

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.
- LGB people in Northern Ireland are more likely to have experienced harassment than their counterparts in the rest of the UK and Ireland.
- Those with a Christian ethos are more likely to disapprove of lesbian, gay or bisexual practice.

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) in 2003 found that “young LGB people experience isolation within society and sometimes within their families”.¹

Research carried out by Jarman and Tennant in 2003 also found that gay respondents were 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 14-25 years (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. These same respondents were also 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. The survey found that almost three quarters of all respondents had experienced

homophobic attitudes from family members. As a result, they felt compelled to leave the family home and 16% said they had experienced homelessness.⁴

Homophobia

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

- Over half the respondents said that sex between men is always or mostly wrong. Over one third of respondents said that sex between women is always or mostly wrong.
- 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 reported having had 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. Of the young women who reported having had sex with another female on at least one occasion, 15.4% said that sex between two women is always or sometimes wrong.³

The disparity between the attitudes and the actual behaviour of those young men and women may have severe implications for their sexual health and personality development. This was highlighted by the NIHRC research, which found that when accessing healthcare services, young people are often exposed to prejudices, human rights abuses and a lack of structures tailored to their needs.¹

Respondents not affiliated to any of the major Christian churches held more liberal views on sexual orientation. Protestants were most likely to disapprove of sex between women and between men.³

It is sometimes assumed that with regard to young people, disapproval of those who choose an LGB lifestyle is confined to church based organisations or other conservative youth groups. However, a study carried out by Youthnet in 2003 showed that young people were just as likely to have had negative experiences related to their sexuality in youth clubs (58%) and youth groups (49%) as they were in church based groups (57%) and uniformed organisations (50%).⁴

While homophobia can and does occur within communities with a faith based ethos, many within those communities repudiate such actions and conduct, particularly when it includes victimisation and abusive, demeaning or other violent attitudes and behaviour. For example, in 2007 the Presbyterian Church adopted guidelines to help it further develop sensitive and effective pastoral care.

Challenging homophobia should be an integral element of a school's relationships and sexuality education (RSE) 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% of respondents 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 in Northern Ireland was higher than that 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 than females to have suffered both harassment and violence;
- the most common form of harassment was verbal abuse;
- the most common forms of violence were being the target of a missile (35%), assault (30%), attempted assault (29%) and being spat at (18%).

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

Conclusion

The homophobic atmosphere and heterosexual bias that exist in Northern Ireland can cause difficulties for young LGB people 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). Belfast: 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.

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