

Lesbian, gay and bisexual teens in B.C. still face health disparities

May 15, 2007

Vancouver, BC

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) teens in B.C. experience greater levels of violence and more health challenges than heterosexual teens, according to a report released by Vancouver-based McCreary Centre Society (MCS) .

Results from the study, believed to be the first of its kind in Canada, are reported in "Not Yet Equal: The Health of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth in B.C." The report reveals trends in life experiences, health and risk behaviours of LGB youth, in both rural and urban areas, across more than a decade.

"All young people, regardless of sexual orientation, deserve the opportunity to grow and thrive in their families and communities," says McCreary's Research Director Elizabeth Saewyc, an associate professor at UBC's School of Nursing. "Most lesbian, gay and bisexual teens are doing well, but far too many experience stigma and discrimination. But when there are positive assets in these teens' lives, they do well despite risks."

Study data were drawn from 1992, 1998 and 2003 B.C. Adolescent Health Surveys conducted in high schools across the province by MCS. The anonymous surveys included more than 74,000 youth in Grades 7-12 from more than 75 per cent of B.C. school districts.

LGB youth were found in all grades and within all ethnic groups. They comprise two to four per cent of students in B.C. high schools or an estimated 7,000 students.

Key findings include:

- LGB youth were two to three times more likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse, harassment in school, and discrimination about race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and other issues in the community compared to heterosexual teens, and rates of discrimination appear to be rising.
- Eleven per cent of LGB teens attend school in rural areas and small towns in B.C. and generally report similar experiences, opportunities, risks and health behaviours as LGB youth in urban centres.
- Between 1992-2003, increased rates of sexual abuse were reported among bisexual females and higher physical abuse among lesbians. There was a decline in sexual and physical abuse among gay males, and rates were unchanged for bisexual males. Rural gay and bisexual males were more likely to report sexual abuse and more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year than their urban peers.

- Compared to heterosexual youth, LGB youth were two to three times more likely to either have been pregnant or have gotten someone pregnant. Rural gay and bisexual males were more likely to have caused a pregnancy than urban counterparts.
- Between 1992-2003, rates of suicide attempts increased for lesbian and bisexual females but declined for gay and bisexual males.
- LGB teens are less likely to report protective factors such as feeling cared about by parents and family members. Girls felt less connected to school than heterosexual peers. LGB youth were more likely than heterosexual youth to have run away from home once or more in the past year.
- Smoking is down for LGB youth, but use of drugs other than alcohol or marijuana increased for lesbians and bisexual male and female teens, but decreased for gay males.
- Gay and bisexual males reported higher levels of feeling spiritual or religious than heterosexual males. However, higher levels of religiosity were not a protective factor and were linked to higher odds of suicide attempts for bisexual males and females.

There are also some hopeful trends, says Saewyc. Smoking declined among all groups over the decade and risky sexual behaviours are also lower for most teens.

The decline in rates of violence and abuse faced by gay males corresponds with similar declines in most risky behaviours for them, such as binge drinking. However, rising rates of violence toward bisexual and lesbian girls mirror their rising rates of substance use, suicide attempts and other risks.

Some school districts have begun to develop supportive programs, like anti-bullying policies that specifically mention sexual orientation harassment and gay-straight alliance student groups in secondary schools, says Saewyc.

“LGB youth report higher exposure to risk and lower social support than heterosexual youth, so it is no surprise that more of them have health issues,” says Saewyc. “We need to promote more supportive school environments for these youth and help families develop safer and more nurturing relationships with their LGB children.”

The McCreary Centre Society (MCS) is a non-profit organization concerned with the health of young people in British Columbia, and since 1977 has conducted community-based research and projects addressing current youth health issues.

The research study may be found at www.mcs.bc.ca.

For more information:
 Elizabeth Saewyc
 Research Director
 McCreary Centre Society
 604-291-1996

Annie Smith
Managing Director
McCreary Centre Society