

Victimization for sexual orientation increases suicidal behavior in college students

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The film and television series “M*A*S*H” featured the song “Suicide is Painless,” but new research refutes that idea and indicates that being victimized because of sexual orientation is a chief risk factor for suicidal behavior among gay, lesbian and bisexual college students.

The study is the first to explore the link between victimization and suicidal behavior among college students. In the course of the study, University of Washington researcher Heather Murphy also uncovered a group of students who previously had not been studied and are at increased risk for suicidal behavior. These students identified themselves as heterosexual, but also reported being attracted to people of the same sex or engaging in same-sex behavior.

This group was three times as likely as heterosexuals to have made a plan to commit suicide in the past year and six times more likely to have actually attempted suicide in the same period. Gay, lesbian and bisexual students also were at increased risk for suicidal behavior. They were twice as likely as heterosexuals to have planned and to have attempted suicide in the previous year.

Murphy did the research for her doctoral dissertation in educational psychology, which she recently completed. The research was based on questionnaires containing 86 questions answered anonymously by more than 500 undergraduate UW students. Fifty-six of those students said they had seriously considered suicide in the previous 12 months. A dozen of them attempted suicide. Two students required medical treatment and recovered. Half of the suicide attempts and both of the cases requiring medical attention involved same-sex attracted heterosexuals.

“A lot of people stop thinking about sexual orientation related victimization and suicide as a problem beyond the K-12 school years,” she said. “But suicide doesn’t stop after high school. I thought I wouldn’t find very much victimization in Seattle, and I certainly wasn’t expecting these kinds of numbers.”

The study was provoked by a question from a 15-year-old gay male while Murphy was working on an internship as a school psychologist at a high school. The youth, who was suicidal and using drugs, asked her, “Does it get better in college?” She didn’t know.

To find out Murphy recruited 528 participants – 404 heterosexuals, 79 same-sex attracted heterosexuals, 38 gays, lesbians and bisexuals, and 7 who said they were not sure of their sexual identity. The students ranged in age from 17 to 26, with a mean age of 19, and 63 percent of them were female.

Data from the questionnaires showed that gay, lesbian and bisexuals and the same-sex attracted heterosexuals experienced significantly more verbal and physical victimization than did heterosexual students. Verbal victimization included homophobic statements, hearing others talk about gays, lesbian and bisexuals in derogatory terms, and being harassed for their sexual orientation. Physical victimization included being physically threatened or assaulted and getting into fights. Murphy said victimization for some students was “pervasive” on campus while others didn’t want to go off campus because they feared being harassed or would only visit areas of Seattle popular with gays in groups.

“There is a lot of hype that gay kids are more suicidal,” she said. “My study shows that this is not

so. In my study, being victimized for being gay was the risk factor that increased suicidal- behavior risk.”

She said the high suicidal-behavior rate among the same-sex attracted heterosexuals was a surprise, primarily because researchers previously had not looked at them as a separate group. “I was shocked by the finding because the rate for these students was just off the charts,” Murphy said.

There are two possible explanations for this, according to Murphy. One is that these people are still in the process of determining their sexual identity and the period before they disclose that they might be gay, lesbian or bisexual is difficult and they engage in suicidal thinking.

“They are still trying to fit into the mainstream heterosexual society and are not willing to talk to friends or go to a queer center to talk about what they are experiencing,” she said. “The gay culture has a family feeling that is welcoming and shows pride. However, these students are not there yet so they may be feeling shame and homophobia.”

The second possibility is that many bisexuals make this identification later in their 20s when they come out, and at 19, the mean age of the students in the study, many students may not yet be at the point of coming out, said Murphy.

Source: University of Washington

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