

The Washington Blade

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Study verifies teen suicide data

Over one-third of Gay teens attempted suicide in past year

by Peter Freiberg

A new study published this week has documented what previous, less rigorous research suggested: Gay teens are far more likely to be victimized and threatened and to engage in health-endangering behaviors, including suicide attempts, drug use, and sexual risks.

The study, conducted in Massachusetts high schools in 1995 and published in the May 5 issue of the journal *Pediatrics*, reports that more than one-third of all self-identified Gay male, Lesbian, or bisexual teenagers reported having attempted suicide in the past 12 months. The percentage was more than three times the 9.9 percent of self-identified straight teenagers who reported having made such an attempt.

The Massachusetts responses came as part of a larger survey, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted every two years by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and administered in high schools all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Students participate in the survey on a voluntary and anonymous basis.

The national survey does not include questions about sexual

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by Clint Steib

Youth advocate Joyce Hunter says the latest data on Gay youth suicide "is going to be taken more seriously ... People are going to pay attention to this."

'Ruined' at 18

Mother's suit blames police harassment for son's suicide

by Lisa Keen

Mark Wayman was 18 years old, a senior on the high school football team, and was less than two months from graduation when he put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. A lawsuit filed in a federal court by his mother last month charges that Wayman killed himself because a police officer threatened to tell his grandfather and others in his small Pennsylvania town of fewer than 5,000 people that Wayman was "queer."

According to the lawsuit filed by Madonna Sterling, Wayman was not Gay. According to the local newspaper, the *Pottsville Republican*, an autopsy report quoted a police document as claiming that, "After being questioned by police, [Wayman and a male friend] admitted that they were about to have sex together."

Whatever the truth, the Wayman case, which is

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National News

Study confirms one in three teens attempt suicide

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orientation. However, in 1995, Massachusetts tacked on a question asking, "Which of the following best describes you?" Out of 4,159 students who filled out the questionnaire that year, 104 (or 2.5 percent) self-identified as Gay, Lesbian, or bisexual (0.6 percent identified as Gay and 1.9 percent as bisexual). An additional 1.5 percent responded "not sure," 3.7 percent checked "none of the above," and 9.3 percent did not answer the question.

Of the self-identified Gay and bisexual students, two-thirds were male and 70 percent non-Hispanic white.

About 50 percent of self-identified Gay and bisexual students reported experiencing more than five risky behaviors, compared to 25 percent of the straight students. Among the behaviors reported were alcohol, drug, and cigarette use; carrying weapons; using alcohol or drugs during sex; missing school because of fear; and being threatened with a weapon at school.

Fifty-nine percent of Gay teens smoked cigarettes, compared to 35 percent of straight teens. And Gay teens engaged in risky behaviors even while they were very young. For example, 59 percent reported using alcohol before age 13, 48 percent smoked cigarettes, 37 percent had tried marijuana, 17 percent had tried cocaine, and 27 percent engaged in sexual intercourse. All these figures were higher than among straight teens.

Although Massachusetts has a civil rights law barring anti-Gay discrimination, and although former Gov. William Weld (R) funded a widely praised program aimed at developing Gay/straight student alliances groups and sensitizing students, teachers, and administrators to Gay issues, the school conditions reported in the survey were striking:

More than 68 percent of the Gay and bisexual teens reported being involved in a fight during the previous year (with 14 percent saying they required medical treatment), compared to 37.6 percent among straight teens;

One-third of the Gay and bisexual teens reported having sexual contact against their will, compared with 9 percent of straight teens;

More than one-fourth of the self-identified Gay and bisexual teenagers reported they "missed school because of fear" for their safety in the previous 30 days, compared to 5.1 percent among straight teenagers; and

Almost one-third of Gay and bisexual teens had been threatened with a weapon in the previous 30 days, compared to 7.1 percent among straight teens.

Commenting on the results, the authors note that "Gay, Lesbian and bisexual (GLB) adolescents face tremendous challenges growing up physically and mentally healthy in a culture that is often unaccepting."

These youth, the authors note, face rejection, isolation, verbal harassment and physical violence both at school and at home.

"[T]hese stresses," they say, "place GLB adolescents at risk of engaging in individual risk behaviors, clusters of risk behaviors, and initiating behaviors at an

earlier age than their peers."

Nevertheless, the authors emphasize that most Gay youth "cope with a variety" of stresses and become healthy and productive adults.

In an interview, lead author Robert Garofalo, a physician at the Boston's Sydney Borum Jr. Health Center who deals with many Gay youth, asserted, "The resiliency of these [Gay] kids is unbelievable. That component isn't captured by this data. Most of these Gay kids do grow up healthy, but there's a subset that feels particularly sensitive to the marginalization or stigmatization of being Gay. ... That puts them at risk."

Both Garofalo and the study's senior author, Robert DuRant, professor of pediatrics at the Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center, commented in a press release that, "These findings suggest that educational efforts, prevention programs and health services must be designed to address the unique needs of Gay/Lesbian/bisexual youth."

Similar findings about Gay teenagers have been cropping up in a variety of studies for years. But most of these surveys did not involve random samples and relied instead on volunteers or on youth who came into social service agencies for help, factors that critics said may have skewed results.

The researchers in the Massachusetts study cautioned that while it may be possible to generalize from their results to other public high school adolescents, the runaway and homeless youth who don't attend school could send the risk behavior figures even higher. At the same time, youth who may not self-identify as Gay until adulthood may not have the same high-risk profile as the Massachusetts study group and could lower the figures, researchers said.

Joyce Hunter, a researcher at the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavior Studies at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, said the Massachusetts findings are important because they come from a random sample that reinforces findings from other non-random surveys that she and others have conducted.

"This is going to be taken more seriously," Hunter said, "because it's randomized and a school-based sample. People are going to pay attention to this."

Hunter said it seems clear that "at least 30 percent of Lesbian, Gay and bisexual kids are attempting suicide, and many of them are repeaters." While no one knows how serious many of these attempts are or how many young Gays actually commit suicide, Hunter said the attempts are "really a serious cry for help."

"These kids are looking for somebody who's going to pay attention to them," Hunter said, "and help them answer their questions about growing up and coming out as a Gay or Lesbian person."

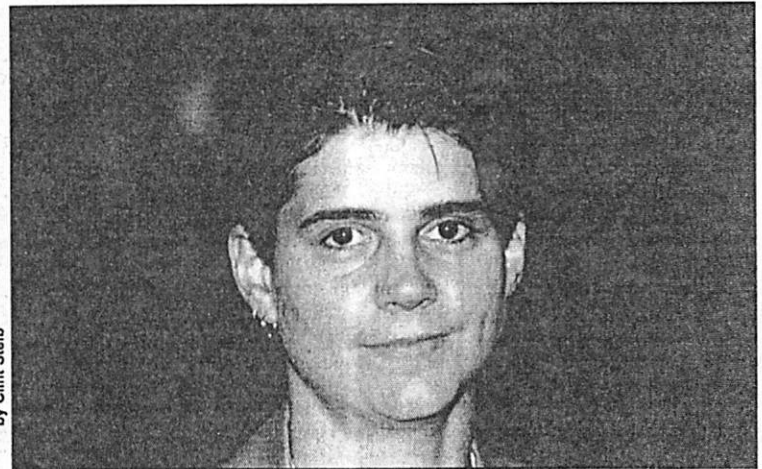
"So something must be put in place," she said, "to help these young people. The programs that are going on in Massachusetts are extremely important, because these kids are getting some kind of sensitivity within these schools, whereas around the rest of the country that is not happening except for [individual projects] in certain schools."

But Hunter warned against attempts to "pathologize" Gay youth.

"These kids are not pathological," she said. "They are young people who are having a difficult time in coming to terms with who they are because they are

lives."

The statistics on risky behaviors engaged in by Gay youth in Massachusetts, Carey said, despite the "most highly developed support system" for Gay youth in the country, "make me



Rea Carey, executive director of the National Youth Advocacy Coalition, called the Massachusetts study important because it's "much harder to dispute government studies which have gone through rigorous review processes."

growing up in a heterosexist environment."

Despite more acceptance in society of Gay adults, Hunter said, it remains difficult for Gay youth to do the kind of exploration that their straight peers do — such as dating — and retain love and support from their families and avoid harassment from their peers.

One openly Gay Massachusetts youth, Charlie Roberts, 17, who heads the tiny Gay/Straight Alliance in his high school near Springfield, said the findings about harassment did not surprise him. He said he has been "very tormented" at his school, mostly verbally but also sexually and with threats of violence.

"For two weeks, I skipped my seventh-period class for fear of my life from one specific kid," he said. "He's twice my size." Roberts said that Gay people like himself who come out are like deer who have come out of the woods onto a plain.

"It's the one on the plain who's going to get shot, instead of the people who are hiding in the woods," Roberts said. "I came out of the closet to be self-liberated, but I keep getting shot down by my peers."

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Youth Advocacy Coalition, a coalition of social service agencies that work with Gay youth, called the Massachusetts study important because it's "much harder to dispute government studies which have gone through rigorous review processes."

Carey said that given the fears that young people would have about the promised anonymity in the survey, it was "remarkable" that 2.5 percent acknowledged being Gay or bisexual.

Despite methodological differences from previous surveys, Carey said, the results on suicide attempts are similar, "which, to me, says that, regardless of who does the study, Gay youth are at an incredible risk for taking their own

ask, 'What in the world is happening in Oklahoma, what is happening in Texas, what is happening in other states?'

"So many young people feel isolated," Carey said. "They don't feel their voices are being heard. They lack the critical support they need to make it through the day." It is not surprising, Carey said, that some Gay youth feel the need to "numb that pain" with alcohol or drugs.

Carey said the figures on the number of Gay students who miss school in Massachusetts are particularly scary because school is the primary place for them to learn skills they will need as an adult.

"They're missing out on the opportunity to learn how to write ... to interact with their peers," Carey said. "I've talked to young people who spend their entire days figuring out how to avoid other students, because they've experienced being beaten up or urinated on or knifed or attacked."

Gary Remafedi, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Minnesota who has done research on Gay adolescent behavior, including suicide attempts, said the Massachusetts study confirmed that there is "no reason to continue speculating about whether young Gay people are at risk for attempted suicide."

"This information needs to be imparted to professionals. We need to implement prevention programs, and we need to answer additional research questions, such as what percentage of these suicide attempts end up as completed suicides," Remafedi said.

Remafedi said that people need to realize that the problems faced by Gay youth are "not just issues of human rights, they're important public health problems, that cost every citizen in this country dollars and cents ... in medical costs and loss of potential human productivity."▼