

# The Risk of Suicide, the Safety of Sexual Minorities in High Schools, and the Response of Gay-Straight Alliances.

Concept Sheet

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## **Abstract:**

In wave 2 of Add health, 24% of gay, lesbian and bisexual high school students reported that they had considered suicide in the past year, compared to 10% of straight students. Suicide risk peaks in the adolescent years, and students from sexual minorities clearly face a higher risk of suicide, along with higher associated risks of anxiety, alienation from school, and loneliness. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students represent a fundamentally at-risk group in America's high schools. The at-risk status of GLB students makes learning and achievement more difficult.

This project will involve two stages. In the first stage, I will analyze the nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), to determine what the correlates of GLB student alienation and suicide risk are. Six years after high school, in wave 3 of Add health, a substantial minority of GLB young adults reported that they had still not disclosed their sexual identity to their parents. Parents who are not fully informed cannot be as effective in shielding their young adult children from the consequences that even minor verbal harassment presents to students. GLB students' lack of effective support structures makes any type of hostile environment more dangerous to them. The special vulnerability of sexual minority students within schools is in part due to micro-contexts within schools; minority students may be harassed by conduct that other students take no notice of.

One school-level answer to GLB student isolation, victimization, and elevated suicide risk is the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). GSAs are reputed to have a strong impact on the safety of sexual minority youth in high schools. GSAs are growing in school systems across the country, though independent research on the efficacy of GSAs is lacking. My study of GSAs will link to national efforts to improve the safety and the educational environment for sexual minority youth. In the second stage of my project, I will do long term ethnographic research with students in high school GSAs, observing GSA meetings, talking to students and teachers, learning about the motivations of both gay and straight students to participate in the GSA, and ultimately determining how

GSAs do and do not work to improve school environments for GLB students. My research with GSAs will include three different kinds of high schools, urban white high SES, urban majority-minority, and rural. In addition to the in-depth ethnographic work with three high school GSAs, I will commission a nationally representative survey of youth ages 18-25, oversampling GLB youth, to determine how many students were aware of GSAs in their high schools, and what they thought the impact of GSAs was.

## **Background**

### **Sexual Minorities in Schools, Problems and Issues:**

Unlike racial minority youth who are still very geographically and residentially concentrated, GLB youth represent a small minority in nearly every large high school in the US. Nationally, GLB students represent 3% of all high school students,<sup>1</sup> and they are not nearly as geographically concentrated as GLB adults, who in turn are less geographically concentrated and much less residentially segregated than racial minority groups in the US.

All the same issues that affect black youth in white schools (Arnez 1978; Schofield 1991; Tatum 1999) affect GLB youth in every school- alienation, harassment, and micro-contextual issues which add up to a less than ideal environment in which to learn. Students from sexual minorities face additional problems that students from racial minorities usually don't face- GLB youth are often unsure about their sexual identity and many are not "out" to their parents, so they have few places to turn for support.

A majority of GLB high school students reported being victimized by verbal harassment at school (Kosciw and Diaz 2006). Suicide risk peaks in the adolescent years and is nearly as great a mortality risk as homicide among adolescents (Dinkes et al. 2006). Research has shown that GLB youth have a substantially elevated risk of suicide. Gibson (1989), working with convenience samples of adolescents in contact with homeless shelters in California, first made the case that GLB adolescents faced twice or three times the risk of suicide as straight adolescents; at the time (in part because Gibson's study was part of a federal report), Gibson's results were very controversial. Sadly, data from wave two of Add health gathered a decade later confirm Gibson's results. While 10% of straight high school students in wave 2 of Add health reported considering suicide in the prior year, 24% of GLB students had considered suicide in the same period.

One of the fundamental functions of adolescence is identity formation. In order to form a strong sense of identity, adolescents need a sense of belonging and support, and a peer group and community to give them that sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Galliher, Rostosky and Hughes 2004; Tatum 1999). GLB students face several particular challenges in arriving at a sense of belonging. As GLB students begin to understand that they are different from their straight peers, they find little solace in their peers' heteronormative rituals of dating, and courtship, and hooking up. The straight adolescent peers, on the other hand, are going through their own process of identity formation which makes it an especially difficult time for straight students to maintain their friendships with GLB students. Same-sex friendships between GLB students and

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<sup>1</sup> The 3% figure is derived from wave III of Add health data, gathered from students in their early 20s.

straight students become difficult in adolescence, because straight adolescents are not always comfortable enough about their own sexual identity to dismiss the questions that their friendships with GLB students might raise (Doppler 2000). Meanwhile, the struggle for identity formation and belonging among the straight students can lead to a climate of teasing and bullying, a negative climate which tends to peak in the high school years, as the straight students intentionally or unintentionally harass the GLB students in an effort to further their own sense of belonging to the straight majority by distinguishing themselves from the GLB minority (Gibson 1989).

Aaron Fricke's (1981) memoir describes some of the difficulties of being gay in High School in the 1970s. He faced regular harassment from a few other students, he was violently assaulted but chose not to tell his parents lest they find out that he was gay, and his pleas for help to the school administration were generally ignored. At a low point, he wrote, "I began to believe that everyone looked down on me and when anyone looked at me I thought I saw their seething hatred of me coming through. When I entered high school I was completely isolated from the world. I had lost all concept of humanity," (Fricke 1981 p.31). Fricke's parents should have known that he was gay, but during most of his high school years his parents refused to acknowledge his homosexuality, which made Aaron unable to turn to his parents for support. If there were sympathetic straight students or teachers at his school, Fricke had no way to identify them. One of the boys Fricke had been sexually active with before obtained a girl friend, and became hostile to Fricke as a way of reinforcing his own heterosexuality. Fricke's isolation from other students and from adult support was nearly complete. What seems to have made the most difference to the young Aaron Fricke is the advocacy on his behalf by a local gay rights group when Fricke was barred from attending his senior prom with a male date. The advocacy (and their eventual victory in court against the school) created a space in which others, including his parents, could and did rally to his support.

The at-risk status of sexual minority youth in high schools has been widely reported (Bontempo and D'Augelli 2002; D'Augelli and Hershberger 1993; D'Augelli, Hershberger and Pilkington 2001; Elze 2003; Garofalo et al. 1999; Remafedi et al. 1998). One convenience sample study of youth recruited through known GLB support groups showed that 50% of the GLB youth had been verbally abused, while 11% had been assaulted (D'Augelli, Pilkington and Hershberger 2002). A representative study of Massachusetts students based on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey was reported by Garofalo et al (1999) to show that one third of the Massachusetts GLB youth had been threatened with a weapon compared to 7% of straight youth. Garofalo et al further found that the risk of attempted suicide was 3.4 times higher for GLB students than for straight high school students, but that the higher risk of suicide was only robustly significant for the gay male students, not for the lesbian and bisexual women. A national survey of sexual harassment issues by the American Association of University Women (1993) found that 23% of young men had been called "gay" and 10% of young women had been called "lesbian" in high school, and that students (regardless of their sexual orientation, which was not measured) found this type of harassment to be the most troubling kind that they faced. Remafedi et al (1998), using a survey of Minnesota adolescents, found that homosexual or bisexual identity had a strong and significant effect increasing suicidal attempts and suicidal intent for boys, but not for girls.

Kosciw and Diaz's (2006) report on a national survey of GLB high school students found that the majority of students reported hearing "faggot" or "dyke" regularly at school, and the majority regularly heard "that's so gay" used as a general putdown meaning stupid. Seventy four percent of the GLB students said they had felt unsafe in school, and 41% had been victims of "cyber-bullying," meaning they had received threatening emails or text messages (Raskauskas and Stoltz 2007). None of these affronts would likely affect the well being or sense of safety of the majority straight high school students, which is why micro contextual issues are so difficult to measure at the school-wide level.

GLB students represent a fundamentally at-risk group in America's high schools. Their at-risk status makes learning and achievement more difficult. One of the central issues that high school teachers face is how at-risk students can accomplish academic goals when the students feel alienated from the school itself (Bronfenbrenner 1979). No amount of pedagogical preparation can overcome student depression and alienation. Students who face harassment, even subtle harassment at school, are at risk of educational failure, and at elevated risk for catastrophic outcomes such as suicide.

### **Relevant Literatures: Racial Integration in Schools**

The literature on sexual minorities in schools is relatively new and as yet under developed. There is, however, a substantial literature on the desegregation of schools by race, and on the experience of racial minorities in mostly-white schools, which is analogous in some ways to the experience of sexual minority students in all schools.

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which struck down legalized racial segregation in US public school systems, was supposed to usher in a new era of educational integration for students of racial minority groups in the US. White political resistance to integration, however, has blunted the progress of school integration (Orfield, Eaton and Harvard Project on School Desegregation 1996). In the aftermath of *Brown*, Black students were moved from under-funded black schools into formerly all white schools. School integration was supposed to be directly beneficial to minority students, yet early experiments with integration demonstrated that integration imposed costs on the minority students which the Supreme Court had not anticipated. National Guard troops had to be deployed to ensure the safety of nine black students who integrated Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, and thousands of white citizens turned out to jeer at the black students. White resistance to integration demonstrated that the benefits of integration might be accompanied by substantial costs for minority students, and led to early questions about the value of school desegregation (Arendt 1959).

In the decades after *Brown* and after the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, cases of violent white resistance to school desegregation have become rare, but the educational challenges faced by minority students have not disappeared. Tatum (1999) argues that minority students tend to find the environment of predominantly white schools to be hostile, even in the absence of the kind of organized hostility which typified the early battles over school integration. Minority students at predominantly white schools find themselves tracked out of the most challenging classes, and find that the teachers and administrators don't trust them (Arnez 1978). The discomfort which minority students experience at school has negative effects on their academic progress.

Tatum (1999) argues that black students sit together at the cafeteria because they have to; their sense of belonging depends on having a strong peer group in which the difficulties of minority status are understood. The cohesion (or, from another perspective, self-segregation) of black students within predominantly white schools is, according to Tatum, a natural result of the process of identity formation and the need for belonging.

The practical difficulties of school desegregation have proven to be stronger and more persistent than anyone imagined in 1954. Although school desegregation has its critics (Arendt 1959; Arnez 1978; Schofield 1991), the majority of educators and minority parents still believe in desegregation, and argue that the problem with school desegregation is not that it does not work, but that it has never fully been implemented (Orfield, Eaton and Harvard Project on School Desegregation 1996).

In the 1970s, spurred on by persistent racial tension in integrated schools, and challenged by persistently low test scores among minority students in mostly-white schools, educators began to reassess how integration could be made more successful at the school level. One line of research started with a re-evaluation of Gordon Allport's (1954) classic contact hypothesis, a theory whose introduction was contemporaneous with the first *Brown v Board* decision.

In over-simplified form, the contact hypothesis was thought to suggest that any social contact between two groups would naturally lessen the barriers of distrust between the groups. Greater contact would lead to greater understanding, according to one interpretation (Ensari and Miller 2002). In fact, Allport's contact theory was more nuanced than early interpreters thought. Allport understood that contact between racial groups could in some cases stir distrust and serve to deepen, rather than lessen, the depth of the racial divide. Allport understood that only contact based on equal status and cooperation stood a strong chance of diminishing racial distrust (Khmelkov and Hallinan 1999; Slavin and Cooper 1999). Using the more nuanced version of contact theory, and also expectation states theory (Berger, Cohen and Zelditch 1972), educators developed cooperative classroom strategies which forced students to work together, across racial lines. Cooperative learning strategies such as those employed by Aronson and his colleagues (1978), later refined by Slavin and his colleagues (Slavin and Cooper 1999) have shown promising results in terms of increasing interracial friendships in multiracial school settings (Gaertner et al. 1990).

### **Gay Straight Alliance as a Social Movement**

Parents in contemporary US society have limited knowledge of the feelings and behaviors of their own adolescent children, in part because fewer parents are full-time homemakers, and in part because young adults in the US are raised with greater expectation of privacy and personal freedom than was the case in the past (Arnett 2004; Hersch 1998; Rosenfeld 2006; Rosenfeld 2007; Rosenfeld and Kim 2005). School principals and administrators, who have hundreds of students under their care, have correspondingly less information than parents do about the well-being of each student.

One purpose of the GSA is to build a communication pathway between sexual minority students and the school administration. In their study of GLB students, Kosciw and Diaz (2006) found that the students who had access to a GSA appreciated it for this reason. Without the GSA, the micro-context of the sexual minority students was

generally invisible to school administration. In other words, knowing and supportive staff matters to GLB youth because of the adults' direct interactions with the students, and also because of the trusted adults' ability to bridge the communication gap between the students and the school administration.

One of the first principles of direct action organizing is that small victories galvanize the troops and build efficacy and self confidence (Alinsky 1971). Even in a school that may be described by teachers and students alike as homophobic, the GSAs are reported to have the ability to bring students together and achieve small victories. These small victories (removing homophobic graffiti, for example) can have important impacts on the sense of belonging for the GLB students, without having any noticeable impact on other students.

According to Doppler (2000), the first known GSA was developed at Philips Academy, a private boarding secondary school in Massachusetts, in the late 1980s. When the state of Massachusetts was examining options for a state wide Safe-Schools Program in 1992 (Griffin and Ouellett 2002), GSAs were chosen over gay and lesbian student clubs because GSAs were considered to be more politically palatable outside of the school. In some schools, the majority of members of the GSA are reported to be straight students who join the GSA to support their GLB friends, or as an act of political solidarity. The national surveys by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educational Network (Kosciw and Diaz 2006) exclude straight respondents from their survey sample, so less is known about straight students who participate in GSAs. Nonetheless, the participation of straight students, and the "alliance" element of the gay-straight alliance has important political and theoretical implications. The alliance aspect of GSAs can be seen as drawing upon the decades old research paradigm of cooperative learning between otherwise hostile racial groups, a classroom strategy which has a long pedigree and for which substantial gains (in terms of interracial friendships and comity) have been reported (Aronson 1978; Slavin and Cooper 1999).

Young adults in the US are already substantially more favorable towards gay rights than are their parents or grandparents (Rosenfeld 2007). Research on political and social attitudes indicates that attitudes are relatively stable over the adult life course, with the young adult years playing a crucial role in attitude formation (Alwin, Cohen and Newcomb 1991). Straight adolescents who have their political consciousness developed in GSAs in high schools could represent a future political wedge in favor of gay rights at the national level. The history of the civil rights movement in the US contains important examples of leadership by both whites and blacks (McAdam 1982; McAdam 1990). McAdam (1990) found that the mostly white college students who participated in Freedom Summer in 1964 generally followed their formative civil rights experiences with life long devotion to activism and civil rights causes.

In 2000, California passed the Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act, which specifically mandated schools to improve safety for all students, including sexual minorities (Gay-Straight Alliance Network 2001). Following the passage of the 2000 law, California has seen a spectacular growth in the number of high schools which have GSAs, to 671 schools by the Spring of 2007, representing 26% of California's 2,565 public and private high schools (including K-12 schools). The schools with GSAs include mostly urban schools, but also a substantial number of suburban and rural high schools as well.

The rapid growth of GSAs in California is indicative of one of the strengths of the GSA paradigm: GSAs are student-initiated, and cost hardly anything to start. Because the GSA is student initiated, the costs are low, and because any sympathetic teacher can be the sponsor, the GSA model scales up easily. Unlike school interventions initiated by adults and imposed on students who may be uninterested or unwilling participants, the GSA builds on the strength of the intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985) of a small group of students. The documented failure of other school interventions, such as peer counseling with delinquent students, was thought to be due to the fact that the target students (the delinquents) had no personal motivation for making the program succeed (Gottfredson 1987).

The GSA is a potentially generalizable model, because the GSA has structural advantages of student initiation, low cost, and the ability of any sympathetic teacher to be the sponsor. One can imagine schools with religious minorities, or linguistic minorities, or national origin minorities, or racial minorities, helping a few interested students form a majority-minority alliance student group. The presence of such an alliance could serve to diminish distrust, reduce some of the isolation that minority students tend to feel, and thereby make schools safer for minority youth at relatively low cost. Because minority students experience school differently than their majority peers, and because school administrators may be unaware of the issues and anxieties of the minority students, the students themselves are in the best position to know what the problems in the school are. The GSA model succeeds (and is generalizable) because the GSA capitalizes on the specialized knowledge and intrinsic motivation of the students themselves.

### **Research Program, Phase 1**

#### **Mediators of Suicide Risk, Data from Add health**

According to the most recent government statistics, in 2003-04 there were 1,282 youth suicides in the US (Dinkes et al. 2006). Although only 3 of these suicides actually took place in school, it is reasonable to suppose that the school environment may have contributed to a substantial number of suicides which took place outside the school as well. Young women attempt suicide more often than young men, but young men outnumber young women among fatal suicides by more than 4 to 1 (Shaffer and Bacon 1989). Among the key predictors of actual suicides are prior suicidal ideation, prior suicide attempts, depression, and alcohol abuse (Shaffer and Bacon 1989).

Wave 2 of Add Health (Udry 2003) asked adolescents whether they had considered suicide in the previous year. The breakdown of answers was as follows:

Table 1: Suicide Risk by Sexual Identity

Student's self reported sexual identity at wave 3 Add health	N of respondents	Percent who reported having considered suicide in past year, wave 2 Add health
Exclusively heterosexual	10,292	9.8
Mostly heterosexual, but somewhat attracted to people of one's own sex	757	20.3
bisexual	191	24.1
mostly gay, but somewhat attracted to people of the opposite sex	76	25.0
100% gay	95	23.2

The number of self-identified GLB students in wave 3 of Add health is 362 (191+76+95). Given the sharply higher suicidal ideation of the GLB students compared to the exclusively heterosexual students (.241 compared to .098, odds ratio of 2.91), the power to detect a significant difference between the groups is complete (indistinguishable from 1) given two tailed tests and an alpha of 0.05. If we exclude the self-identified bisexual students from the comparison and compare only the exclusively gay and mostly gay students to the exclusively heterosexual students, the N of gay students is reduced by more than 50% to 171, but the odds ratio of the comparison remains the same (2.91) and the power to identify statistically significant contrasts remains high, 0.991. The sample size of Add Health is more than sufficient to distinguish between sexual identity groups in a study of suicide risk.

### General Determinants of Suicide Risk

In order to understand the heightened risk of suicide for GLB students, one must understand the general suicide risk for all students. Roughly 1% of individuals who contemplate suicide actually commit suicide. For the purpose of this study, contemplation of suicide is the outcome variable not only because contemplation of suicide is associated with actual suicides, but also because contemplation of suicide represents a state of individual anxiety and desperation which is inconsistent with good student health and progress, and therefore “considering suicide” represents an important social outcome in its own right.

Understanding of suicide risk was the subject of one of the first great works of sociology, Durkheim's *Suicide* (Durkheim [1897] 1951; Pescosolido and Goergianna 1989). Durkheim argued, in part, that Catholics were less prone to suicide than Protestants because Catholics were more integrated into their religious community which shielded them from some of the predations of modernity, and gave Catholics a stronger

sense of belonging and protection. The finding that Catholics were less likely to commit suicide than Protestants was so well accepted that Merton (1967) claimed it as a natural law. Later data analysis seem to overturn this classic Durkheimian hypothesis, claiming that Catholics were no less likely to have committed suicide, but simply less likely to report the deaths of family members as suicides because of their stronger religious proscriptions against suicide (van Poppel and Day 1996).

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