

A New Dimension in Snapshot of Gay Teenagers

By DAVID TULLER

In 1989, when a government report suggested that gay teenagers were at high risk for suicide attempts, lesbian and gay rights advocates welcomed the finding as long overdue.

They said the report, one of the first to address the health of gay youth, offered compelling evidence of what they had maintained for years — that prejudice had damaged gay adolescents' psychological well-being.

Indeed, dozens of studies in the past several years have strengthened that conviction. Gay teenagers, researchers say, are much more likely than their heterosexual peers not only to attempt suicide but to suffer from depression, eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, violence-related injuries, and infection with H.I.V. and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Advocates for gay youth routinely cite the statistics to argue that schools and health care providers must do a better job of protecting and counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teenagers.

A growing number of schools and school districts have adopted policies forbidding anti-gay harassment. According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, an organization fighting anti-gay bias, more than 1,000 schools now have "gay-straight alliances" that provide forums for support and discussion among teenagers.

But some experts are now saying that the research is incomplete and has created a distorted picture of what it is like to be a gay teenager.

Dr. Ritch C. Savin-Williams, a professor of developmental and clinical psychology at Cornell, says many of the studies are "horribly flawed" and significantly overstate the degree of self-destructive behavior. Moreover, he says, by focusing so much attention on those who are at risk rather than on the large majority of gay and lesbian teenagers who appear to be doing well, the research is "pathologizing" gay youth and handing conservative groups ammunition to argue that being gay is inherently unhealthy.

"Most of this research was done essentially to try to gain resources and services for these youth by demonstrating to the outside world how poorly they have been treated," said Dr. Savin-Williams, an expert on adolescent sexual identity issues. "But the research is delivering



Shane Young for The New York Times

Rebecca Fureigh, a recent high school graduate, says the gloomy picture of gay teenagers has been consistent with her experiences.

what I call 'the suffering suicide script,' which essentially tells them, 'Hey, look how horrible it is to be gay.'"

Some of the statistics that have been gathered are certainly grim. The Seattle-based Safe Schools Coalition, one of many groups founded in recent years to improve the educational environment for gay youth, has compiled a review of eight large-scale, government-financed surveys of students.

In Minnesota, according to the coalition's report, 31 percent of gay, lesbian and bisexual students had attempted suicide; in Massachusetts,

The statistics may be grim, but there's more to the story.

33 percent had tried cocaine compared with 7 percent of other students; and in Seattle, 9.2 percent had vomited or taken laxatives to lose weight in the previous 30 days compared with 2.8 percent of students who were not gay.

Many gay and lesbian teenagers, like 18-year-old Rebecca Fureigh, say the gloomy portrait painted by the research is consistent with their experience. Ms. Fureigh, who graduated from high school this year in the San Francisco Bay area, left her own family two years ago in the face of persistent problems and went to live with a friend's family.

"All of my friends who were gay

or bisexual were self-mutilating, cutting themselves with safety pins or razors or burning themselves," Ms. Fureigh said. "All of them were doing drugs and alcohol. Some of them tried to commit suicide. I certainly thought about suicide."

Many others, however, say they are doing just fine.

Saira Qureshi, a graduate student at San Francisco State University, said she had felt little connection as a teenager to the news media's portrayals of tormented gay youth.

"None of the stereotypes applied to me," said Ms. Qureshi, 24, whose parents were born in India, but who grew up in Arizona. "I wasn't butch, I wasn't an alcoholic, I didn't feel empty inside, I wasn't abused. I was just a normal kid."

Dr. Savin-Williams does not dispute that some gay youth engage in harmful behavior. But a major drawback of much research, he said, is that the studies include only those willing to identify themselves as gay or at least acknowledge same-sex attraction.

That sample, he argued, is significantly smaller than the total number who will eventually turn out to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Many teenagers in the larger group may be adjusting very well but simply prefer to keep their sexual orientations to themselves even on anonymous surveys, he added.

Dr. Savin-Williams said that although researchers often discussed these limits, they generally highlighted only the alarming statistics when presenting the results. "That's great for headlines, but I'm saying let's look at the kids who are doing extraordinarily well and see

how they got that way," he said.

Others share Dr. Savin-Williams's concerns. "The studies are starting to become very two-dimensional," said Dr. John D'Emilio, a gay historian and the director of gender and women's studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"Very often people who confront social hostility develop incredible strength and resilience. If you emphasize where the strengths are instead of what's bad, it helps you figure out, for example, what kind of environment you want to create in schools."

Beth Reis, co-chairwoman of the Safe Schools Coalition, acknowledged that there might be some merit to the argument that the studies undercount gay youth who are adjusting well. "We may be identifying a slightly more at-risk group than if we were surveying the population at large in their 20's, but I don't think it invalidates what these studies have found," she said.

Several factors have fueled the gay youth research boom. Some government-sponsored surveys of teenagers have begun to include questions about sexual orientation, for example, enabling researchers to get more data. Researchers also say gay youth are easier to study now because they are acknowledging their sexual orientation sooner, with many coming out publicly as young as 14 or 15 — a rare phenomenon 10 or more years ago.

Moreover, an interest in studying sexual minority youth is less likely to raise eyebrows in academic circles than it was a decade ago, said Dr. Stephen T. Russell, director of the 4-H Center for Youth Development at the University of California at Davis, a research center.

"The area of adolescent sexual orientation was marginalized, and that prevented research for a long time," said Dr. Russell, a sociologist and a prominent researcher in the field.

Whatever the risks associated with being young and gay, researchers have started to explore in more depth the factors that may help gay teenagers adjust.

For example, Caitlin Ryan, director of policy studies at San Francisco State University's Institute on Sexuality, Inequality and Health, recently began a study to examine families in which a gay, lesbian or bisexual child has felt able to come out to relatives.

"We need to understand why some youth struggle and others thrive," she said, "so we can put more effective programs in place."