

Same-sex marriage gives LGBTQ youth hope for future

16 October 2014, by Brian Mcneill

The fact that same-sex marriage is legal in Virginia and many other states will positively affect how LGBTQ youth perceive their futures and opportunities, according to a Virginia Commonwealth University expert.

Alex Wagaman, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the School of Social Work, researches LGBTQ youth at the intersections of multiple identities facing social and institutional marginalization and oppression.

She recently discussed her research and how the Supreme Court's move to allow same-sex marriage might affect the experiences of LGBTQ youth.

What can the research tell us about the typical experience of LGBTQ youth in this country prior to this historic change?

At this point, I'm not sure we can say much about the "typical" experience of an LGBTQ youth in the U.S. LGBTQ youth are found in every subpopulation within the U.S. Unfortunately, many of those subpopulations have not been well represented in most research on LGBTQ youth, particularly those from communities of color, undocumented young people, youth in rural areas and transgender or gender-nonconforming youth.

What the research does seem to indicate is that LGBTQ youth still consistently experience discrimination and harassment, as well as unequal treatment from the institutions that are in place to nurture their well-being, such as school. These experiences have been linked to increased risks for negative health and mental health outcomes, including suicide. Youth at intersections of multiple identities that experience marginalization and oppression have additional risks for unequal treatment from systems such as the juvenile justice system.

We also know that LGBTQ youth are incredibly resilient. We are just beginning to learn about the unique factors that support resilience among youth in this population.

Do you expect the fact that same-sex marriage is now legal in so many states to change that experience in any way? If so, how?

I definitely think it will change how LGBTQ youth perceive their futures and opportunities. I believe it gives them hope that civil rights and protections under the law can and will be achieved. We can't forget that many LGBTQ youth and [young adults](#) have been actively engaged in the efforts that created this change.

In places where same-sex marriage has been legal for several years now, how has that affected the experience of young LGBTQ people?

I have not seen research that has examined this. It is a very good question. I think in these parts of the country, other changes have been made in areas that more immediately impact LGBTQ youth, including the schools. I am not sure we can separate the multiple efforts that have been happening and tie one or another to the well-being of LGBTQ youth. Youth who live in communities where they are affirmed and supported do better.

Apart from the recent developments related to same-sex marriage, are there other policies remaining that affect LGBTQ youth in a negative way? Are there recommendations you'd make to change that?

Yes—there are a number of things that still need to be addressed. In many places across the country, LGBTQ youth and young adults face violence, discrimination in the areas of housing and employment, and other experiences of marginalization. HUD has recently made great

strides to end housing discrimination, but these policies are hard to monitor and LGBTQ young people often feel that they do not have any recourse if they experience discrimination. This is particularly true for LGBTQ youth who grew up in working-class or poor families, or are youth of color. Research estimates that 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ, many due to being pushed out by their families based on their identity. For transgender and gender-nonconforming youth, we have a very long way to go in terms of policies and practices to fully support them. We make it difficult to change legal documents to align with their gender identity, which is required for access to many services, employment, etc. We do not adequately protect them from threats of violence.

I think the bottom line is that marriage rights are important, but they are not the priority for many LGBTQ youth who are worried about how they will feed themselves, find a safe place to live and exist day to day without the fear of violence.

Could you tell me a little about your own research on LGBTQ youth?

My research is focused on LGBTQ youth at the intersections of multiple identities facing social and institutional marginalization and oppression. I am interested in their interactions with service providers, as well as how community based LGBTQ youth organizations meet their unique needs. I also use participatory action research as a way to engage LGBTQ [youth](#) and young adults in defining and researching the issues that are important and relevant to them.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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