

# Homosexual Harassment and Its Psychological Effects

## Abstract

**“How does harassment affect young homosexuals psychologically?”** In the beginning, this paper explains homosexuality, a sexual orientation, from the biological perspective. Then it explores the types of harassment that young homosexuals are subjected to, and presents studies to display that homosexuals are, in fact, exposed to many types of harassment. Next, it considers the psychological problems that the students suffer from after being victims of harassment. Studies and statistics are given to show that PTSD and suicide are the two major dilemmas that homosexual youth are left with after harassment. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the result of bullying or verbal harassment. Suicide is usually the result from all types of harassment, and it is often the outcome of the victim feeling hopeless.

The conclusion of this essay displays that harassment takes a serious toll on homosexual youth. Some members of society believe that homosexual youth have psychological disorders only because of their sexual orientation, but this essay clearly defines that harassment is the main factor. In the end, suggestions are offered to make schools safer environments for the homosexual; mainly that sexual orientation needs to be clarified to students and staff of all schools. With understanding, one day maybe harassment against homosexuals will come to an end.

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# Homosexual Harassment and Its Psychological Effects

## Introduction

In the past few years, the American public, along with other countries, has been encouraging the public to “to accept, actually to embrace” homosexuality (The Chronicle, 2006). Studies conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, including 21 different local surveys between 1980 and 1991, found widespread discrimination across the country against gay men and lesbians. The study also stated that gay men and lesbians reported discrimination in public restaurants, in health services, insurance, and education (LCCR & LCCRE, 2002). The Civil Rights bills have been introduced into the legislation process that will “grant special rights of nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation.” Along with the homosexual adult community, there is an increasing number of homosexual youth today. The 1996 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that six percent of youth, ages 13 to 18, reported same-sex attraction (The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2006). How does harassment affect a young homosexual adult psychologically?

To deal with the problem, one must first confront issues about homosexual discrimination while assessing evidence of the harassment and discrimination that homosexual youth have been subjected to and the psychological effect that this has had on them. One must define sexual orientation, and examine statistics of how many people in America are homosexual. Then using the biological perspective the homosexual drive will be explained. Statistics over the past two decades support that there is discrimination among the homosexual youth and that they are frequently being harassed. Types of

harassment that the homosexual population endures on a daily basis are presented for later discussing the trauma and psychological complications. Along with the descriptions of the types of harassment, studies are presented with results suggesting that the victims of the harassment had some psychological complications. The impact of the harassment and explain how psychologists view homosexual trauma, including suicide, along with the best ways to eliminate discrimination against homosexual students in school are examined.

### Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is an enduring sexual attraction toward members of either one's own sex (homosexual orientation) or the opposite sex (heterosexual orientation). Gay men and lesbians recall themselves to be the same as heterosexuals when they were younger, and it was not until during or shortly after they became adults that most of them took notice of their homosexual orientation. Many of them did not declare themselves as homosexuals until they were in their twenties. The popular press believes that ten percent of the American public is homosexual, but, in 2002, the Gallup survey revealed that an estimated 21 percent of American men are gay and 22 percent of American women are lesbians (Myers, 2006). Although the number of homosexuals will not change civil rights' issues, health experts find it helpful to know sexual statistics.

### The Psychology behind Homosexuality

Generally, various biological and behavioral traits of gays and lesbians are different from those who are straight. There are biological correlations of sexual orientations found among brain differences, genetic influences, and prenatal hormonal influences. New research suggests that sexual orientation is, at the least, partly biological.

Simon LeVay discovered, while studying deceased homosexual and heterosexual people, that sections of the hypothalamus have a connection with gay identity. He found that hypothalamus cell clusters are larger in straight men than in women and gay men. The brain does differ with sexual orientation, which is supported by the theory that everything that is psychological is also biological (Myers, 2003).

LeVay does not see the brain as a sexual orientation organ, but, rather, as an important part of the neural pathway engaged in sexual behavior, meaning that the brain's anatomy influences sexual behavior. He later confirmed his theory when he discovered a similar difference between the six to 10 percent of male sheep that display same-sex attractions, and the 90+ percent attracted to females. A section of the *corpus callosum* that is one-third larger in homosexual men than in heterosexuals or females, discovered by Laura Allen and Roger Gorski, also supported LeVay's theory. This discovery states, "Homosexual men are more likely to have female-typical neuroanatomy than heterosexual men" (Myers, 2003).

Evidence has also suggested that genetics influence sexual orientation. Studies were conducted on sets of twin homosexual brothers, and the results revealed that among identical twins, 52 percent shared the brother's orientation, and 22 percent among fraternal twin brothers. It can be concluded, also, that genetics is not the only thing that is the base of homosexuality, but it does have an influence (Myers, 2003).

Another theory as to why twins share the same sexual orientation is that they shared the same prenatal environment. In animals and some human cases, abnormal prenatal hormone conditions have been known to alter sexual orientation. During the critical period after the middle of the second month and up to the fifth month after



conception, the structure of the brain's neural-hormonal control system have led scientists to form a hypothesis that homosexuals were exposed to atypical prenatal hormones. Exposure to the hormone levels predisposes the fetus to be attracted to males later in life. Tests reveal that homosexual men have spatial abilities more like those of typical heterosexual women. Lesbians also have more male-typical anatomy. For example, the cochlea and hearing system of lesbians develop in a way that is intermediate between those of heterosexual females and males, which have been attributed to prenatal hormone influences (Myers, 2003).

Dahir Mubarak wrote a magazine article in *The Advocate* entitled, "Why are we Gay?" which explores whether being gay is influenced by genetics, environment, or biology. He states that, for years, the gay and lesbian political establishments have been stating that homosexual orientation is inborn and permanent (Mubarak, 2001). This has actually won quite a few supporters to the gay and lesbian civil rights' group. The article states, "Americans who believe sexual orientation is either genetic or biological are much more likely to support gay and lesbian civil rights than those who believe it is determined primarily by environmental influences" (Mubarak, 2001). Scientists believe that around 70 percent of them are influenced genetically to have a homosexual orientation, although they also think that three percent can manipulate their sexual orientation. Scientists today believe that homosexual orientation is influenced by genetics, environment, and has biological predispositions. Their investigations and answers may allow the public to discontinue harassment and discrimination for sexual orientation, if they prove that sexual orientation can not be manipulated and that it is not only influenced by the environment.

### The Harassment of Homosexuals

Every day, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people are the victims of harassment and violence, particularly at school. The controversial term “hate crimes” is often used to describe the psychological abuse with which lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender young adults must deal. Hate crimes were defined by the U.S. Congress in 1992, as, “the defendant's conduct motivated by hatred, bias, or prejudice, based on the actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity of another individual or group of individuals.” In the last decade, the punishment for these hate crimes has become much harsher, even though it is more likely to refuse a criminal the death penalty for murder that is associated with hate.

A study was concluded to assess the mental health consequences of hate crimes between 1993 and 1996, by Gregory M. Herek, Ph.D., and two of his colleagues. This study was performed on 2,300 gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. It included roughly an equal number of both men and women and had a median age of 34 years. The participants were given a questionnaire about their experiences with crime, their attitudes and beliefs on a variety of topics, their community involvement, and their psychological well being. The researchers discovered that hate crimes had more psychological effects than did other crimes. They noticed significantly higher levels of distress shown by the gay men and lesbian survivors of hate crimes--depression, stress, and anger--than those who had survived crimes that were not biased to sexual orientation (Herek, 2006). The researchers believe that heightened distress was caused by the association of personal danger and vulnerability with their identity. Along with causing more distress, the duration of distress of hate crimes was discovered to be longer-lasting than non-biased

crimes. Among these findings there was the prevalence of hate crimes against homosexuals; the reports of these crimes to any kind of authority were quite fewer than other crimes, but most of all this type harassment is not the only kind to which this population is exposed (Herek, 2006).

Harassment refers to the broad spectrum of offensive behavior. Behaviors that harassment refers to are found to be threatening or disturbing, and beyond those that are sanctioned by society. *The Journal of Adolescent Health* has published a study to examine the link between discrimination at school and mental health risks, by using representative data and comparing lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youths and heterosexual youths. The data was taken from the 1995 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, given in Massachusetts and Vermont; it included 9188 students, which incorporated 315 students who identified themselves as either a homosexual or bisexual. The study's conclusion stated, "The findings provide evidence that differences in health risks among LGB youth are mediated by discrimination at school. Such discrimination of LGB youth is associated with health risk behaviors" (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). In societies that support free speech, only repetitive, persistent and untruthful types of speech are sanctioned legally as harassment. To understand, we must explain types of harassment that are relevant to today's youth, to reveal studies conducted recently by psychologists over harassment with youth. Types of harassment include bullying, gang stalking, psychological harassment, racial harassment, religious harassment, sexual harassment, stalking, and street harassment.

Verbal harassment is the most frequently reported type of harassment, because it contains no limitations. It is merely defined as something that makes a person feel as if he



is in danger or that a statement was taken offensively by the victim. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) measured the anti-gay harassment found in schools and discovered that 61.1% gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students reported being verbally harassed (ACLU, 2001). *The Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* published an article that reviewed the verbal and physical abuse of homosexual youths. The article states, "This response to gay male, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents by significant others in their environment is often associated with several problematic outcomes, including school-related problems, runaways, conflict with the law, substance abuse, prostitution, and suicide. Although the causal link between these stressors and outcomes has not been scientifically established, there is suggestive evidence that these outcomes are consequences of verbal and physical harassment" (Savin-Williams, 1994).

Bullying is harassment that occurs on the playground or in the classroom at school or in the workplace. Typically physical and psychological harassing behavior is carried out against a certain individual. Psychological harassment is humiliating or abusive behavior that lowers a person's self-esteem or causes him or her torment. This harassment is primarily seen in the form of verbal comments, actions, or gestures. Also psychological harassment can be in writing, such as on bathroom walls in the school. Stalking is an unauthorized following and observing of an individual, to the extent that the person's privacy is inappropriately intruded upon, and, in most cases, the victim fears for his safety.

In March of 2005, UCLA researchers reported the first study that examined daily school harassment, which was conducted on 192 sixth grade students. Forty-seven

percent of them reported being bullied at least once during the conducting of the study, while 46% said that they had been bullied at least once. This study is relatively useful because it addresses the psychological problems that these students were left with after being harassed. Juvonen, Graham and Mark Schuster write, "Students who reported getting picked on also reported increased humiliation and anger, while students who saw a classmate picked on reported increased anxiety and disliked school more" (Wolpert, 2005). Adrienne Nishina, Jaana Juvonen, and UCLA developmental psychology graduate student Melissa Witkow recently published in the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, "Middle school students who are bullied in school are likely to feel depressed, lonely and miserable, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to further bullying incidents" (Wolpert, 2005).

Because they are different from their peers, the bullying that homosexual students are subjected to is considered out of the ordinary. Homophobia is one reason that the youth are often harassed, and homophobia starts early and is often influenced by the adult figures in the child's life. The Institute of Education conducted interviews in 1987, with teachers at schools, and it concluded that 82% of teachers are aware of homophobic bullying, although the school still lacks the effort to deal with these issues. Homophobic bullying and harassment has been estimated to be the cause of one in five homosexual's attempt to commit suicide or harm himself. Bullying and harassment are types of trauma and, therefore, can cause injury to one's health. The symptoms that the victims often display are ones that are diagnosed as "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." Violence and harassment often cause the PTSD to be more complex. Complex PTSD is often untreated because the sufferers of PTSD tend to find it difficult to find any type of treatment or

knowledge of treatment, and, if untreated, PTSD symptoms can last a lifetime. In homosexual youth today, this seems to be a major issue, because harassment leading up to PTSD, which it frequently does, in most cases prevents people from achieving their goals (Field & Field, 2005).

Sexual harassment is also common among youth in educational settings. In the year 2001, the American Association of University Women conducted a study on students in grades 8 through 11, and discovered four out of five—boys and girls—reported some sort of sexually harassment (AAUW, 2007). The GLSEN found in a study conducted in 2001 that 46.5% reported being sexual harassed. Although the percentage is quite a bit smaller, the homosexual community is especially small compared to the total population, and some students may have feared to report the incidents of being sexually harassed.

Over the past year, a national survey was conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and administered to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) youth; it found that, more than four-fifths of LGBT youth experience verbal harassment, and 42 percent have experienced sexual harassment. In 1997, an Iowa study found that on a daily average, high school students will hear 25 antigay remarks. These types of harassment can escalate to physical attacks and even rape. During a five-year study done by the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State, the researchers documented 111 incidents of antigay violence in 73 different schools. This violence included eight gang rapes with 11 different students from sixth graders to twelfth graders (NGLTF). Sexual harassment in America is considered a form of illegal discrimination and is a form of psychological abuse. Many victims of psychological

harassment suffer from physical ailments, irritability, anxiety, nervousness, insomnia, stress, fatigue, depressive states, burn outs, and, in some cases, suicide.

### Suicide, a Result from Harassment

Gay and lesbian teenagers have increased rates of assault, suicide, substance abuse, and homelessness; these events can reflect homophobic attitudes expressed by others, as well as internalized feelings of self-hatred. Adolescents who have already determined that they are gay or lesbian can become depressed or act out, and often become truants or they run away from home, or they may project hostile feelings onto family members. Gay teens "need assistance managing the effects of persistent attacks by social institutions on their self-esteem and hopes for a successful career" (Lock & Kleis, 1998).

Suicide, although not always the outcome of sexual harassment, is fatal. Suicide is the willingness of one person to take his or her life. It seems too many people that the gay and lesbian youth are at risk for suicide because of the sexual harassment throughout their lives. Several state and national studies have revealed that, among homosexual youth, there are more thoughts and actual suicide attempts than among heterosexual youth. Psychologists often view suicide as an outcry for attention. They also believe that reasons for suicide are not only external but also internal, meaning there is a chemical imbalance. They have not, though, found any links of suicide of homosexuals with internal influences. This is important because it strongly suggests that sexual harassment is the main cause of suicide among homosexuals.

Statistics for homosexual suicide have fluctuated between 30% to less than 1%. Peter LaBarbera, in an article titled "The Gay Youth Suicide Myth," uses statistics provided by



Dr. David Shaffer, one of the country's authorities on suicides throughout today's youth.

LaBarbera quotes Dr. Shaffer,

“...by broadening the definition, we therefore ran the risk of over-determining the number of gay suicides. In spite of this, out of 107 male teen suicides, only three were known to have talked to others about a homosexual experience (2.7%) and two of these three died together in a suicide pact. A further four showed some behavior that could have been indicative of homosexuality. None of the female suicides were thought to have been lesbian. If all of the teenagers who showed any evidence of homosexual behavior were indeed gay, then a total of 6% of the suicides in our study would have been gay. Once again, there is no evidence that a large proportion of suicides are gay, but [6% is] more or less [what] we would expect in the general population” (LaBarbera, 2006).

In Oklahoma suicide, is the second most common cause of death among ages 13-25, both sexes, and all races. In the year 2003, according to the National Center of Injury Prevention and Control, 76 young adults in Oklahoma committed suicide. Out of that, five were homosexuals. Oklahoma's statistics were considered because it is believed to be a zealous and conservative state, considering it was one of the 11 states in November 2004 “approving [the] constitutional amendments codifying marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution.” Additionally, the state defined it as a misdemeanor crime to issue a marriage license to a same sex couple (Roberts & Gibbons, 2004). Throughout the United States, there were 4,620 suicides in the year 2003, and the homosexual community accounted for 277 for all of those deaths. Considering the population of the United States, 277 does not seem like too many, but considering that the homosexual community only makes up 1-2%, it is quite a few. Suicide rates are important to examine at in this case, although it is difficult to do so because sexual orientation is not listed on one's death certificate.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, harassment does affect the homosexual individual by making him either feel stressed, afraid of being open with his sexual orientation, or even suicidal. There are all different types of harassment that confront homosexuals, but all result in psychological abuse against the individual, and it is important to note that the reason that homosexuals have psychological troubles is not because of their being homosexual, but, rather, the harassment to which they are subjected. One of the psychological results from homosexual harassment is PTSD, which weakens the victim from the stress of a traumatic event; bullying and sexual harassment can cause this. The most defining result from homosexual harassment is suicide. The suicidal youth feel that the pressure of the attacks is too taxing and that they can not live with the burden of being homosexual. Suicide is the result of all types of harassment, including verbal, physical, and sexual harassment, which is the reason that discussing homosexual harassment is so significant.

The reason that homosexuals are treated differently is because people are not knowledgeable about homosexuality. The National Association of School Psychologists recognizes that children who question their sexual orientation are at a greater risk of harmful situations, such as suicide, physical and verbal harassment, and physical violence. These risks usually occur for the child at school, and in their survey the NASP concluded that 28% of the students missed at least one day of school as a result of feeling unsafe because they questioned their sexuality. Their suggestions for creating a safe school for sexual minority youth include establishing and enforcing non-discrimination policies that apply to all students, educating students and staff, intervening when a student is harassing or being harassed, along with giving that student support. In order for

the homosexual youth to feel safe at school, these students need to be included in the non-discrimination policy that most schools have. The students and staff then need to be aware of all the consequences that follow the harassment of a homosexual student or peer. The education of students and staff about sexual minority youth should include a thorough in service training on all diversities of human beings, as well as including relevant research of the risks experienced by homosexual youth. Consequences should be applied to the perpetrators, but counseling should be offered to both the victim and the perpetrator.

If the public were educated on the subject and were able to perceive that homosexuality is not a choice, but rather a chemical imbalance, then the outlawing of harassment towards homosexuals would be considered more by individuals, even in zealous states such as Oklahoma.

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