

Poll finds young adults more liberal on gay issues

By ELIZABETH MEHREN
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Homosexuals have experienced a dramatic rise in acceptance over the last two decades, according to a new Los Angeles Times Poll.

Almost seven in 10 Americans know someone who is gay and say they would not be troubled if their elementary school-age child had a homosexual teacher. Six in 10 say they are sympathetic to the gay community, displaying an increasing inclination to view same-sex issues through a prism of societal accommodation rather than moral condemnation.

On questions ranging from job discrimination to adoption to whether homosexuality is morally wrong, responses indicate that as homosexuals have become more open, heterosexuals in return have become more open toward them.

The change has come within one generation. In two polls in the mid-1980s and other data from the same era, the level of sympathy toward homosexuals was half what it is today.

"The stigma of being gay is disappearing," said Gary Gates, a demographer at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. "This is a huge change. Gay people in general are feeling more comfortable in society — and society is feeling more comfortable with gay people."

The fact that 69 percent of those polled by The Times said they know someone who is gay — up from 46 percent in 1985 — is particularly significant, Gates said. "Being gay is no longer an abstraction. It's my friend, my neighbor, my brother, my office-mate."

The poll showed that women tended to be slightly more sympathetic toward homosexuals than men, and the

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survey affirmed a polarization that puts liberals and conservatives at opposite ends of a broad spectrum.

The poll also found a profound gulf in attitudes between older and younger Americans. Compared to those over 65, respondents between 18 and 29 were so much more favorably disposed toward gays that, Gates said, over time, "Many of these issues are simply not going to be issues any longer."

But resistance remains in some areas.

A slim majority of people surveyed by The Times opposed same-sex marriage — an issue that has driven the subject of homosexual rights to the forefront as Massachusetts prepares to allow homosexuals to marry next month.

The issue also prompted President Bush to support a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to a union between a man and a woman.

Yet the nationwide survey showed that regardless of their own feelings on the subject, 59 percent of respondents believe legal recognition of marriage for same-sex couples is inevitable.

Among those in the 18-to-29 age group, 71 percent said legal recognition of same-sex marriage is inevitable. These young Americans were

more than four times as likely to support same-sex marriage as those over 65, the poll found.

"When we were young(er), the world was changing and we didn't have a problem with that. We thought it was fine. If someone was gay, that was fine too," said poll respondent Christine Claesgens, 25.

Claesgens, a waitress in Portland, Ore., predicted that when she is 65, same-sex marriage "might still be an interesting topic. But I don't think it will be a problem."

The Times Poll, supervised by polling Director Susan Pinkus, surveyed 1,616 adults nationwide March 27-30. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The poll produced a variety of strong responses:

- 61 percent say a homosexual would make a good role model for a child.

- 72 percent favor laws to protect homosexuals from job discrimination and 74 percent favor laws to protect them from housing discrimination.

- 62 percent say gays should get the same civil-rights protections as women and minorities.

- 70 percent say the military should not discharge homosexuals.

- 62 percent say their community accepts gays.

- 65 percent say they can accept homosexuals living together.

But John P. DeCecco, editor of a quarterly publication in San Francisco called the Journal of Homosexuality, characterized the growing tolerance as "an uneasy acceptance."

Heterosexuals remain "very sensitive as to whether their friends and colleagues are gay," said DeCecco, a 79-year-old professor emeritus at San Francisco State University.