

LGBT Self-Harm & Suicidality: An Overview of National & International Research Findings

GLEN - Gay and Lesbian Equality Network

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Introduction

International research has consistently found higher levels of psychological distress related to victimisation and stigmatisation among LGBT people when compared to their heterosexual peers.

Furthermore, a clear picture is emerging from more recent research of higher levels of self-harm and suicidality among LGBT people, and young LGBT in particular, when compared to their heterosexual peers.

This document provides an overview of key international and national research evidence, and more recent research in particular, that clearly highlights that LGBT people are a population group at risk for self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

GLEN would strongly recommend that in order for the forthcoming national suicide strategy to be robust and effective in addressing priority risk groups and factors, that LGBT people are named as a priority group.

International Research

The report of the Scottish Government's National Suicide Prevention Working Group (2010) states that "sexual orientation is also a risk factor for suicidal behaviour. A recent systematic review highlighted high rates of mental illness and suicidal ideation in lesbian, gay and bisexual people. An implication of this finding is that this higher risk needs to be recognised in the planning of public health and clinical services. Concern about sexual orientation among adolescents in Scotland is also associated with self-harm" (page 3).

The systematic review cited in the above Scottish Government report was conducted by King et al (2008). Entitled *A systematic review mental disorder, suicide & deliberate self harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people*, the meta-analysis revealed a two-fold excess in suicide attempts in lesbian, gay and bisexual people [pooled risk ratio for lifetime risk 2.47 (CI 1.87, 3.28)]. LGB adolescents and adults were more than twice as likely as comparable heterosexual persons to report a past-year suicide attempt. Lifetime prevalence of suicide attempt was especially high in gay and bisexual men, with findings that it was four times higher compared to heterosexual males (RR 4.28, CI 2.32, 7.88). King et al also found that LGB people's risk for depression and anxiety disorders was at least 1.5 times higher and alcohol and other substance dependence was also 1.5 times higher.

In an earlier UK study, Warner et al (2006) found that of the 1285 gay, lesbian and bisexual participants, 43% had mental disorder as defined by the revised Clinical Interview Schedule (CIS-R). Out of the whole sample, 31% had attempted suicide. This was associated with markers of discrimination such as recent physical attack (OR 1.7, 95% CI 1.3-2.3) and school bullying (OR 1.4, 95% CI 1.1-2.0), but not with higher scores on the CIS-R.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) has concluded that LGBT youth are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviours, suicide attempts, and suicide. They cite a nationally representative study in the US of adolescents

(Russell and Joyner, 2001) where the findings indicate that youths with same-sex orientation are more than 2 times more likely than their same-sex peers to attempt suicide. Russell and Joyner also tested whether the association between adolescent sexual orientation and suicidality persists when respondents' age and family background characteristics are controlled for. They found that, regardless of age and family background, males and females who reported same-sex romantic attraction or relationships were more likely than their peers to report suicidal thoughts (odds ratio [OR] of suicidal thoughts=1.68 for males and 2.14 for females) and suicide attempts (OR=2.45 for males and 2.48 for females). The authors conclude that the findings provide strong evidence that sexual minority youths are more likely than their peers to think about and attempt suicide.

In a paper entitled *Suicidality and Depression Disparities between Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review*, Marshal et al (2011) concluded that their study provides strong evidence that sexual minority youth (SMY) experience significantly higher levels of suicidality and depression symptoms than do heterosexual youth. They state that "the robust pattern of results, particularly regarding suicidality, highlights the severity and pervasiveness of disparities between SMY and heterosexual youth. For example, on average 28% of SMY reported a history of suicidality as compared with 12% of heterosexual youth" (page 121).

An editorial in *The Lancet* (2011) on the health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations stated that "compared with their heterosexual peers, members of the LGBT community are at increased risk of suicide, depression, harassment, and victimisation, and they may have higher rates of smoking and alcohol use".

The internationally recognised Institute of Medicine in its 2011 publication, *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People*, report the findings of a systematic review of peer-reviewed research on LGBT mental health and suicidality. Below is a summary of the Institute's findings divided between childhood and adolescence, early and middle adulthood, and later adulthood.

Findings of Institute of Medicine's Systematic Review on LGBT Mental Health & Suicidality	
Childhood & Adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ LGB youth are at increased risk for suicidal ideation, attempted suicide and depression. This increased risk appears to be consistent across age group, gender, race and self-identified orientation. A few studies with small nonprobability samples suggest the same is true for transgender youth. ■ Potential risk factors for increased rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts specific to LGB youth include sexual-minority status, homophobic victimisation and stress, and family rejection.
Early & Middle Adulthood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ LGB adults appear to be more likely than heterosexual adults to experience depression both over a period of 12 months and over a lifetime. Very limited research on transgender adults and depression has been undertaken, but studies conducted on convenience samples suggest elevated rates of risk among this population. ■ Studies suggest that LGB adults are more likely than heterosexual adults to report suicidal ideation and behaviour. Some evidence indicates that suicidal ideation and behaviour may vary by sexual orientation and gender. Studies of transgender adults suggest their rates of suicidal ideation and behaviour may be comparable to or higher than those in LGB adults.
Later Adulthood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Depression levels and suicidality appear to be elevated among older lesbians and gay men. Less research has been conducted in this area among bisexual and transgender elders.

National Research

The *My World Survey* (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012) is the most comprehensive study of youth mental health in Ireland to date and it found that there was a clear link between sexual orientation and psychological distress. The findings reveal a significant relationship between sexual orientation and depression, anxiety and stress. Young adults who described themselves as heterosexual were more likely to report normal levels of distress, while those who described themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual or who were not sure of their sexuality were less likely to do so.

The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland – a Report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan Group (Cannon et al, 2011) contains findings from two Irish epidemiological studies on the mental health of Irish youth.

The authors state in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual young people:

- “Our findings suggest that having a minority sexual orientation (i.e. being gay, lesbian or bisexual) increases young people’s risk of psychopathology and mental health in the 19-24 year age range. Young people who were bisexual and homosexual were over 4 times more likely to have a diagnosable mental disorder at the time of the study than their heterosexual counterparts.
- They were also over 7 times more likely to have experienced suicidal ideation, have engaged in suicidal acts or experienced a mood disorder and were 10 times more likely to have engaged in self harm than their heterosexual peers. As a group, they were also 10 times more likely to have had contact with psychiatric services than heterosexual young people.
- We also found that bisexual or homosexual young adults were over 7 times more likely to have experienced suicidal ideation, have engaged in suicidal acts or experienced a mood disorder than young people with a heterosexual orientation.
- The incidence of deliberate self-harm was also found to be substantially higher in this group and they were 10 times more likely to have engaged in deliberate self-harm than their heterosexual peers.
- As a group, they were also 10 times more likely to have had contact with psychiatric services than heterosexual young people” (page 33).

The *Supporting LGBT Lives* study (Mayock et al, 2009) was the first dedicated national study of the mental health of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Ireland. The key findings among the 1,110 Irish LGBT participants were:

- 27% had self-harmed and 85% of these did so more than once
- 16 years was the average age of first self-harming
- 40% of females and 20% of males had self-harmed
- 18% had attempted suicide and 85% saw their first attempt as related to stresses associated with their LGBT identity (e.g. fear of rejection by family or friends)
- 17.5 years was the average age of first suicide attempt
- 24% of females and 15% of males attempted suicide at least once
- Over a third of those aged 25 years and under had thought seriously about ending their lives within the past year and over 50% had done so at some time

The LGBTIreland study (Higgins et al) which has yet to be published and the findings of which have not yet been made public, indicates that LGBT self-harm and suicidality remain very significant issues in Ireland. Below are some key preliminary findings from the 2,257 participants which highlight that LGBT people, and LGBT youth in particular, continue to be a population group at risk for self-harm and suicidality:

- 35% had self-harmed and 90% of these did so more than once. The rate of self-harm among the 14-25 year old participants was 50% compared to 21% in the My World Survey. 57% stated their self-harm was related to being LGBT.
- 60% had ever seriously thought about ending their own life. The rate of suicidal ideation among the 14-25 year old participants was 65% compared to 51% in the 17-25 year old age group in the My World Survey. 58% stated their suicidal ideation was related to being LGBT.
- 21% had attempted suicide and 26% had done so in the previous year. The rate of attempted suicide among the 14-25 year old participants was 25% compared to 7% in the 17-25 year old age group in the My World Survey. 64% stated that their suicide attempt was related to being LGBT.

References

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About GLEN

The Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) is a policy and strategy focussed organisation which aims to deliver ambitious and positive change for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Ireland. Our work programmes address legal recognition and support for same-sex relationships and families; education; mental health; sexual health; community safety, workplace diversity and immigration. GLEN was a winner of a People of the Year award in 2010.

Odhrán Allen is GLEN's Director of Mental Health and our mental health programme is funded by the Health Service Executive and the National Office for Suicide Prevention. The GLEN mental health programme aims to prevent LGBT suicide and self-harm and to increase LGBT mental health resilience and wellbeing. To achieve this aim GLEN works in partnership with a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies and services including the National Office for Suicide Prevention, professional bodies, mental health services, the Mental Health Commission, LGBT organisations and mainstream mental health agencies. For more information about our work on mental health see: www.glen.ie/mentalhealth

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