

This factsheet summarises current research in relation to the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) population of Northern Ireland.

Key issues

- LGB young people are less likely to discuss their sexuality within the family.
- Those with a Christian ethos are more likely to disapprove of LGB people.
- LGB people in Northern Ireland are more likely to have experienced harassment than their counterparts in the rest of UK and Ireland.

LGB people and family relationships

Although the LGB population in Northern Ireland is now more visible than it has ever been, research published by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) found that “young LGB people experience isolation within society and sometimes within their families”.¹ The research carried out by Jarman and Tennant in 2003 also found that gay respondents are more likely than heterosexuals to report that they felt they had to keep their sexual feelings secret.²

The *Towards better sexual health* survey published by fpa in 2002 surveyed 1,000 young people aged 14 to 25 years of age (heterosexual and LGB) and found that respondents who identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual were less likely to report having a close personal relationship with their parents; less likely to be able to discuss personal or sexual matters with their parents; and less likely to have received relevant sex information at home.³

Although the research concluded that there was no quantifiable evidence that the sexual orientation of LGB young people affected their levels of confidence and happiness, and their ability to cope with problems, there was nevertheless some evidence that homosexuality and bisexuality affects the family atmosphere and relationships.

In 2003 Youthnet surveyed 362 young people under the age of 25 who identified as LGB or transgender.⁴ The survey found that almost three quarters of all respondents indicated that they had experienced homophobic attitudes from family members. As a result they felt compelled to leave the family home, and 16% stated that they had experienced homelessness.

Homophobia

The *Towards better sexual health* survey concludes that many young people are disapproving of those who choose a LGB lifestyle. Key findings of that survey included the following:

- Over half of all respondents said that sex between men was always or mostly wrong. Over one-third of respondents said that sex between women is always or mostly wrong.
- Respondents who were not affiliated to any of the major Christian churches held more liberal views about sexual orientation. Protestants were most likely to disapprove of sex between women and between men.
- Most young men disapproved of sex between men but only a minority of young men disapproved of sex between women.
- 16% of male respondents who had reported having homosexual sex said that sex between two men is always wrong, with another 8% saying that it is sometimes wrong. The figures for young women are similar.³

The research also found that, of young women who reported having sex with another female on at least one occasion, 15.4% said that sex between two women is always or sometimes wrong. The disparity between the attitudes and the actual behaviour of those young women and men may have severe implications for their sexual health and personality development. This was confirmed by the NIHRC research which found that when accessing health care services, young people are often exposed to prejudices, human rights abuses and lack of structures tailored to their needs.¹

Challenging homophobia should be an integral element of a school's relationships and sexuality education programme, yet ACCORD's research, carried out in post primary Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, found that 68% of respondents had not discussed homosexuality or were unsure whether it had been discussed, and 83% had not discussed bisexuality or were unsure. Only 1% had discussed their sexuality with a parent.⁵

Sexual harassment

Jarman and Tennant's research found that the percentage of people who had experienced violence and harassment was higher than indicated by comparable surveys in Britain and Ireland.² The study, which surveyed 186 LGB people (67% male, 33% female), highlighted that:

- 82% had experienced harassment and 55% homophobic violence.
- Males were more likely to have suffered both harassment and violence than females.
- The most common form of harassment was verbal abuse.
- The most common forms of violence experienced were being the target of a missile (35%), subjected to assault (30%) or attempted assault (29%) and being spat at (18%).

Youthnet's research found that 44% of young people were bullied at school because of their sexuality, and 69% of young people who left school earlier than they would have preferred were also bullied.⁴

Conclusion

The homophobic atmosphere and the heterosexual bias which exist in Northern Ireland cause difficulties for young LGB people in coming to terms with their own sexuality.

References

1. Loudes C. Learning to grow up: multiple identities of young lesbians, gay men and bisexual people in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2003.

2. Jarman N, Tennant A. An unacceptable prejudice: homophobic violence and harassment in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research, 2003.
3. Schubotz D, Simpson A, Rolston B. Towards better sexual health: a survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland. Belfast: fpa, 2002.
4. Youthnet. Research into the needs of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT). Youthnet, 2003.
5. Loughrey C. Beliefs, attitudes and experiences of pupils, parents and teachers about relationships and sexuality education in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. Belfast: ACCORD, 2002.

Other Northern Ireland factsheets:

Sexual behaviour and young people
Teenage pregnancy
Family planning services in Northern Ireland
Abortion
Sexually transmitted infections
The legal position regarding contraceptive advice and provision to young people
Relationships and sexuality education in schools

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