Why LGBTQ+ Adolescents Face Higher Rates of Suicide and Mental Health Challenges
Compared to their Heterosexual Peers

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There has been an increase in mental illnesses among youth in the U.S., especially LGBTQ+ youth. According to the 2022 survey by the Trevor Project, the percentage of individuals reporting symptoms of anxiety in 2020 was 68%, which increased to 73% in 2022 (Trevor Project, 2022). Whether it is seasonal depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc., mental illness can affect anyone. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, studies have shown that mental illness among youth and suicide rates are on the rise (Trevor Project, 2022). LGBTQ+ students face a higher risk of suicide, bullying, and mental health issues compared to their heterosexual peers, due to the ongoing discrimination, stigmatization, and lack of support they experience in society, schools, and communities.

In a survey conducted by the Trevor Project in 2021, 45% of queer youth considered suicide (Trevor Project, 2021). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers, according to the article *Supporting the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Students in Schools by* Midwest and Plains Equity and Assistance Center (Blackburn and Chrisman, 2021)*.* In the absence of intensive action or discussion, this issue is likely to only get worse. Many kids suffer from mental illness and suicidal ideations without help or resources. These issues have drastically grown over the years. Self-harm, and thoughts of suicide are on the rise in conjunction with mental illness (Blackburn and Chrisman, 2021). Though symptoms of mental illness are rising, so are resources for help. Governmental and nonprofit resources, social media, therapy, universal helplines, and numerous other resources are available to help parents and children with mental illness (Blackburn and Chrisman, 2021). The government, schools, and public spaces should provide accessible and affordable mental health resources and resources for LGBTQ+ youth and adults.

There is an epidemic of suicide and mental illness among queer youth as well as them frequently being victims of assault and discrimination, especially in schools. Queer youths often have similar experiences because of their sexual or gender identity. The sections of this thesis address LGBTQ+-related topics. Section one will start with information about suicide and abuse statistics, section two will discuss some of the environmental, school, and mental health impacts on LGBTQ+ youth as well as

similarities, and section three will provide information about stigmas, stereotypes, and the dangers of them. As a result of this thesis, research, and comparison, readers will gain a deeper understanding of mental health disparities among queer teens.

Section One: Suicide

For years, queer people have been shunned, discriminated against, assaulted, or even killed among other hardships. Though it has often remained hidden, queer people have experienced persecution and exclusion for years. LGBTQ+ history though hidden; recent scholars have brought the rich history of LGBTQ+ people to light. According to the National Archives, in a court martial dating from the Revolutionary War, "on March 10, 1778, Lieutenant Frederick Gotthold Enslin became the first U.S. soldier court-martialed for 'attempting to commit sodomy' with another soldier," resulting in his permanent expulsion from the armed forces (National Archives Collection). Since the first recorded instance, many LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States have faced comparable challenges, such as enduring the loneliness of hiding their true selves, being subjected to mistreatment or ridicule by society, and suffering abuse. This history of the LGBTQ+ community illustrates how they were compelled to comply with societal norms that centered around heterosexuality, resulting in grave and, at times, fatal outcomes for those who defied those expectations.

Suicide rates among LGBTQ+ youth are alarmingly high, highlighting the urgent need for increased support and resources to address the unique challenges faced by this vulnerable population. The Trevor Project reported in 2022 that 45% of LGBTQ+ youth considered suicide in the past year (Trevor Project, 2022). For example, studies show that "Bisexual women face lower levels of social support and lower quality of life than heterosexual or lesbian women, and also report the lowest levels of emotional well-being," due to society's delegitimization of their sexuality (BiNetUSA). People contemplate suicide for a multitude of reasons, whether it is environmental effects, life experiences, trauma, and so on. A recent survey by the Trevor Project stated that when LGBTQ+ youth live in an environment that accepts queer people the suicide rate is significantly lower than those who do not (Trevor Project, 2022). Though environmental

effects are a significant factor in one's mental health; it has been proven that LGBTQ+ youth have strikingly similar experiences.

Studies show that LGBTQ+ youth experience suicide ideations and attempts at least four times higher than their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Rhoades et al, 2018). Nearly one in five transgender and nonbinary youth attempted suicide and LGBTQ youth of color reported higher rates than their white peers (Trevor Project, 2022). In 2016, 74% of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) youth said they experienced verbal harassment or abuse (Espelage et al., 2016). Statistics have only decreased by one percentage point since then. The Trevor Project surveyed in 2022 found that 73% of LGBTQ+ youth have experienced verbal abuse (Trevor Project, 2022). Despite the clear and urgent issues revealed by data like these, society at large and the medical and behavioral health communities, in particular, were, until quite recently, committed to the idea that LGBTQ behavior and LGBTQ-identifying people were mentally ill.

The medical field has long viewed homosexuality as a mental illness, according to Stephen T. Russell and Jessica N. Fish stated in *Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth (LGBT)*, "Over the past 50 years, the psychological discourse regarding same-sex sexuality shifted from an understanding that homosexuality was intrinsically linked with poor mental health toward understanding the social determinants of LGBT mental health," (Russel and Fish, 2016). Due to misconceptions and biases that are prevalent in society; can leave adolescents vulnerable and have a negative impact on them, especially in the context of bullying.

Many individuals engage in bullying behavior simply because of someone's self-expression or identity. For example, according to *When Bullying Takes a Life: Advocacy Tips to Protect LGBTQ Youth,* by Andrea Khoury, the author wrote of a 13-year-old boy named Seth Walsh who hanged himself because he was bullied for being gay. Khoury also relates the story of another 13-year-old boy named Asher Brown, who shot himself for being bullied because he was gay, and a 15-year-old boy named Billy Lucas also hanged himself for being bullied because he was gay (Khoury, 2016). All of these boys were just some examples of a bigger issue. Many kids at such a young age are bullied because they were simply themselves. We must find a solution

to the suicide epidemic by finding solutions and resources that stop adolescent suicide and bullying. In most circumstances, environmental surroundings take a toll on one's mental health.

Section Two: LGBTQ+ Students Mental Health in Schools

Many factors contribute to one's mental health struggles, including whom one surrounds themselves with, school environments, and others. Both natural and social environments can affect a person's mental state. A primary example of this can be social anxiety, everyday interactions cause significant anxiety, self-consciousness, and embarrassment because you fear being scrutinized or judged negatively by others" (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Anxiety can cause stress both mental and physical which includes panic attacks, depression, and so much more (Debra R. Wilson, Kristeen Cherney, 2022). In addition to anxiety, other factors can affect a person's mental health.

The CDC stated, from a survey in 2019, taking results from a survey in 2016 that children from the ages of 13-17 with depression experience another mental disorder. For example, 3 in 4 kids who experience depression also experience anxiety which is 73.8% of children(CDC, 2019). As previously said, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience bullying and harassment compared to their heterosexual peers. This can range from verbal and physical abuse to cyberbullying, exclusion, and feeling unsafe in social environments. These forms of bullying and harassment can have catastrophic effects on their mental health, self-esteem, and even physical health. This can lead to feelings of isolation, worthlessness, and shame. These negative emotions can have damaging long-term impacts such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Instances like these can also lead to being less likely to trust others or reach out to peers for support because of past experiences with bullying and harassment.

Many LGBTQ+ students are afraid to go to school because of how others speak about the LGBTQ+ community and/or because of how they are treated. As reported by *The 2021 National School Climate Survey* 68% of queer high school youth feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender

expression(GLSEN, 2021). As a result of how LGBTQ+ students are treated at school, many of these kids have similar experiences of feeling unsafe or uneasy in their school environment. The word "gay" being misused, homophobia, discrimination, exclusions or discrimination against queer people are contributing factors to students feeling unsafe.

The LGBTQ+ community is diverse in terms of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and many other ways in which people identify themselves. Nonetheless, there are shared traits within the LGBTQ+ community that may increase their susceptibility to mistreatment and harassment. Due to the widespread discrimination and social stigma that queer individuals encounter, they are at a higher risk of experiencing abuse and harassment compared to their heterosexual counterparts. According to Mental Health America, harassment, whether verbal or physical, increases the likelihood of self-harm among LGBTQ+ youth by 2.5 times, highlighting the impact of such mistreatment(Mental Health Care). According to a survey conducted on November 27, 2022, 87% of LGBTQ+ youth had experienced assault or harassment because of their identity (Prokopenko & Hango, 2022). Most of these incidents involved social harassment, sexual harassment, or online harassment. Without proper policies and laws, these issues worsen.

The CDC released a survey in 2023 from statistics that dated from 2011 to 2021 that have shown that kids feel increasingly unsafe in their schools. The survey found that over 20% of high school students reported being bullied on school property, and over 7% reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property. Additionally, the survey found that over 10% of all high school students reported feeling unsafe at school. These statistics are alarming and highlight the need for increased efforts to ensure the safety of children in schools (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

J Eric Fisher shares his account of being a closeted gay kid living in Lancaster, PA during the 1990s with writer Ethan Edward Coston(Coston, 2022). J tells of how being part of the LGBTQ+ community was a generally taboo and stigmatized topic. In the article, J, his husband, and his son had when the family went back to Lancaster in 2016. When J began searching for schools to enroll his son, he inquired with a principal

about the school's policies on discrimination the principal responded, "Homophobia does not exist in the school district". For example, the tragic suicide of 13-year-old Seth Walsh highlights the urgent need for schools to implement discrimination policies that explicitly protect kids against bullying and discrimination(Khoury, 2016). Such policies help to create a safe and inclusive learning environment that benefits all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. As this anecdote shows, LGBTQ recognition in schools is unfortunately overlooked, ignored, or explained away, even when the evidence of its effects is quite evident.

Recognizing a person's identity as well as implementing discrimination and bullying policies are extremely crucial. These factors create safe and inclusive environments for students in schools. Without strict bullying and discrimination policies, students may feel unsafe, excluded, unsupported, and so on.

In the absence of discrimination and bullying policies, students, especially those who are part of marginalized communities, may feel unsafe and unsupported in places where they are supposed to feel the opposite. Discrimination can affect students' performance and their emotional and physical states of being, which can result in absenteeism and so on. According to Human Rights Watch in states such as Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and other southern states, teachers and staff are prohibited from discussing LGBT+ issues (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Silencing real-life issues causes erasure and greater discrimination.

Students, school staff, and administrations need to be informed about the signs of discrimination and suicide. This will enable them to recognize the sign to prevent them from occurring. This will lead to improved comprehension, which will aid in the prevention of erasure. Erasure is the removal of all traces of something; in this context the removal of lgbtq+ existence in schools. Erasure of any kind is dangerous because it diminishes people, culture, history, and communities. When social issues are erased, we remove the lessons learned from them, which can have serious consequences for future generations. Erasure also has the potential to create a distorted view of the past as it only allows people to see what has been presented to them. This can lead to misunderstanding, prejudice, and even violence, as people may not understand the real

history of a group or nation. This is used as a tool of oppression, as it can be used in power to suppress the voices of marginalized communities. The voices of three LGBTQ advocates were brought to the forefront in ACLU's article *How LGBTQ Voices are Being Erased in Classrooms* Jared Fox, one of the advocates, expressed, "It's also important to note that many of the books that are banned are also by authors of color, which shows our desire as a society to silence the voices of people of color (Rafei, 2022). It's yet another example of white supremacy at work" (Rafei, 2022). It is crucial for LGBTQ+ youth to learn about and connect with other LGBTQ+ individuals as it can help them feel less isolated and more accepted. When queer youth see others who share their experiences and identities, it can provide a sense of community and safety.

According to the Trevor Project, LGBTQ youth who live in an accepting community are significantly less likely to attempt suicide than those who don't (Trevor 2022). U.S. News reported *LGBTQ Teens Feel Unsafe and Unwelcome, Despite Growing Support for Rights*, that 27% of LGBTQ+ youth feel they can "definitely be themselves at school," indicating that a large number of LGBTQ+ youth feel uncomfortable discussing their sexuality and/or gender at school(Levy,2018). Within that article, it states that two-thirds of transgender youth say that they refrain from using the bathroom at school by any means possible(Levy, 2018). A study conducted by the National Center for Lesbian Rights surveyed that 30% of LGBTQ+ youth have experienced physical abuse from family after coming out(NCLR, 2006). The study goes on to state that 26% of LGBT youth are kicked out of their homes because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (NCLR, 2006).

Suicide remains a critical issue within the LGBTQ+ community. The factors leading to suicide among LGBTQ+ individuals are multifaceted, including societal stigma, discrimination, and lack of acceptance. Despite efforts to promote awareness and acceptance, negative stereotypes and stigmas persist in many communities.

Section 3: Stigmas, Stereotypes & Inclusivity

Stigmas and stereotypes have burdened marginalized communities because of how dangerous they can be. Often, stereotypes and stigmas create negative and

inaccurate perceptions about particular groups of people. These damaging perceptions can lead to discrimination, prejudice, bias, and more. For example, among the LGBTQ+ community, particularly among gay men, HIV has been subject to stigmatization. Human Immunodeficiency Viruses (HIV) is a virus that attacks a person's immune system and if left untreated can result in death (CDC). Blood transfusions, shared needles, saliva, and other bodily fluids can lead to the spread of the virus. HIV was first detected in the gay community in 1981 and ever since there has been a growing stereotype that only gay men can contract the virus. This is one of many stereotypes that pose an immense burden to the LGBTQ+ community despite millions of people of all genders contracting the virus since the epidemic began.

To create more inclusive and equitable societies and environments, dismantling stigmas and stereotypes is crucial to ensuring respect and dignity are accorded to people of all races, religions, sexualities, and backgrounds. Educating people about how harmful these stigmas and stereotypes are will make it easier for them to be discussed and stopped. Recent studies have shown an increase in LGBTQ+ students in recent years; as a result, there should be a greater understanding of how stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination can be harmful; especially to marginalized communities.

Ileana Najarro stated in her article, in 2021, that a study done by students at UCLA found that 10% of youth in the U.S between the ages 13-17 identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community(Ileana Najarro, 2021). As more kids are starting to come out, adding LGBTQ+ clubs and curricula to schools will bring more understanding to the LGBTQ+ community and break down stigmas and stereotypes. For example, gay-straight Alliances (GSAs) were made to create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students in schools. Schools must take proactive measures to prevent bullying and violence, such as implementing anti-bullying programs and increasing security measures. These can be vital in making schools a safe environment for kids all over. An information section on Youth.gov stated

Research shows that GSAs have numerous positive benefits for students, even among those who do not participate in them, such as creating a more

affirming school environment. GSAs can also enhance students' self-esteem and

foster their resilience and coping skills for responding to bias. (youth.gov, 2020)

Safe spaces within schools can improve a student's mental health and urge to attend school. Research has shown that schools with GSAs or safe spaces for Queer kids have shown lower rates of suicide attempts and harassment (youth.gov, 2020). Implementing access to affordable resources such as GSAs, counseling, safe spaces, and more, is important to maintaining a child's mental health. Sixty percent of LGBTQ youth who wanted mental health care in the past year were not able to get it (Trevor Project, 2022). While 82% of queer youth wanted mental health care only 18% did not (Trevor Project, 2022). Increasing accessible and affordable mental health resources can drastically improve a child's mental health, especially within schools and homes.

The rebranding of the suicide hotline to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline marks a significant change in the way mental health crises are addressed in the United States. The new lifeline was launched in July of 2022. There has been an abrupt increase in the lifeline's use since the ten-digit number was changed to a three-digit number. The hotline's number was changed to 988 to make the hotline more accessible. Ever since the number change the call volume has routed 2.1 million calls, texts, and chat messages to their call centers. They reported that 89% of the calls had been answered and those who weren't hung up before a counselor answered. Since the summer launch in 2022, 300,000 texts, calls, and chats have been received every month. When calls were answered the average call would last 21 minutes and 55 seconds. This is a small example of how free and accessible mental health care can save lives (Jacqueline Howard, 2023).

According to CNBC, The amount of money being invested into mental health treatment has risen 52% since 2009 but this does not include the costs of decreased productivity or lower workforce participation rates. The article stated that "depression alone is estimated to account for $44 billion in losses to workplace productivity". Though more money is being invested into mental health treatment there is still an issue in terms of cost and accessibility. Even though more money is being poured into

treatments, the locations to get help are primarily in urban areas, creating a disparity for those in rural areas. States such as South Dakota, Missouri, Arizona, Montana, and so on have lower rates of mental health needs being met by their residents because of the lack of mental health resources. Research has shown that the U.S. will still experience a shortage of mental health professionals until 2025 due to 112 million Americans living in areas with scarce mental health treatment. The United States' mental health crisis will continue without the proper professionals, affordability, and an increase in treatment centers being built.

Conclusion

In conclusion, LGBTQ+ students face a disproportionate amount of mental health challenges and risks compared to their heterosexual peers. This is due to a range of factors, including discrimination, stigmatization, and lack of support, which can lead to depression, anxiety, self-harm, and even suicide. We must recognize these challenges and work towards creating more inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQ+ students in schools and communities. This can be achieved through increasing awareness, promoting education and understanding, and providing resources and support services. We must prioritize the well-being and mental health of all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, to promote a safer, healthier, and more inclusive society for all.

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