

# Why do Discipline Disparities Exist between LGBTQ and Heterosexual Youth?

A Brief Report

June, 2016



**Source:** Poteat, V. P., Scheer, J. R., & Chong, E. S. K. (2016). Sexual orientation-based disparities in school and juvenile justice discipline: A multiple group comparison of contributing factors. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 108*, 229–241.

# OVERVIEW

Punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, ranging from school suspension to incarceration in the juvenile justice system, are directed disproportionately toward certain minority youth populations. There is robust evidence for this bias against racial minority youth: they are overrepresented in school and legal sanctions and face harsher discipline sanctions than white youth who report similar offenses.<sup>1-5</sup>

Few studies have considered discipline disparities among sexual minority youth (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning [LGBQ] youth). These youth experience similar challenges in schools as those faced by racial minority (heterosexual) youth.<sup>6</sup> Emerging findings show that sexual minority youth are more likely to report school expulsion and juvenile arrests than heterosexuals.<sup>7</sup> Also, those in the juvenile justice system often face discrimination and barriers to service.<sup>8-10</sup> In view of this evidence, we ask...

## Why are LGBQ youth overrepresented in school suspension and juvenile justice system involvement?

In our study we tested for evidence of...

- the *underlying factors* that contribute to discipline disparities among LGBQ youth; and
- their *more sizable negative effects for LGBQ youth* compared to heterosexual youth.

Our findings underscore the need for educators, psychologists, and juvenile justice professionals to give greater attention to discipline disparities faced by LGBQ youth and suggest ways to address them.

# DEMOGRAPHICS

Data are from the 2012 Dane County Youth Assessment. The population-based sample included 13,645 high school students (Grade 9–12) from 22 schools of Dane County, Wisconsin. The county is expansive and geographically diverse, ranging from rural farming areas to a large city (Madison, WI).

### Sexual orientation

- ☼ 93.6% heterosexual, 1.2% gay or lesbian, 3.2% bisexual, and 2.0% questioning (see *Figure 1*).

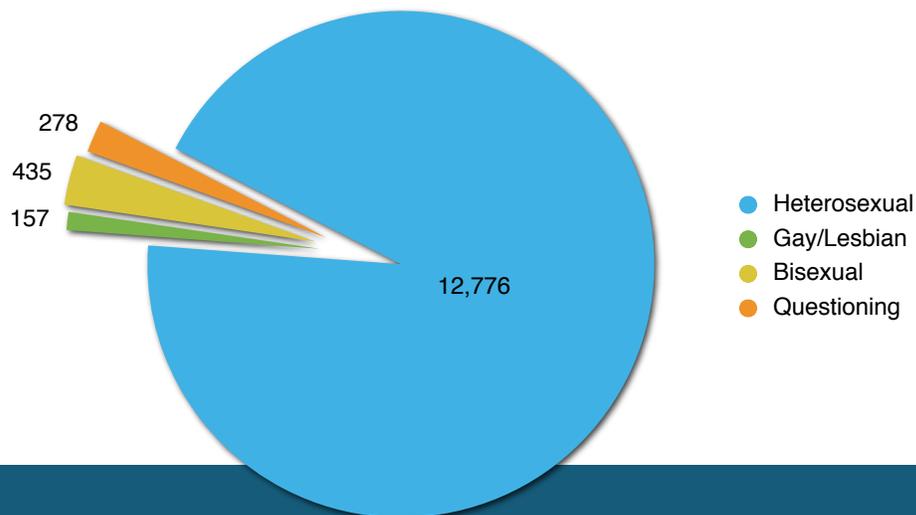
### Gender

- ☼ There was an equal representation of male and female participants (50.2% female).

### Race/ethnicity

- ☼ The majority of youth identified as White (73.7%), whereas the remaining youth identified as African American/Black (5.3%), Hispanic (5.1%), non-Hmong Asian (2.7%), Hmong (1.6%), Native American (0.6%), Middle Eastern (0.6%), bi/multiracial (7.3%), or ‘other’ (3.1%).

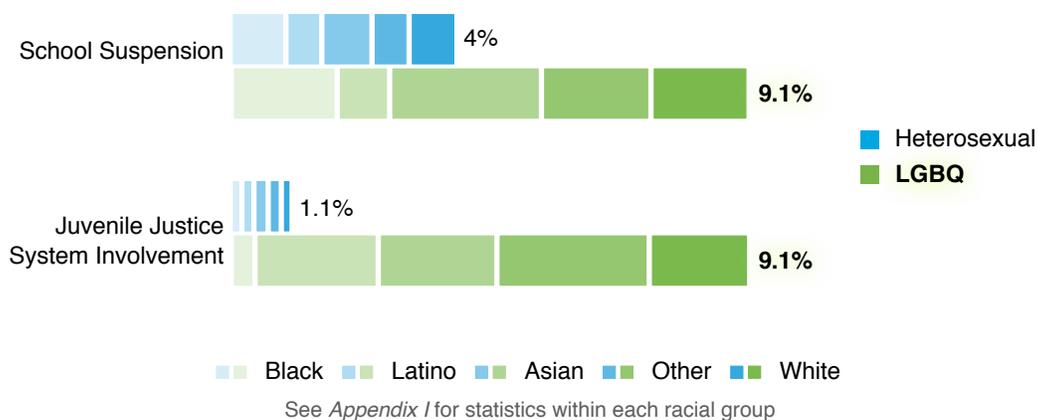
*Figure 1. Number of Students by Sexual Orientation*



# DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES

LGBQ youth were 2.41 times more likely to be suspended and 9.21 times more likely to be involved in juvenile justice system than heterosexual youth (see *Figure 2*).

*Figure 2. Proportion of Youth who reported Exclusionary Discipline*



“ To understand why LGBQ youth were more likely than their heterosexual peers to report exclusionary discipline, we must understand the **stressors** experienced by LGBQ youth. ”

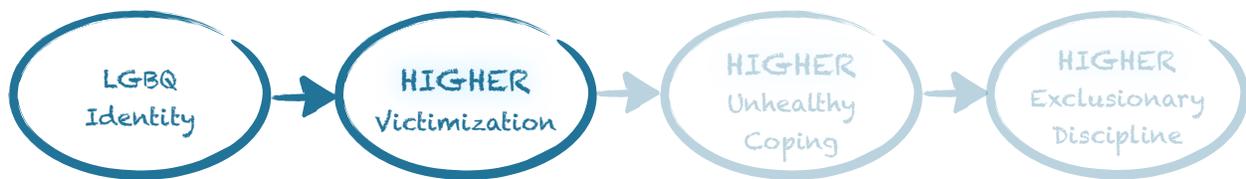
# VICTIMIZATION AS A CATALYST

## Sample items

- I got hit / pushed by other students
- Other students made fun of me
- Other students picked on me
- Other students called me names

**It has been well established that LGBTQ youth experience greater marginalization in schools and society. <sup>11</sup>**

- ✿ Congruent with past studies, LGBTQ youth in our study reported more victimization than their heterosexual peers. <sup>12-14</sup>

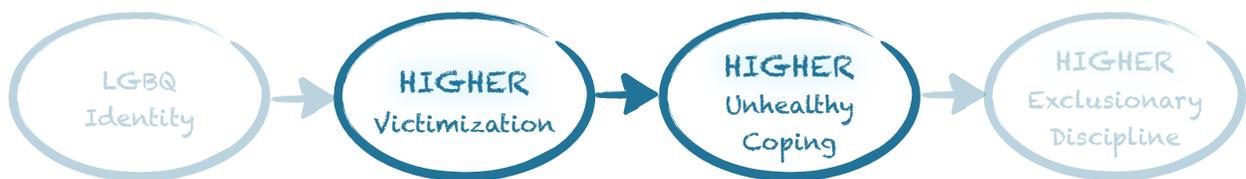


# COPING DUE TO VICTIMIZATION

## In connection with more victimization...

- ✿ LGBTQ youth were at higher risk than heterosexual youth for engaging in these strategies.

✿ Substance use (*cigarette, alcohol, marijuana*)  
 ✿ School-related externalizing behaviors (*truancy, weapon carriage*)



## Lacking access to resources and support, victimized LGBTQ youth may

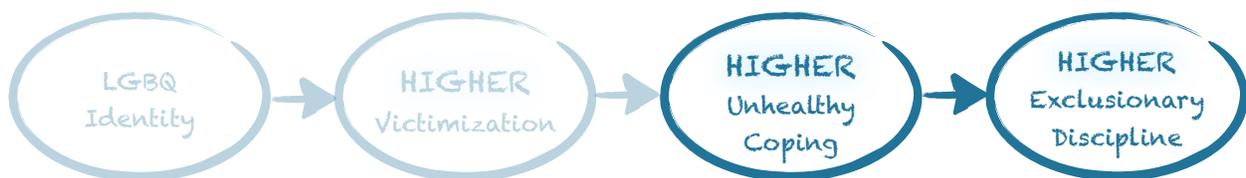
- ✿ use substances as a means to *cope with trauma (e.g., discrimination)*;
- ✿ skip school for serious safety concerns and to *avoid victimization*;
- ✿ carry weapons to school for *self-defense*.

# CONSEQUENCE

**These particular coping behaviors for victimization constitute punishable infractions.**

- ☀ These unhealthy coping strategies placed LGBQ youth at heightened risk for more serious forms of discipline.

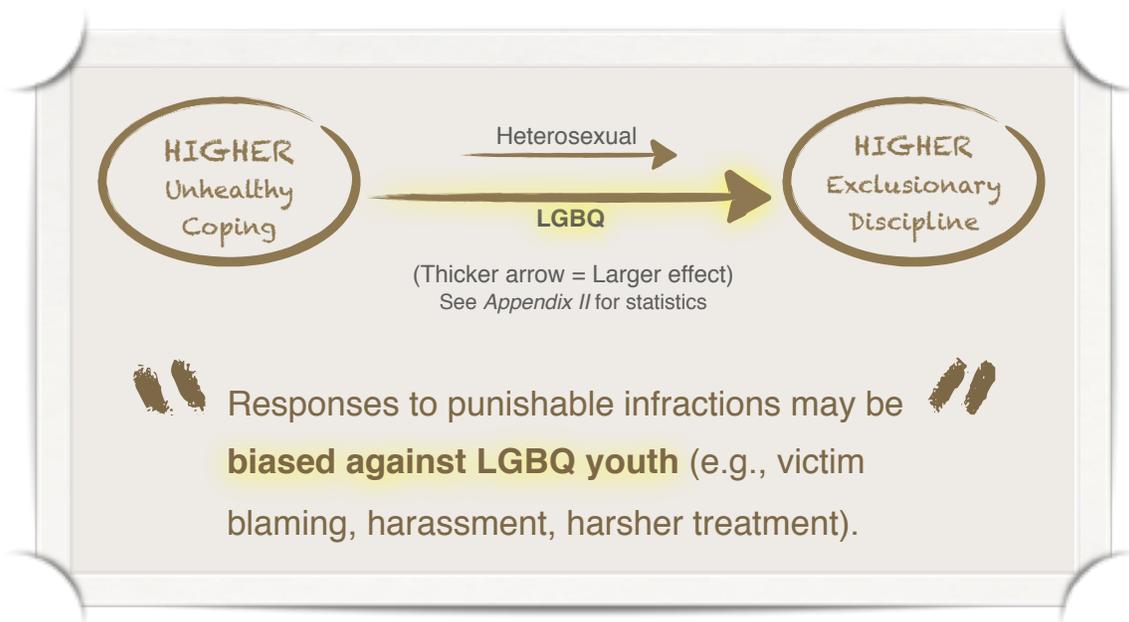
- ☀ School suspension
- ☀ Juvenile justice system involvement



## Disproportionate Punishment of LGBQ Youth

**Even with the same level of infractions committed...**

- ☀ **LGBQ youth** faced disproportionately **higher rates** of punitive discipline compared to heterosexual youth.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Based on these factors contributing to exclusionary discipline disparities for LGBTQ youth, we present the following recommendations and resources:**

## **Create safe school communities...**

- ☼ Support youth to lead and participate in Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)

<http://glsen.org/gsa> | <http://gsanetwork.org>

<http://www.gsafewi.org/resources/for-youth-gsas>

- ☼ Provide training for school administrators, teachers, and staff on how to foster LGBTQ affirmative environments (e.g., creating Safe Zones, supporting GSAs, implementing anti-bullying policies, increasing LGBTQ inclusivity in school curricula)
- ☼ Consider ways to address instances of school-based discrimination and other contributors to exclusionary discipline for LGBTQ youth using approaches such as restorative justice, school-wide anti-bullying programs, and inclusive curricula

<http://glsen.org/educate/resources/guides> | <http://www.stopbullying.gov>

[http://ssp.wi.gov/ssp\\_lgbt](http://ssp.wi.gov/ssp_lgbt) | <http://www.gsafewi.org/programs/educator-training>

[http://www.ywcamadison.org/site/c.cuWLiO0Jql8E/b.7968327/k.87EF/Restorative\\_Justice\\_Program.htm](http://www.ywcamadison.org/site/c.cuWLiO0Jql8E/b.7968327/k.87EF/Restorative_Justice_Program.htm)

## **Connect youth to effective resources and strategies to promote resilience...**

- ☼ Connect LGBTQ youth with community resources
- ☼ Explore ways of addressing infractions that acknowledge their underlying causes that may be tied to victimization/discrimination

<http://www.glnh.org/talkline> | <http://www.thetrevorproject.org>

<http://www.glbtear.me.org> | <http://www.matthewsplace.com>

<http://amplifyyourvoice.org/yr-resources> | <http://www.campuspride.org>

<http://www.hrc.org/resources/category/youth-campus>

<http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/lgbthealth/LGBTYouth>

<http://www.gsafewi.org/wp-content/uploads/Resources-in-WI-February-2013.pdf>

## REFERENCES

1. Piquero, A. R. (2008). Disproportionate minority contact. *The Future of Children, 18*, 59-79. doi:10.1353/foc.0.0013
2. Ray, K. E. B., & Alarid, L. F. (2004). Examining racial disparity of male property offenders in the Missouri juvenile justice system. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 2*, 107-128. doi:10.1177/1541204003262228
3. Shaw, S. R., & Braden, J. P. (1990). Race and gender bias in the administration of corporal punishment. *School Psychology Review, 19*, 378-383.
4. Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *The Urban Review, 34*, 317-342. doi:10.1023/A:1021320817372
5. Wehlage, G., & Rutter, R. (1986). Dropping out: How much do schools contribute to the problem? *The Teachers College Record, 87*, 374-392.
6. Coker, T. R., Austin, S. B., & Schuster, M. A. (2010). The health and health care of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. *Annual Review of Public Health, 31*, 457-477. doi:10.1146/annurev.publhealth.012809.103636
7. Himmelstein, K. E., & Brückner, H. (2011). Criminal-justice and school sanctions against nonheterosexual youth: A national longitudinal study. *Pediatrics, 127*, 49-57. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-2306
8. Curtin, M. (2002). Lesbian and bisexual girls in the juvenile justice system. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 19*, 285-301. doi:10.1023/A:1016301828661
9. Graziano, J. N., & Wagner, E. F. (2011). Trauma among lesbians and bisexual girls in the juvenile justice system. *Traumatology, 17*, 45-55. doi:10.1177/1534765610391817
10. Irvine, A. (2010). We've had three of them: Addressing the invisibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender nonconforming youths in the juvenile justice system. *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law, 19*, 675-701.
11. Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*, 674-697.
12. Poteat, V. P., Mereish, E. H., DiGiovanni, C. D., & Koenig, B. W. (2011). The effects of general and homophobic victimization on adolescents' psychosocial and educational concerns: The importance of intersecting identities and parent support. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*, 597-609.
13. Russell, S. T., Franz, B. T., & Driscoll, A. K. (2001). Same-sex romantic attraction and experiences of violence in adolescence. *American Journal of Public Health, 91*, 903-906.
14. Williams, T., Connolly, J., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (2005). Peer victimization, social support, and psychosocial adjustment of sexual minority adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34*, 471-482.

## APPENDICES

### I

- ☼ The proportions of LGBQ youth who reported being suspended were 9.8%, 4.8%, 13.9%, 10.0%, and 9.0%, respectively, within each racial group (Black, Latino, Asian, Other, and White); whereas those for heterosexual youth were 4.9%, 3.1%, 4.3%, 3.2%, and 4.1%, respectively.
- ☼ The proportions of LGBQ youth who reported being involved in the juvenile justice system were 2.2%, 10.9%, 10.5%, 13.5%, and 8.9%, respectively, within each racial group (Black, Latino, Asian, Other, and White); whereas those for heterosexual youth were 1.2%, 1.1%, 1.3%, 1.2%, and 1.0%, respectively.

### II

- ☼ The multigroup comparison of our structural equation model indicated these coefficients for LGBQ and heterosexual youth could not be constrained to be equal.
- ☼ The association between punishable infractions (including substance use, truancy, and weapon carriage) and school suspension was stronger for sexual minority youth than heterosexual youth (standardized effects = 0.47 vs. 0.40).
- ☼ Similarly, the association between punishable infractions and juvenile justice involvement was stronger for sexual minority youth than heterosexual youth (standardized effects = 0.57 vs. 0.12).
- ☼ Note: Range of standardized effects = 0–1.