Methodological Barriers to Research on LGBT Youth

Conducting research on the experiences of LGBT youth, the harassment and violence they endure, and the effects of this abuse on their mental health, physical health, and educational performance is fraught with technical challenges. A number of problems, including a lack of funding and political barriers that complicate researchers’ attempts to collect information from youth, make it difficult to capture a random, representative sample of LGBT youth. For example, a provision in the No Child Left Behind Act, which is discussed further in chapter 5, requires all school districts to develop written policies and procedures, in consultation with parents, regarding any third-party survey of students that includes questions about political affiliations or beliefs, mental problems, sexual attitudes or behavior, illegal or antisocial behavior, critical appraisals of family members, religious beliefs of the student or parent, or income.¹ (This would include, for example, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], which includes optional questions about sexual orientation and behavior as well as many other health issues.) At a minimum, these policies must specify how parents will be notified about such surveys and how they will be given the opportunity to prevent their children from participating in them.

As written, this provision does not dramatically influence researchers’ ability to collect information. Prior to the passage of the legislation, many schools chose to notify parents about all surveys administered to students, allowing parents to request that their child not participate. In practice, however, few parents exercise this opt-out option, and it has had no substantial impact on survey results.

By comparison, policies that require parents to opt in by sending in prior written permission, or “active permission” for participation, make collecting reliable data extremely difficult. Once in place, active parental
consent regulations make it virtually impossible to collect data on large representative samples of students in schools. At least three states—Alaska, New Jersey, and Utah—require the prior written informed consent of a parent before a survey can be administered to a student.\(^2\) Alaska’s opt-in law prevented the state from obtaining a high enough response rate for it to participate in the 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.\(^3\)

Although volunteer-based research methodologies, which use self-selecting participants, are commonly employed in many academic disciplines, they can be problematic for research on small, minority populations. For participants in studies about sexual orientation or gender identity, self-identification often comes with risk, both real and perceived. Consequently, LGBT research participants may choose to withhold information about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Even though most studies are anonymous, fear of the consequences of coming out still prevents many people from participating. The issues of self-selection and coming out tend to skew research on LGBT youth toward those who are most comfortable with their identities at younger ages and are more likely to experience negative outcomes, making more broadly-based research especially difficult.\(^4\)

Some argue that researchers who rely on self-selected volunteers are likely to overlook important developmental characteristics of those who experience same-sex attraction but do not necessarily consider themselves lesbian, gay, or bisexual.\(^5\) Because of the perception that being gay entails being harassed at school, some adolescents choose not to categorize themselves according to existing labels, instead describing their same-sex relationships in terms of desires or attractions. Consequently, studies that ask youth to self-identify as “lesbian” or “gay” yield lower numbers compared to studies that ask questions about same-sex attraction, sexual behavior, or both.\(^6\)

To address these problems, researchers use population-based data, which can include a large number of students in one region or even nationwide. Since the late 1980s, state and federal agencies have used this method to conduct surveys on a broad range of issues critical to teen health and safety. The CDC, for example, coordinates the nationwide Youth Risk Behavior Survey every two years. Although none of these population-based studies focuses exclusively on LGBT youth, answers to the questions they include about same-sex sexual behavior offer important and sometimes striking information about health and safety risks that disproportionately affect LGB students. Unfortunately, none of them includes questions specific to gender identity.
From Isolation to Activism
A Profile of Louie Garay

After coming out to several friends at his Catholic middle school when he was fourteen years old, Louie Garay began experiencing isolation and harassment—experiences that only grew stronger after he started attending an all-boys preparatory seminary high school. Because of inadequate support from teachers and school staff and a lack of dedication to his studies, Louie was expelled after his freshman year. Although this was quite stressful and upsetting at the time, leaving that school allowed Louie to transfer to Global Studies High School, closer to his home in Brooklyn, New York.

Fueled by his frustration at the inadequate support from his former school, Louie decided to become politically active and change his new school environment to make it more supportive. He learned of the annual Equality and Justice Lobby Day at the New York State Capitol in Albany, sponsored by the Empire State Pride Agenda (ESPA), and arranged for his new school to approve the trip. Despite meeting all requirements, school officials rejected the trip at the last minute. (It is unclear whether this was because of homophobic school officials or clerical errors.) Regardless, Louie, his mother, and a fellow classmate decided to join ESPA’s trip anyway. According to Louie, this event was the beginning of his activist journey.

After returning from Albany, Louie became more involved with ESPA and began participating in programs for youth at New York City’s LGBT community center. Louie and several of his classmates founded his high school’s first gay-straight alliance (GSA), which caused quite a stir in south Brooklyn. Shortly afterward, several school officials from neighboring districts who also wanted to start GSAs at their schools contacted Louie for assistance. The GSA had about twenty consistent members and worked with teachers and staff on school initiatives to provide a safe and supportive environment for LGBT students. For example, the GSA, along with other student groups, organized the school’s first No Name-Calling Week, which brought students, teachers, and staff to a new level of understanding of how bullying and verbal harassment causes a great deal of harm. Although much of Louie’s student activism and school involvement created opportunities for him to connect
with school officials and develop leadership skills, he still dealt with occasional harassment from students.

By the time Louie was a senior, he became a trailblazer at his school and a leader in the larger LGBT community in New York City. He collaborated with a variety of national LGBT rights organizations, including the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD); the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN); and PRIDE, a Puerto Rican LGBT group. He also participated in an initiative sponsored by Gay Men’s Health Crisis that supports young gay men of color who participate in the House and Ball community. Working with these and other groups, Louie conducted outreach and education to support LGBT youth and to prevent the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. During his final year at Global Studies High School, Louie even became the first openly gay president of the school’s student government.

While Louie developed into an out and proud leader at his high school, his mother became more politically active as a member of a Families of Color and Allies (FCA) chapter of the national support, education, and advocacy organization Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). As a result of her participation and Louie’s involvement with the group, he was asked to join the board of PFLAG–FCA as its youth advisor. Throughout Louie’s struggles in school, his parents grew from supportive confidants to active allies. His mother participated in numerous events to raise awareness of LGBT issues, and both parents opened their homes to several of Louie’s friends who became homeless after coming out to their families.

Louie’s unaltering activism also garnered national recognition. On June 29, 2009, he and his mother were chosen to represent PFLAG–FCA at the White House’s LGBT Pride reception. Wearing a brand new suit, which he purchased only hours before arriving, Louie met President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama as an out, young, gay man with his supportive, activist mother—an accomplishment he never thought possible. Participating in this historic event was a formative experience that, according to Louie, solidified his journey as an activist. Louie plans to continue inspiring other LGBT youth to realize their boldest dreams.
How Many LGBT Youth Are There?

The problems endemic to the scientific study of LGBT students make it difficult to determine exactly how many LGBT youth there are in the United States. Data from population-based studies allow for estimates of the prevalence of homosexuality and bisexuality among adolescents. (As of 2010, we could find no population-based studies that asked questions about gender identity.) How homosexuality and bisexuality is defined affects what percentage of the population is viewed as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Measuring attraction finds the highest rates, while measuring sexual behavior or self-identification reports lower rates. Various studies conducted over the past decade and a half indicate that the percentage of the population that is homosexual and bisexual is between 4 and 6 percent.¹⁰

The 1996 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a comprehensive study of more than twelve thousand youth in grades 7 through 12, found that 6 percent of participants between the ages of thirteen and eighteen reported same-sex attraction: 1 percent reported that they were only attracted to members of their own sex, and 5 percent reported attraction to both sexes.¹¹ Similarly, a 1999 review of eight population-based studies by the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State found that 4 to 5 percent of teens in secondary schools identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; had engaged in same-sex sexual activity; or had experienced same-sex attraction.¹² Additional surveys had similar findings:

- The 2001 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that 5 percent of respondents either self-identified as gay or bisexual or reported same-sex sexual experiences.¹³
- The 2001 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 3 percent of students reported same-sex sexual experiences.¹⁴

The 2002 National Survey of Family Growth found that 6.5 percent of men and 11 percent of women from fifteen to forty-four years of age reported a same-sex sexual experience. When asked if they thought of themselves as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or something else, 2.3 percent of men answered homosexual, 1.8 percent answered bisexual, and 5.7 percent said something else or did not give an answer (3.9 percent and 1.8 percent, respectively). Among women, 1.3 percent answered homosexual, 2.8 percent answered bisexual, and 5.6 percent said something else or did not give an answer (3.8 percent and 1.8 percent, respec-
Roughly 4.1 percent of respondents identified as homosexual or bisexual.\textsuperscript{15}

When questioned about their sexual attractions, 92 percent of men from eighteen to forty-four years of age said they were attracted only to women, 3.9 percent said mostly to women, and 3.2 percent said mostly to men or equally to men and women. For women, 86 percent said they were attracted only to men, 10 percent said mostly to men, and 3.4 percent said mostly to women or equally to men and women.\textsuperscript{16}

How one asks about sexual orientation affects response rates. A 2006 study reported that self-administered surveys that do not require a human interviewer find much higher rates of reported homosexuality and bisexuality. The study compared results from interviews involving a human interviewer and results using a technique called telephone audio computer-assisted self-interviewing (T-ACASI). Those taking the self-administered survey were 50 to 60 percent more likely to report same-sex attraction than those who took a traditional telephone survey with a human interviewer.\textsuperscript{17}

Very few studies estimate the transgendered population, because of the complexity associated with defining “transgender” and what one considers gender variant (a category that includes transsexuals, cross-dressers, androgynous people, and those who are gender nonconforming). In 1998, \textit{Time} magazine reported that an estimated twenty-five thousand Americans had had sex reassignment surgery and that another sixty thousand were candidates for it.\textsuperscript{18} The American Psychiatric Association estimates that one in thirty thousand adult men and one in one hundred thousand women undergo sex reassignment surgery.\textsuperscript{19} It is likely that the percentage and number of people who are transgender is much smaller than the share of the population that is gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

To estimate the number of LGBT youth in public schools in the United States, researchers should focus on students in public school grades 7 through 12 (ages thirteen through eighteen), because they are more likely to be aware of their sexual attractions, sexual orientation, or gender identity and out to their families and friends. For the 2007–8 school year, the U.S. Department of Education estimated that there were 22.4 million students in this grade range.\textsuperscript{20} Given the studies indicating that 4 to 6 percent of the U.S. population is homosexual or bisexual, we estimate that between 896,000 and 1.34 million students in grades 7 through 12 may identify as LGB. This estimate is conservative: it is likely that many youth either are afraid to report same-sex attraction on a sur-
vey or are simply not yet aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, it does provide a rough estimation of the number of students directly affected by school policies related to LGBT issues and anti-LGBT harassment or violence.

Transgender Youth

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including, but not limited to, transsexual people (who may or may not pursue medical treatments to change their bodies); cross-dressers (including drag queens and drag kings); and men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical. In its broadest sense, the term encompasses anyone whose identity or behavior falls outside of stereotypical gender norms. That includes people who do not self-identify as transgender but who are perceived as such by others and are thus vulnerable to the same social oppressions and physical violence as those who actually identify with any of these categories.21

Gender identity refers to how people understand themselves: as boys or girls, men or women, or something else altogether. Gender expression refers to all the ways that people express their gender identity to the outside world, including through dress, appearance, and behavior. Transgender youth include those who identify with a gender different from their birth sex. Some transgender youth are transsexual and may seek to modify their bodies through hormones and/or gender reassignment surgery in order to bring their physical appearance in line with their gender identity.22

Transgender and gender-nonconforming youth face significant challenges “integrating a complex gender identity with their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, personal characteristics, and family circumstances. They are faced not only with the task of developing a sexual identity, but also with reconciling their gender identity with the traditional gender expectations associated with their biological sex.”23 This can lead to increased risk of negative mental and physical health outcomes, as well as pervasive harassment and violence at school.24 According to GLSEN, transgender students are at great risk: over 53 percent report being physically harassed because of their gender expression, as compared with 44 percent of LGB students reporting physical harassment because of their sexual orientation. In other words, transgender students were 20 percent
more likely to suffer physical harassment than LGB students.25 One activist argues,

Given the bullying and discrimination faced by “sissy” boys, “tomboy” girls, gay teens, and [transgender] students, school administrators have a special obligation today to set an example of tolerance for diversity. They must make sure every student knows that gender stereotyping—and the violence that often accompanies it—no longer has a place in our nation’s schools.26

In general, transgender people may face constant danger of emotional or physical harm. For example, they encounter workplace discrimination, may be asked to show identification that does not match their identity, or may be obliged to use unsafe public restrooms several times each day. Given that transgender youth often do not have the same access to resources as adults do and that they may depend on adults who do not approve of their gender identity or expression, the harassment and discrimination they face can be even more pervasive given the younger ages at which transgender people are coming out.27

There are no longitudinal, population-based data on the prevalence or experiences of transgender youth in public schools. Of the 6,209 LGBT youth surveyed by GLSEN in 2007, 5 percent (297) identified as transgender, 4 percent (248) as “[an]other gender identity” (e.g., genderqueer, androgynous).28 These transgender students reported even higher levels of verbal harassment and physical assault than their non-transgender peers, were more likely to miss school due to safety concerns, and were more likely to report that they were not going to college.29

A study conducted in the United Kingdom in 2002 analyzed 124 transgender youth who were receiving mental health treatment at St. George’s Hospital in London.30 The average age of the youth in the program was eleven; 32 percent were biologically female, 66 percent were biologically male, and 2 percent were intersex, meaning they were born with ambiguous genitalia. Although 75 percent of the youth in the study stated that they wished they were of the opposite sex, only 21 percent stated a belief that they belonged to the opposite sex. Many of these youth exhibited problems at school and in social relationships:

• 16 percent of all the youth in the study and 28 percent of the females refused or were afraid to go to school.
• 11 percent did not attend school at all.
• 22 percent experienced discipline problems.
• 52 percent cited difficulty relating to their peers.
• 33 percent of all the youth and 43 percent of the males experienced harassment or persecution by their peers.

The study concluded that these youth require long-term support and understanding, particularly at school, given the higher incidence of harassment and violence they experience. The fact that boys were harassed more often may indicate that gender nonconformity is more socially acceptable for girls.31

Basing an estimate of the proportion of transgender youth in a school-age population primarily on a clinical subpopulation raises serious conceptual and methodological issues, and it may also overestimate the extent of mental health issues not gender-related in that subpopulation. Apart from the groundbreaking research conducted by GLSEN, the experiences of transgender youth have not been well documented. More inquiry is needed to better understand their experiences and what kinds of interventions might best mitigate the harassment and other obstacles they face. Breaking the silence around transgender issues, including positive representations of transgender individuals in the classroom, are important steps toward creating a more hospitable environment for all gender-nonconforming youth.32

**Judge Rules That School Must Allow Transgender Youth to Express Her Gender Identity While Attending School**

A Profile of “Pat Doe”

*Doe v. Yunits*, a case decided by a Massachusetts Superior Court in 2000, was the first reported case on behalf of a transgender student.33 The fifteen-year-old plaintiff, known only as “Pat Doe,” began wearing women’s makeup and clothing to school when she was in the seventh grade. Her outfits included tight skirts, high-heeled shoes, and a dress once worn to a semiformal dance. Although this attire was not so different from what many girls in Pat’s school wore, school officials singled her out and treated her differently because she was transgender.34

When Pat began eighth grade in the fall of 1999, the principal required that she report each morning so that he could determine
whether her clothing was appropriate. If Pat came to school in clothing deemed too feminine, she was sent home to change. She was frequently too upset to return. Eventually, Pat stopped going to school altogether. The next year, the administration told her she could not enroll if she continued to wear women’s clothing. Pat’s grandmother, “Jane Doe,” who had raised Pat since she was one month old, filed suit against the school district with the help of the Boston-based Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders.35

On October 12, 2000, superior court judge Linda E. Giles ruled that the school had discriminated against Pat on the basis of her sex by treating her differently from other girls simply because she was biologically male. She also ruled that Pat must be allowed to express her self-identified gender while attending school. The court explained that Pat’s decision to wear women’s clothing “is not merely a personal preference but a necessary symbol of her very identity.” Furthermore, to force her to wear male clothing would be to stifle her selfhood “merely because it causes some members of the community discomfort.” The school district’s attorney, Edward Lenox, argued that Pat’s wearing feminine clothing constituted a “pattern of behavior that has been disruptive.” Judge Giles responded that Pat could not be reprimanded for wearing clothing and accessories that would be considered acceptable on other female students. Furthermore, Judge Giles suggested that rather than view Pat as a disruption to the educational process, the situation could be seen as an educational opportunity. She wrote that “exposing children to diversity at an early age serves the important social goals of increasing their ability to tolerate differences and teaching them respect for everyone’s unique personal experience.”36

When Pat returned to school, twenty of her fellow classmates, in a show of protective solidarity, shielded their friend from the media and urged the public to be more sensitive. As they walked home with Pat on her second day back, a friend remarked, “[She’s] mad cool. I don’t know why people have to hate . . . [her]; all they have to do is get to know [her].”37 Six months after the ruling, Pat’s attorney, Jennifer Levi, remarked on the significance of the case. “Now schools know,” she said, “that they can easily and happily incorporate a transgender student.”38
Intersex Youth

Like LGBT youth, youth with intersex conditions suffer the negative consequences of not fitting into prevailing ideas about sex and gender. The term *intersex* refers to a variety of conditions in which a person has or had reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definition of “male” or “female.” Intersex youth are distinct from transgender youth and can have any sexual orientation or gender identity. Overall, there are at least fifteen different medical causes of intersexuality, and only a small percentage of these cases result in ambiguous genitalia at birth. Other intersex conditions manifest at puberty, while still others manifest later in life. Frequencies of intersex conditions range widely, from “late-onset adrenal hyperplasia,” found in 1 in 66 births, to “complete gonadal dysgenesis,” found in 1 in 150,000 births.

Doctors perform surgery on one or two babies per thousand births in an effort to “correct” ambiguous genitalia. The Intersex Society of North America, along with other groups, reports that these surgeries are harmful to many intersex people and that performing cosmetic genital surgery on infants is often not in the best interest of the child. Instead, they recommend that a child be assigned and raised either male or female and be given choices when older about whether or not to pursue surgery.

At school, where anti-LGBT attitudes reinforce prevailing notions about what it means to be a girl or a boy, intersex youth are likely to feel great discomfort and shame about their intersex status. Intersex youth may live in fear of others learning of their condition. Education about the existence of intersex individuals is a necessary first step to eradicating this fear. Greater understanding and acceptance of the fluidity of sex and gender would benefit not only intersex youth but all young people who exhibit gender-nonconforming characteristics.

Gender Nonconformity: Making the Connection

Research on anti-LGBT violence in public schools has focused heavily on sexual orientation. As students identify as gay or lesbian at younger ages, they are harassed in school at younger ages. This simple correlation, however, does not account for the majority of violence and harassment that occurs in elementary and middle schools—sometimes long before
these youth are even aware of sexual orientation and gender identity issues. Even in high school, a girl who is certain of her heterosexual identity may be called “dyke” simply because she has short hair and plays softball. This is because a lot of anti-LGBT harassment is actually a response to gender nonconformity, or behavior and mannerisms that do not match socially acceptable standards of behavior for males and females.

Gender-conforming children are those who prefer sex-typical activities and same-sex playmates; gender-nonconforming children are those who prefer sex-atypical activities and opposite-sex playmates. Not all children who exhibit primarily gender-nonconforming behavior grow up to identify as LGBT. Many—perhaps most—grow up to be heterosexual, and all youth, regardless of their sexual orientation, exhibit some behaviors that could be perceived as gender nonconforming. Regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, many youth experience violence and harassment because they do not conform to gender-stereotypical behavior in their attire, interests, or mannerisms. Violations of these stereotypes and gender roles (which can be as innocuous as a boy who is more artistic than athletic) may cause harassment and victimization that begins long before a child is aware of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity.

Youth who are gender nonconforming and identify as LGBT may be even more likely to experience harassment. A 1998 study of school counselors’ experiences with lesbian and gay students found that the majority of reported incidents of harassment targeted male students who acted “too feminine.” The 2002 Preventing School Harassment Survey, which surveyed over twenty-four hundred students in California, found that nearly a quarter (23 percent) of all students were harassed because they were not “as masculine as other guys” or “as feminine as other girls.” LGB students were nearly twice as likely (42 percent) and transgender students were nearly three times as likely (62 percent) to report harassment based on gender nonconformity.

A 2006 study supported by the National Institute of Mental Health confirms the link between gender atypical behavior and verbal, physical, and sexual harassment or violence, referred to by the researchers as sexual orientation violence (SOV). A two-year longitudinal study of 528 LGB youth ages fifteen to nineteen found that those who were considered gender atypical in childhood experienced more victimization and suffered more long-term mental health consequences.
Three fourths of the youth felt different from their peers as they were growing up. This perception of difference occurred, on average, at about age 8, or in late childhood. This is a period in which gender expectations become increasingly salient to children, and their sex role–related behavior comes under increasing scrutiny and evaluation by parents, peers, and school personnel.

Youth who felt different, were called sissies or tomboys by others including parents, and who were discouraged by parents from acting in gender atypical ways experienced significantly more lifetime verbal and physical SOV than those who did not have these experiences. Gender atypical youth were verbally attacked for the first time at earlier ages, if they felt different, were considered different, or were called sissy or tomboy by parents. As to physical SOV, youth reporting gender atypicality received more physical attacks during their lifetime. First physical attacks occurred at earlier ages for youth who were called sissies or tomboys and who reported that their parents discouraged their gender atypicality.

When they were growing up, over half of the males in this study were called sissies, and two-thirds of the females were called tomboys. Gender atypical behavior also elicited negative responses from parents, which, for a small percentage, ranged from punishing or restricting the behavior of their children to sending their children to therapy. Youth who were called sissies or tomboys when they were growing up were two to three times more likely to meet the diagnosis criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder than those who were never called sissies or tomboys.

LGBT Youth of Color: The “Tricultural” Experience

In GLSEN’s 2007 National School Climate Survey, 6 percent of LGBT youth identified as African American/black; 13 percent as Hispanic or Latino/a; 4 percent as Asian Pacific Islander; 6 percent as Native American, American Indian, or Alaska Native; and 5 percent as multiracial. Although youth from minority communities face challenges that reflect the unique multidimensionality of their lives, there is a paucity of research about the intersection of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation among youth. In GLSEN’s survey, a little more than half of the LGBT youth of color experienced verbal harassment based on their race or eth-
nicity. LGBT youth of color may confront a “tricultural” experience: they face homophobia from their respective racial or ethnic group, racism from within a predominantly white LGBT community, and a combination of the two from society at large. They are also at increased risk for being stigmatized and bullied in school because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as their race or ethnicity. Feeling that they must choose between various aspects of their identity can be particularly burdensome.

Research into the influence of ethnicity on the development of a sexual orientation indicates that some milestones in identity development, such as labeling same-sex attractions and same-sex romantic or sexual involvement, are consistent among all ethnicities, while others, such as disclosing to family members and having opposite-sex romantic and sexual relationships, vary according to ethnic group. A small study of fifteen minority gay male youth found no difference between racial or ethnic groups when analyzing the disclosure of sexual orientation. Instead, attitudes toward marriage and religion and the use of a second language played a much larger role in coming out. Racial or ethnic minority youth who had families with more “traditional” values were less likely to come out at all. A larger study published in 2006 found significant differences between racial and ethnic groups in being out to one’s parents. Unfortunately, there is no research comparing how transgender youth of color and white youth develop and disclose their gender identities.

LGBT youth of color are likely to face different challenges and stresses in consolidating their racial, ethnic, and sexual identities than white, non-Hispanic LGBT youth. The significance of sexuality can vary greatly among different cultural and ethnic groups. Identity is influenced, in part, by such cultural factors as values and beliefs regarding sexuality, stereotypes about gender roles and expectations about childbearing, religious values and beliefs, and the degree of acculturation or assimilation into mainstream society. The tight-knit family structures important to many immigrant communities and communities of color can make the coming-out process more difficult for some LGBT youth. As Trinity Ordona, a cofounder of Asian/Pacific Islander PFLAG in San Francisco notes, “The families are the core of the culture. When a gay Asian comes out and gets kicked out of the family, it’s like being severed from the heart. But if you get the family on your side they will stand and protect you.”

For children, racial and ethnic identity is an important point of com-
monality with their families, which provide a vital support system for living in a society in which racism persists. Even when children experience hostility in the outside world because of their race or ethnicity, they come home to a supportive environment anchored by a shared culture. In contrast, LGBT youth cannot expect to find similar support around sexuality or gender issues at home. In addition, conservative religious beliefs dominate some ethnic minority and immigrant communities. Two-thirds of the 2,700 Black Pride Survey respondents in the year 2000 said homophobia was a problem in the black community. Forty-three percent reported mostly negative experiences in black churches and mosques, while another 31 percent reported equally positive and negative experiences.

The age at which youth become aware of same-sex attraction and the degree to which they are comfortable coming out to school friends may vary along racial and ethnic lines. Though not generalizable to all LGBT youth, a study of 139 gay men found that Latinos became aware of their same-sex attraction at a younger age compared to white and African American youth. White youth, however, were more likely to come out to their families. The same study found that Asian American youth were more likely to have sex at an earlier age—three years earlier, on average—than other racial or ethnic groups. The majority of African American youth in the study engaged in sex before labeling their sexual identity, while Asian American youth overwhelmingly engaged in sex only after labeling themselves as gay or bisexual. A 1996 study reported that African American youth had more optimistic attitudes than whites about coming out to their friends, believing that their heterosexual peers would accept them. Most had already come out to their best friends with positive results.

Some researchers have proposed that there are differences in the coming-out process based on race and culture. In one study, Asian American, African American, and Latino youth were less likely than white youth to disclose their sexual orientation to family members. Low levels of disclosure of sexual orientation to others were associated with higher levels of internalized homophobia among Latino and Asian American youth. This dynamic was not the case for African American and white youth. White youth may be more likely to hide their sexual orientation in school, citing fears of harassment and violence. Some researchers suggest that white adolescent students feel less comfortable coming out because they are not accustomed to minority status and have not developed the same coping skills as minority youth.
LGBT youth of color often experience racism in white-dominated LGBT communities, organizations, and support networks, which may disproportionately be of service to white, suburban, middle-class LGBT youth. Such LGBT communities may offer fewer resources for urban youth, who are more likely to be black or Latino, and the institutions that do exist may be perceived as “white,” inaccessible, or irrelevant to their experiences. For example, some students in a California high school reported that the local Project 10 program, a chapter of the first major school-based program developed to provide education and counseling on the subject of sexual orientation, did not serve the purpose for which it was intended. During the 1997–98 academic year, Lance McCready investigated the reasons why black gay males were reluctant to be involved with Project 10. About one of the students interviewed, the researcher wrote,

At [the high school], where social groups are often defined by race, identifying himself as gay (a social identity he and other Black students perceived as White) in every situation would put him at odds with his Black peers. Consequently, he chose to de-emphasize his sexuality and involve himself in extracurricular clubs and activities (such as student government) that are legitimated by Black students. Downplaying his sexuality also meant that Project 10 was off limits—to align himself with Project 10 meant risking harassment and public ridicule.

Although sizable and well-organized LGBT communities of color exist, particularly in large urban areas, LGBT youth of color may choose not to connect with them because they fear they will be harassed by their peers. Though these youth are stigmatized on the basis of both race and sexual orientation or gender identity, many find inadequate support as they navigate among three, often compartmentalized communities.

The few researchers and educators who have examined the relationship between sexuality, race, and the harassment faced by LGBT youth of color often treat LGBT students’ race as an add-on to their sexuality or gender identity. Initiatives to make schools safer for LGBT students and to integrate LGBT issues into the curriculum sometimes lack an understanding of how the experiences of youth of color differ from those of white LGBT students. The information that is available seems to assume that because of the stigma of being both a racial and sexual minority, LGBT youth of color have a more difficult school experience. However,
that may not always be the case. One researcher found that African American youth who experience same-sex attraction actually had significantly higher self-esteem than their white, Asian, or Hispanic peers. While these findings do not discount other studies that have documented the negative experiences of LGBT youth of color, they do highlight the need for more research on the different ways that white youth and youth of color cope with coming out at school.

Children of LGBT Parents

Historically, estimates of the number of children in the United States being raised by gay or lesbian parents ranged widely from one to fourteen million. More recent analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that over 270,000 children were living in households headed by same-sex couples in 2005. (There are no available estimates on the number of children who have a parent who identifies as bisexual or transgender.)

Estimates of the number of lesbian or gay parents in the United States range from two to eight million. U.S. Census data also provide estimates of the number of unmarried same-sex couples with children. Of the nearly six hundred thousand same-sex couples counted in the 2000 census, 34 percent of female unmarried-partner households (i.e., lesbian or bisexual female couples) and 22 percent of male unmarried-partner households (i.e., gay or bisexual male couples) had at least one child under the age of eighteen living with them. The percentage of unmarried female same-sex couples is not that much lower than the percentage of married opposite-sex households with children (46 percent) or the percentage of unmarried opposite-sex households with children (43 percent).

These children are enrolled in schools throughout the United States, not just in urban areas. For example, the following rates of parenting by female or male same-sex unmarried partners were reported by the U.S. Census in predominantly rural states:

- Alaska: 37 percent of unmarried same-sex male couples and 39 percent of unmarried same-sex female couples
- Mississippi: 31 percent of unmarried same-sex male couples and 44 percent of unmarried same-sex female couples
- South Dakota: 34 percent of unmarried same-sex male couples and 42 percent of unmarried same-sex female couples
Analysis of census data also revealed some interesting statistics regarding the intersection of LGB parenting with race and ethnicity: black and Latino same-sex couples were nearly twice as likely as white same-sex couples to be raising children. In a 2000 survey of LGBT African Americans, 21 percent of respondents reported being biological parents, and 2 percent reported being adoptive or foster parents. Another study found that one in four black lesbians lived with a child for whom she had child-rearing responsibilities, while only 2 percent of black gay men reported households with children. Clearly, many LGB people are parents, and parenting appears to be even more prevalent among LGB people of color.

LGBT individuals pursue different paths to parenthood. Some have children from previous or current heterosexual relationships; others have children after coming out, through donor insemination, surrogacy, or adoption. Some parents are couples; others are single parents. The vast majority of professional organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Psychological Association (APA), recognize that gay and lesbian parents are just as good at parenting as heterosexual parents and that children thrive in gay- and lesbian-headed families. As one APA publication reports, “not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents.” These conclusions are likely true of bisexual parents as well. Although there is a lack of research focusing specifically on bisexual parents, it is highly probable that there are bisexuals in the same-sex couples included in the samples of many of these studies.

Debate over same-sex marriage and other laws and policies that affect the ability of LGBT people to foster or adopt children has focused on whether the development of sexual orientation or gender identity and the psychological and personal development of children raised in families headed by same-sex couples differs significantly from the development of children raised by heterosexual parents. However, research has found little difference in the psychological adjustment and well-being of children raised by gay or lesbian parents.

More than 25 years of research on the offspring of non-heterosexual parents has yielded results of remarkable clarity. Regardless of whether researchers have studied the offspring of divorced lesbian and gay parents or those born to lesbian or gay parents, their findings have been similar. Regardless of whether researchers have
studied children or adolescents, they have reported similar results. Regardless of whether investigators have examined sexual identity, self-esteem, adjustment, or qualities of social relationships, the results have been remarkably consistent. In study after study, the offspring of lesbian and gay parents have been found to be at least as well adjusted overall as those of other parents.89

In fact, research on gay or lesbian families with children suggests that the quality of parenting is far more influential in the development of children than is the gender90 or sexual orientation91 of parents.92 For example, a study of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found no statistically significant difference in delinquency, victimization, and substance use between children being raised in families headed by female same-sex parents and those headed by different-sex parents. Rather, good family relationships were associated with lower tobacco, drug, and alcohol use.93 Another study of the same data found that “regardless of family type, adolescents whose parents described closer relationships with them reported higher quality peer relations and more friends in school.”94

While the overall health and well-being of children in gay- or lesbian-parent families is very similar to those in heterosexual-parent families, research has found differences, likely related to family structure and environment, that many would consider positive.

Without a doubt, many differences between children growing up in lesbian-, gay-, and heterosexual-parented homes do exist. For instance, the young adult offspring of lesbian mothers report feeling fewer antigay sentiments than do the offspring of heterosexual mothers. With regard to parental divisions of labor within couples, lesbian mothers report sharing child-care duties more evenly than do heterosexual parents. Although not relevant to policy debates, these and other differences have been reported in the research literature.95

Researchers have also begun to identify the effect that societal homophobia may be having on the children of LGBT parents. A study that compared children raised by lesbian parents in the United States with children raised by lesbian parents in the Netherlands found that the children in the United States were less likely to be open about having lesbian mothers and experienced more homophobia.96 According to Abigail
Garner, the founder of Families Like Mine, an organization dedicated to decreasing the isolation of people who have LGBT parents and giving voice to their experiences, “It wasn’t having a gay father that made growing up a challenge, it was navigating a society that did not accept him and, by extension, me.”

Homophobia also leads to harassment and violence against the children of LGBT parents at school. A 1998 study of school counselors and their perceptions of the gay and lesbian students in their schools found that many of the students targeted for harassment had gay or lesbian parents. Nearly one-third of the twenty-four hundred students in the seventh through twelfth grades who participated in the Preventing School Harassment Survey in California disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school is safe for students with LGBT parents.

In one school, a sixth-grader was labeled a “fag” by classmates who discovered that he had lesbian parents. Other children would point pencils at his behind and make sexual innuendos, while teachers who witnessed this harassment failed to intervene. The harassment spiraled out of control, culminating in physical violence. He was thrown against his locker and kicked in the head by a boy wearing cleats. Moments later, he yelled at one of his attackers, and he was later punished for using inappropriate language. His mothers, with the help of a lawyer, quickly had their son transferred to another school.

Analysis of data from the National Lesbian Family Study found that at ten years old, 43 percent of children in the study reported experiencing homophobia:

At first when I was in second grade some kids said some things to me on the bus. Now they don’t. . . . I ignored them. I felt bad.

The only time I remember is once last year a girl told me my moms were going to hell. I probably turned away and told a teacher. It’s hard to remember [how I felt]—probably sad, definitely annoyed, not at the point of tears.

Teachers don’t allow kids to make negative comments about skin color or gender, but they don’t stop them from saying negative things about gays.
Children in this study also reported that schools were less likely to reprimand students for making homophobic comments than for sexist, religious, or ethnic insults.\textsuperscript{102}

In 2008, GLSEN released the results of a survey of 588 LGBT parents of a child in grades K–12 (in public or private school) and 154 students in middle or high school with an LGBT parent. Nearly 60 percent of parents reported that they were “sometimes,” “often,” or “frequently” worried that their children will have problems in school because of having an LGBT parent. Nearly one-quarter of the youth in the study reported that they felt unsafe at school because of having an LGBT parent. Sixty-four percent of students heard derogatory, homophobic remarks in school “frequently” or “often,” and 18 percent “frequently” or “often” heard negative remarks specifically because of having an LGBT parent. Even more students (28 percent) heard negative remarks about LGBT families from school faculty or staff.\textsuperscript{103}

There is very little research specifically on the children of transgender parents. A small study published in the \textit{International Journal of Transgenderism} in 1998 noted that opposition to transsexuals’ continuing in a parenting role during and after their transition to the opposite sex is still very high among psychiatrists, psychologists, and society at large. This opposition is largely due to unsubstantiated concerns that the children of transgender parents will be confused about their own gender identity during critical years of child development and will be subjected to bullying and ostracism at school. However, the small body of research that is available does not support these concerns. A small study of eighteen children, each with one transsexual parent, found that none became transsexual, despite continued contact with their transsexual parent, and that only three of them experienced some teasing when their peers found out about their parents. In each case, it was quickly resolved with the help of supportive teachers and school administrators.\textsuperscript{104} The fourteen-year-old daughter of a female-to-male transsexual parent summarized her experience in this way:

My mother is not happy in the body she is in. My mom is a lot happier since starting to live as who she wants to be. When I was thirteen, my mother said, “I want to be a man; do you care?” I said, “No. As long as you are the same person inside and still love me. I don’t care what you are on the outside.” It’s like a chocolate bar; it’s got a new wrapper, but it’s the same chocolate inside.\textsuperscript{105}
While further research is needed on the experiences of children with transgender parents, the author of this 1998 study concluded that these children are more likely to be hurt by a traumatic separation from their parent than because of that parent’s gender identity.

Children of LGBT parents hear messages—from society, from their school-age peers, and even from school personnel—that their families are, at best, nontraditional or, at worst, a threat to them and to Western civilization. Heterocentric assumptions are pervasive in society and tolerated, if not magnified, in public schools. Most early childhood educational programs and teachers are ill-equipped to address the needs of these youth. So the inclusion of LGBT parents in school partnership can only aid students.

It is well established that the development of school, family, and community partnerships can help children succeed in school and later in life. By extension, it can be assumed that efforts to improve communication among school professionals, sexual minority parents, and the entire school community will be a tremendous help to the success of children with sexual minority parents.

Educators and administrators who work to create safer and more inclusive schools assist not only LGBT-identified students but also children in LGBT families and children who come from other nontraditional families.

**LGBT Youth in Foster Care**

An estimated 5 to 10 percent of youth in the foster care system are gay or lesbian. The lack of institutional acknowledgment of LGBT youth in foster care leads to a hostile atmosphere that forces them to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity and subjects them to physical, verbal, and emotional harassment and abuse. One of the problems faced by transgender youth in foster care is not being allowed to dress according to their gender identity. One study found that 78 percent of LGBT youth ran away from foster homes because of the hostile treatment they received due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Sadly, 100 percent of LGBT youth surveyed in group homes run by New York City’s Administration on Children’s Services reported being verbally harassed, and 70 percent suffered physical abuse because of their sexual orientation.

Youth in the foster care system are also more likely to encounter
difficulty finding a long-term living situation and to suffer multiple interrup-
tions in their education. This discontinuity, combined with their experience of harassment and alienation in schools, places these students at an elevated risk for dropping out. The New York City Child Welfare Administration, the Council of Family and Child Care Agencies, and the Child Welfare League of America have all endorsed reforming the foster care system to better aid LGBT youth.\textsuperscript{113}

**Homeless LGBT Youth**

Though the number of homeless youth who identify as LGBT is difficult to determine, the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services estimates that anywhere from 20 to 40 percent of homeless adolescents identify as gay or lesbian.\textsuperscript{114} It has been estimated that more than 40 percent of homeless youth in large cities like New York and Los Angeles are LGBT.\textsuperscript{115} Additional research shows that over one-third (35 percent) of homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.\textsuperscript{116} According to a 2002 report by the Urban Justice Center, 4 to 10 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system in New York identify as LGBT.\textsuperscript{117} The 1991 National American Indian Adolescent Health Survey found that gay Native American youth were significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers (28 percent vs. 17 percent, respectively) to have run away from home within the previous twelve months.\textsuperscript{118}

A 2002 study was the first to compare the risks faced by homeless LGBT youth to those faced by their heterosexual counterparts. From 1995 to 1998, data were collected from homeless youth thirteen to twenty-one years of age. The majority of participants identified as white (53 percent) and heterosexual (78 percent). Of the 22 percent of the participants who identified as other than heterosexual, 85 percent identified as bisexual, with only 14 percent identifying as exclusively gay or lesbian. Only one participant (1 percent) identified as transgender.\textsuperscript{119}

The study indicated that LGBT youth and heterosexual youth left their homes for similar reasons, including an inability to get along with their parents and domestic violence. But LGBT youth left their homes, returned, and ran away again almost twice as frequently. LGBT youth were also more likely to leave home as a result of physical abuse and parental alcoholism. Only twelve LGBT youth (14 percent) said that they ran away because of conflicts with their families over their sexual orientation. The LGBT homeless youth experienced higher levels of victimization than
their heterosexual counterparts, and since the time that they first became homeless, gay male homeless youth had been sexually victimized more frequently than their heterosexual counterparts. These youth were also more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol and experienced a higher incidence of the symptoms of depression. The LGBT homeless youth had sex with more partners and were also younger, at an average age of thirteen, when they had their first sexual experience. The majority also reported that they did not use a condom during sex “most of the time.”

While the process of coming out to family and friends at school is difficult for the majority of LGBT youth, many are fortunate enough to have a support network to rely on for guidance and acceptance. This is almost completely absent for homeless LGBT youth, who were almost entirely ignored by researchers and policymakers until recently. The homeless shelters that exist are often segregated by sex and do not properly integrate transgender youths according to their gender identity. Left on their own to support themselves, many LGBT youth are arrested for “survival” crimes, such as robbery or sex work.

**LGBT Youth and Their Families**

LGBT youth often feel estranged from their families because they feel the need to hide their emerging sexual orientation or gender identity. One study found that coming out or being discovered as gay by family or friends, along with antigay harassment, induced the most common stressors among youth. This stress is magnified when youth are prematurely discovered to be gay by their parents, which happened to 33 percent of the predominantly black and Hispanic gay and bisexual male adolescents interviewed in a 1996 study. A slightly higher percentage (38 percent) chose to disclose their sexual orientation to their parents. Youth who voluntarily tell their parents about their sexual orientation are more likely to come out to their mothers than to their fathers. In 1998, a study found that 60 to 80 percent of gay and lesbian youth came out to their mothers, while 30 to 65 percent chose to come out to their fathers. A study of 528 LGB youth that was published in 2006 had similar findings: approximately 60 percent came out to their mothers, but only 27 percent told their fathers.

When parents find out that their child is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, responses range from warm acceptance to open hostility. A study published in 1987 found that 26 percent of adolescent males were
forced to leave their homes because of their families’ conflict over their sexual orientation. Available research indicates that the experiences of gay and lesbian youth who come out to their parents have not gotten much better over time. A 1993 study of 120 lesbian and gay men ages fourteen to twenty-one found that 42 percent of the women and 30 percent of the men reported negative responses from their families after coming out to them. A study published in 1996 found that only 11 percent of gay and lesbian youth experienced supportive responses after coming out to their parents, while 20 percent of mothers and 28 percent of fathers were rejecting or completely intolerant.

There is little academic research available on how parents react to the gender expression of their transgender children. However, in one small study of twenty-four transgender youth ages fifteen to twenty-one, between 35 and 73 percent reported being “sometimes” or “often” verbally abused by their parents because of their gender expression, and between 13 and 36 percent reported “sometimes” or “often” being physically abused. These youth were more likely to report attempting suicide than those who experienced less abuse at the hands of their parents.

A groundbreaking study published in 2009 in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics was the first to examine the relationship between family rejection of LGB youth and the development of health and mental health problems in adulthood. This survey of 224 LGB young adults (ages 21 to 25) found that higher rates of family rejection were significantly correlated with negative health outcomes. Participants who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse, compared with LGB youth who reported no or low levels of family rejection.

The Strength and Resiliency of LGBT Youth

Because many researchers and advocacy groups passionately advocate for the safety of LGB youth, a lot of information is collected regarding the difficulties these youth face. (Unfortunately, there has been less attention paid specifically to the experiences of transgender youth, good and bad.) While the existing research is significant in establishing the need for nondiscrimination policies, gay-straight alliances (in-school
support groups for LGBT, questioning, and straight students), and other policy interventions, many LGBT youth are happy, healthy, and display remarkable strength and resiliency. Even after they experienced harassment or violence at school, some youth reported feeling well supported and cared about because of the interventions of friends, family, or school administrators. “I don’t feel as scared as I did. I’m a whole lot angrier now,” asserted one youth. “[I am] much stronger. Very sure of who I am,” said another. Many youth are also able to use these negative experiences to develop self-empowering, proactive behaviors. According to one youth, “I joined a club at school to combat racism, sexism and homophobia. Hopefully that will help.” Another reported, “[Harassment] has made me a lot more active, made me try to push harder to fix what’s wrong at my school.”

Many LGBT youth are also thriving in their school environments and are proud of who they are and what they are accomplishing. They have remarkable strengths, talents, and skills at their disposal; are able to develop positive and productive coping strategies; and can tap into existing support networks or even create their own. They do not just advocate for themselves; they also educate their peers and teachers in the process. For example, in Massachusetts in 1993, hundreds of LGBT youth successfully lobbied the legislature to pass a law banning sexual orientation discrimination in the state’s public schools. It was the first time most legislators had met an openly gay youth. Many LGBT students are also one another’s role models and sources of support, learning from each other’s experiences. Through these experiences, they gain a sense that they can make a difference and contribute positively to their communities.

While the statistics regarding LGBT youth and suicide demand immediate intervention, a large study of 11,940 adolescents revealed that the majority of the sexual minority youth who were surveyed (85 percent of males and 72 percent of females) reported no suicidal ideation at all. Another study of 221 LGB youth found that participants who had not considered or attempted suicide “possessed internal and external qualities that enabled them to cope well in the face of discrimination, loneliness, and isolation.”

What are those “internal and external qualities”? New research has found that when youth are in environments that support the development of their sexual orientation or gender identity safely, they can thrive emotionally and psychologically. For example, a study of 350 youth ages fifteen to nineteen who attended LGBT youth support programs in the New York City area found that participation in a same-sex relationship
increased self-esteem in males and decreased internalized homophobia in girls. This suggests, for example, that schools that treat students in same-sex and opposite-sex dating relationships equally, such as by allowing LGBT youth to take a same-sex date to the prom, are helping to support healthy developmental milestones.

Still, little attention has been given to explaining why the majority of sexual minority youth grow up to be healthy despite widespread homophobia. The small but growing body of research on protective factors that support resilience in LGBT youth in schools has found a number of unique protective factors, including

- school policies that explicitly prohibit harassment based on sexual orientation;
- teacher training to create supportive school climates;
- social supports geared toward sexual minority students, whether in the form of peer support in school clubs or institutional support through clearly identified policies, resources, and support for sexual minority students.

In fact, research in California has found that when students attend schools that have

- (1) specific anti-harassment policies, (2) teachers who intervene when they hear slurs, (3) a GSA or similar student club, and (4) information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity, they score higher on multiple scales of resilience, including feeling that adults care, feeling that teachers are fair, and feeling that students have a voice and can make contributions at their school.

Section 2 of this book includes a more detailed review and analysis of these school-based policies that can significantly influence the experiences of LGBT youth. The need for more research on LGBT youth and resiliency is discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

Of course, it would be far better for youth to develop increased self-esteem and personal acceptance without having to deal with harassment and violence in the first place. In many of the cases discussed in the next chapter, parents and school administrators do little or nothing to protect them. School districts that believe they do not need to address the needs of LGBT students or, worse, that they “have no gay or lesbian students” are woefully mistaken.