

Bridging the Gap: Addressing Mental Health Disparities in LGBTQ+ Youth

By Dane County Human Services Prevention
and Early Intervention Student Intern Liz Butler



Between January and April 2024, in Wisconsin, middle and high school students in Dane County participated in the 2024 Dane County Youth Assessment (DCYA). Conducted every three years, the DCYA provides valuable insights into the opinions, concerns, behaviors, attitudes, and experiences of youth across a broad spectrum of topics. The 2024 survey questions focused on in this report include mental health issues, incorporating questions to evaluate both the negative and positive impacts on high school students. The analyzed data underscore the significant mental health disparities faced by LGBTQ+ youth compared to their peers.

To explore these disparities, the following research question was posed: How do social, cultural, and environmental factors influence mental health disparities in LGBTQ youth, and what strategies can effectively mitigate these disparities? The analysis centered on critical mental health indicators, such as major depressive disorder, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.

The findings reveal alarming statistics among LGBTQ and transgender high school youth. Of the total high school population of 15,459, 3,499 (23%) identify as LGBTQ, and 658 (4.3%) identify as transgender.



Mental Health Data Points

Prevalence of Depressive Disorder Among Youth

LGBQ Youth: 32.3%
Heterosexual Youth: 11.6%
Transgender Youth: 43.2%
Cisgender Youth: 15.2%
Overall Youth : 16.4%

During the past 12 months, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities?

LGBQ Youth: 52.7%
Heterosexual Youth: 22.7%
Transgender Youth: 62.4%
Cisgender Youth: 28.2%
Overall Youth: 29.6%

During the past 12 months, how many times did you do something to hurt yourself on purpose, without wanting to die, such as cutting or burning yourself?

LGBQ youth: 37.3%
Heterosexual youth: 10.4%
Transgender youth: 52.4%
Cisgender youth: 15%
Overall Youth: 16.6%

During the past 12 months, have you thought seriously about killing yourself?

LGBQ youth: 30.4
Heterosexual youth: 9.2%
Transgender youth: 40.8%
Cisgender youth: 12.8%
Overall Youth: 14%



Factors Contributing to Negative Mental Health

The gravity of this issue is profound. Mental health disparities among LGBTQ+ youth are pronounced, as they frequently experience elevated rates of mental health challenges, including suicidality, depression, and anxiety. These challenges often stem from societal discrimination, prejudice, and minority stressors, which adversely affect their overall well-being and can result in severe consequences.

The DCYA offered questions that allowed reflection on areas we may see negatively contributing to the mental health of our youth, including the following: family risk factors, discrimination, and being picked on.

Family risk factors can significantly impact mental health by fostering stressful home environments for young individuals. The survey highlights several critical factors, including parents' mental health, incarceration, experiences of physical harm, substance abuse, and domestic conflict. Among our LGBTQ youth, 13.9% reported encountering two or more family risk factors, while 19.2% of transgender youth did the same. In contrast, only 7.7% of all youth surveyed identified two or more risk factors. These adverse conditions can lead to a range of mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, and are associated with increased rates of self-harm and suicidal ideation.

It is also observed that there is a significant impact on our youth, particularly regarding the high incidence of discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Among those who experience discrimination, 41.9% identify as LGBTQ, while the percentage rises to 56.4% for transgender youth. In comparison, the overall rate of discrimination among all youth stands at 21.6%. LGBTQ+ youth often endure prejudice based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, which can distort their self-image and engender insecurities about their identities. Such discrimination can have profound effects on their well-being during this vulnerable stage of life, leading to heightened anxiety and an increased risk of depression linked to negative perceptions of self-identity.

We also noted that among our youth surveyed, 40.7% of LGBTQ youth reported experiencing being picked-on in the past 30 days, while a striking 50.4% of transgender youth identified similar experiences. In comparison, only 30% of all youth reported being picked-on during the same period. Negative treatment from peers, including being picked-on is a significant and persistent risk factor for youth suicide.

Protective Factors for Youth

While troubling disparities negatively impact youth mental health, the DCYA also highlights several protective factors that can benefit our young people. These factors include access to mental health services, engagement in social activism, strong connections to school, and participation in organized activities.

We observe a positive trend, with 39.2% of LGBTQ youth having access to mental health services, while over half of transgender youth (52.1%) receive similar care. Although this does not imply that all youth in need can access mental health support, it is encouraging to recognize that a significant number can obtain the support they require.

LGBTQ+ youth activism is crucial for creating safer, inclusive environments, enhancing resilience and personal growth. Engaging in social justice activism helps young people advocate for their rights, challenge discrimination, and foster positive community change. This involvement mitigates discrimination's negative effects and supports identity exploration. Data shows that 40% of LGBTQ youth and 46.4% of transgender youth are active in social activism.

Furthermore, we observe a significant level of school connectivity and involvement in organized activities, which encompass academic clubs, school clubs, art programs, religious engagement, and various community initiatives. Notably, 66.9% of LGBTQ youth report feeling connected to their school, while 56.8% of transgender youth share the same sentiment. Additionally, we see impressive participation rates in organized activities, with 82.2% of LGBTQ youth and 80.2% of transgender youth engaged in such programs.



The Essential Role of Supportive Adults and Their Vital Importance in Suicide Prevention

Research indicates that LGBTQ youth who have trusted adults within their educational environments experience enhanced self-esteem (Dessel, 2017). Furthermore, access to supportive peers serves as a protective factor against anxiety and depression, particularly for those lacking familial support (Parra, 2018).

The DCYA addresses this critical statistic by prompting youth to identify how many adults they can rely on for assistance in times of need. Findings reveal that 72.3% of LGBTQ youth can identify three or more supportive adults, while 66% of transgender youth can do the same. Research shows that having at least one accepting adult is associated with a reduced risk of suicidal ideation and attempts, as well as a more positive school experience. The ability of youth to identify three or more supportive adults is a particularly favorable indicator of resilience.

Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge that LGBTQ youth who perceive strong support from their families tend to exhibit better mental health outcomes. Parental involvement plays a vital role in the well-being of LGBTQ youth by fostering a supportive environment, which mitigates the risk of negative mental health outcomes and promotes a sense of belonging and identity. The DCYA also inquires about parental involvement; among our youth, 86.7% of LGBTQ youth reported parental support, while 82.1% of transgender youth indicated the same.



LGBTQ+ youth have identified the following top five actions that individuals in their lives can take to demonstrate support and acceptance
(Trevor Project, 2024)

1. Trust in my self-identity: 87% Identifying This
2. Standing up for my rights: 81% Identifying This
3. Advocacy on my behalf: 76% Identifying This
4. Respecting my pronouns: 63% Identifying This
5. Taking the initiative to learn about LGBTQ+ identities: 62% Identifying This

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Links and Resources

[2024 Dane County Youth Assesment Overview Report](#)

[2024 Dane County Youth Assesment High School Report](#)

[2024 Dane County Youth Assesment Sexual Orentation Report](#)

[2024 Dane County Youth Assesment Transgender Report](#)

[The Trevor Project](#)

[The Trevor Project WI Report](#)

