

Understanding the Well-Being of LGBTQI+ Populations

EDUCATIONAL WELL-BEING

Over the past decade, there have been remarkable changes in the social, political, and legal status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and other sexual and gender diverse (LGBTQI+) populations. In 2020, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened an expert committee to explore what is currently known about LGBTQI+ populations. The resulting report, *Understanding the Well-Being of LGBTQI+ Populations*, highlights the need for attention to the social and structural inequities that drive disparities affecting sexual and gender diverse populations and argues for new research on the full range of sexual and gender diversity, especially among LGBTQI+ people at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. This brief provides an overview of what is known about educational well-being among LGBTQI+ populations. Citations and further information can be found in Chapter 9 of the report.

Educational Well-Being of LGBTQI+ People

School has historically been a primary institution that has socialized cishnormativity and heteronormativity in the lives of children and youth. Many LGBTQI+ students continue to encounter discrimination, bullying, and victimization from K–12 through higher education, which undermines their personal well-being, as well as their long-term educational achievement, occupational attainment, and socioeconomic status. Lesbian and gay parents are equally or more engaged in their children’s education than heterosexual parents, but they may also experience discrimination in educational environments.

BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION

A 2016 consensus study from the National Academies identified bullying and victimization as a significant social problem in schools, highlighting that LGBTQ students are at higher risk of being bullied than non-LGBTQ students and that bullying is often explicitly homophobic or transphobic. In 2015, the nationwide Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) showed that 34 percent of LGB students reported being bullied on school property, compared to 19 percent of heterosexual students. In the 2017 YRBS, 35 percent of transgender students reported encountering interpersonal bullying, and other studies have found that transgender and gender-nonconforming students who feel unsafe in school bathrooms report lower quality of life and more anxiety. Structural discrimination also affects the well-being of transgender students: One study showed that transgender students who were prohibited from using restrooms and locker rooms that matched their gender identity were at higher risk for assault. In one of the few studies of the school experiences of adults with intersex traits, many respondents reported being bullied at school and dropping out before finishing high school.

Evidence also shows that LGBTQ students are often treated differently by school personnel in patterns that parallel the harsher treatment of Black and Latinx youth of any sexual orientation or gender identity: Black and Latinx youth are much more likely than White youth to be suspended or expelled despite no differences in punishable behavior patterns. At the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender, LGBTQ youth of color are particularly overrepresented in exclusionary discipline in schools. For instance, some studies have documented that Latinx girls whose gender expression is masculine may be perceived by teachers as threatening, while Black

WHO IS BULLIED IN SCHOOL

35%

of transgender students
in 2017

34%

of LGB students
in 2015

19%

of heterosexual students
in 2015

boys whose gender expression is feminine are often targeted for discipline because of their dress, behavior, or expression.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Due to experiences of discrimination or victimization at school, LGBTQI+ students may skip school, drop out, not plan to attend college, and have lower academic achievement. Lower educational attainment shapes economic opportunities later in life, and education itself reflects a measure of socioeconomic status. Paradoxically, studies among older LGB cohorts often find higher-than-average levels of educational attainment, which may reflect a pattern of greater investment in education to compensate for the psychological and economic effects of stigma; among younger LGBT people, however, educational attainment tends to be lower than average, which may indicate that, as people from younger cohorts are coming out earlier, they are more likely to encounter discrimination, loss of parental support, and other risk factors for poor educational attainment.



Education Law and Policy

Enumerated nondiscrimination policies, safe spaces, staff training, and inclusive curricula in schools have been associated with positive student experiences and greater educational attainment. As of 2021, there is no federal law expressly pertaining to nondiscrimination in education based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or intersex status. Due to the close relationship between federal employment and education civil rights laws; however, the federal government has released some guidelines for schools on the ramifications of the U.S. Supreme Court case *Bostock v. Clayton County*, which clarified that federal employment laws prohibit discrimination against LGBTQI+ people. Approximately one-half of states and many individual school districts have laws that prohibit bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. In schools that have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination policies, students report feeling safer, hearing fewer homophobic remarks, and seeing less bullying. They also report better school attendance, higher self-esteem, and fewer mental and behavioral health problems, including lower risk for suicidal behavior and substance use.

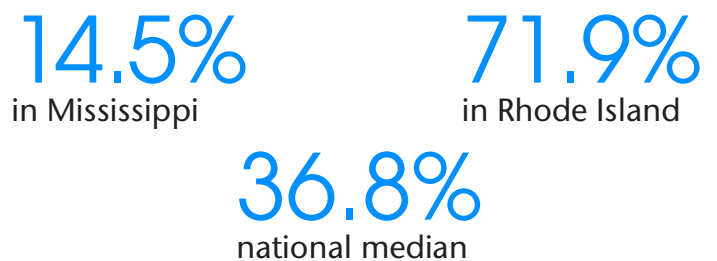
Student-run organizations such as gay-straight alliances (GSAs) also promote better academic performance, school belonging, school safety, and civic engagement. The benefits of a GSA are not limited to members: Students who attend schools with GSAs report hearing less homophobic language, seeing less bullying, and feeling more school belonging. Access to these supports varies substantially by state, however: For example, in 2018 the proportion of schools with GSAs ranged from 14.5 percent in Mississippi to 71.9 percent in Rhode Island (national median:

36.8%). Racial and ethnic minority GSA students report less frequent GSA attendance and less peer support than White GSA students.

In schools that provide professional development training on LGBT issues, teachers are more likely to intervene in homophobic bullying. There is also strong evidence that curricula inclusive of sexual and gender diversity contribute to school safety for all students. A 2015 study found that inclusive curriculum materials were most common in sexuality education (40%), followed by English and social studies classes (27%); physical education and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) classes were the least likely to have inclusive materials. An example of an inclusive curriculum unit comes from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, which offers “Defending Democracy at Home: Advancing Constitutional Rights, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, and Same-Sex Marriage” as part of its English and humanities resources. This resource is designed for grades 11 and 12 and examines the role of “state courts, individuals, and advocacy organization in working to advocate for the expansion of constitutional rights in advance of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), the Supreme Court case that led to the protection of same-sex marriage as a fundamental right under the Constitution.”



SCHOOLS WITH GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES VARIES BY STATE



Key Research Areas

- Longitudinal assessments of LGBTQI+ student experiences from elementary through higher education
 - Development and evaluation of educational policies and practices to reduce bullying and improve school climates
 - Development and evaluation of professional antidiscrimination and antibullying training for teachers, administrators, and other personnel, such as bus drivers and cafeteria workers
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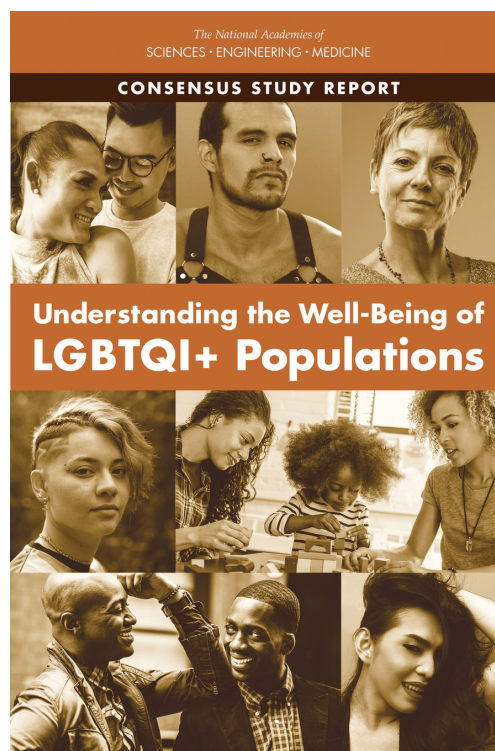
Resources

Read the report highlights and the full report online, download a free PDF, or order the paperback publication today.

[*Understanding the Well-Being of LGBTQI+ Populations* \(2020\)](#)

View the project's [interactive resource](#), highlighting the key findings of the report.

Learn more about the Committee on Population
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