

Supportive high schools help sexual minority males

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Supportive high school environments can make a difference to the mental health of male sexual minority students, according to a new study from the University of Auckland.

The study looked at the association between supportive high school environments linked to depressive symptoms and suicidal intentions among sexual [minority students](#).

"Our report suggests that the vulnerability of [sexual minority](#) students to discrimination, victimisation and poor mental health outcomes, may be affected by the environment of the school they attend," says lead author, Associate Professor Simon Denny from Child and Youth Health in the Department of Paediatrics.

"Male sexual minority students who attend schools with a generally supportive school environment, including support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students report lower rates of both depressive symptoms and suicide risk," says Dr Denny.

This is the first study internationally to use independent teacher ratings of their school's support for sexual minority students to examine school environments and mental health outcomes among same-sex attracted students.

In 2007 more than 9000 students from 96 high schools around New Zealand used internet tablets to complete a health and well-being survey that included questions on sexual attractions, depressive symptoms, and suicide risk.

Students reported their experience of supportive environments at school and LGBT bullying. Nearly 3000 teachers from participating schools completed questionnaires on aspects of the school environment, including how supportive their schools were toward sexual minority students.

"Our findings suggest that there may be benefits for sexual minority students in schools where a dual approach is taken to both increase the overall supportiveness of the school and specific strategies are used to promote the safety and well-being of sexually minority students in the school," says Dr Denny.

"Results indicated that the impact of a positive school environment was associated with reduced depressive symptoms and suicidal intentions in male, but not female sexual minority students," he says. "That's in line with it being known that male students are more likely than female students to engage in overt victimisation or bullying of males, and bullying has a very negative impact on mental wellbeing.

"Any gender role non-conformity of individuals, especially of sexual minority people, is judged particularly harshly by boys and this could help to account for the sex differences observed in this study," he says.

The study also highlighted the diversity of experiences among sexual minority youth and showed that students who reported sexual attractions to both sexes experienced the highest rates of [mental health](#) concerns, compared to students who reported only same-sex attractions.

"Future research needs to recognise the range of experiences of sexual minority youth, as well as for gender diverse young people, and the need to identify subgroups of sexuality and gender diverse students at risk of poor psycho-social outcomes as intervention efforts may be more effective if tailored to the specific needs of these groups," says Dr Denny.

The study also found that there was no association between generally supportive school environments and [suicide risk](#) or [depressive symptoms](#) for opposite-sex attracted students.

"The strengths of this study lie in the ability to examine the impacts of school-level effects on sexual minority young people," says Dr Denny. "Our results support an important shift away from viewing LGBT students as inherently at risk of [poor mental health](#) outcomes, to viewing the environments around them as crucial to their emotional and mental well-being."

He says the study findings supported school strategies to support sexual minority and gender diverse students.

These include measures such as school non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies specifically aimed at: addressing LGBT bullying and victimisation; training teachers on effective interventions to prevent harassment; availability of information, resources, and support at school about LGBT students; presence of school-based support groups for LGBT [students](#) (frequently called Diversity Groups in New Zealand); and, inclusion of LGBT people or issues in the [school](#) curriculum.

Provided by University of Auckland

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