



Recommendations

The *Writing Themselves In* report makes several recommendations in the areas of public safety, cyber safety, education, health services and parents.

Some of the key recommendations include:

- Police programs which liaise with the gay community and seek to make reporting easier should be protected and expanded.
- All education authorities should provide clear policies and adequate resourcing to ensure all schools have a specific policy on homophobic bullying - which offers well-publicised protection to SSAQG students.

- Those who offer one to one counselling and support in schools should be trained to receive and work with a disclosure about sexual orientation or gender identity in a positive, non-judgemental and constructive manner.

- Health services need to undertake training in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sensitive service delivery and actively signal to SSAGQ young people through waiting room posters and service promotion that they are welcome.

- Parents need both education and support to be prepared for a possible disclosure and sometimes to manage their own feelings of disappointment or apprehension. It is suggested

P-Flag organisations in all states and territories should be fostered and supported with government funding to ensure their availability and viability. In addition, information about same sex attraction and gender diversity should be included in all mainstream material about adolescence health that may be accessed by parents. ■