

The Impact of Social Support on Mental Health for LGBTQ+ Foster Care Youth



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Study Overview

Nationally, sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth or those that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender diverse are at a significantly increased risk of psychological disorders including, major depressive disorder and suicidality. SGM youth are also overrepresented in the foster care system, with estimates ranging between 13-30%. Foster youth are already at heightened risk of poor mental health outcomes; sexual and gender minority foster youth may be at even more risk based on their sexual minority or gender identity status. However, positive relationships with caring adults can improve mental health outcomes for foster youth. Social supports, in the form of caregivers, caseworkers, and community-based programs, are important assets for these youths. To date, few research studies have looked at how social supports may impact mental health outcomes for SGM youth in foster care. In addition, there is very little research on the additional impact of foster care stress and discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression on mental health for this vulnerable group. This research worked to address these gaps in order to tailor services and interventions for SGM youth in foster care.

Community Partners

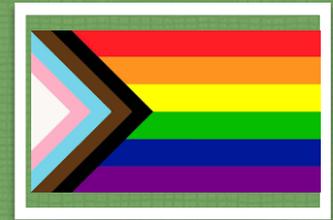
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Study Outcomes

The main study goal was to look at the gaps in what is known about the impact of foster care stress and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity on mental health for this vulnerable group.

"...This has really helped, just being able to talk about it and get it out; I wish I would have had that when I was younger, like an outlet-- just to express these feelings; it's really helped me to think about who I am and how I've reacted; this has been really helpful to me; I would suggest that this happens more; need more people who truly listen and more research like this."



IMPLICATIONS TO THE COMMUNITY

Our results were startling, and we found that rates of depression, anxiety and suicidality were much higher compared to data we have on other foster care youth. Based on this project, we are citing the need for trauma-informed, social support-based interventions for SGM youth to curb the impact of SGM-based victimization on mental health outcomes. We are working with our community partner at DCFS and community-based organizations to incorporate findings from this study into trainings for case workers and prospective foster parents. Here are some of the findings:

- 65% of the sample met criteria for clinical depression and 79% met criteria for clinical anxiety; 70% reported suicidal ideation and 45% had a past suicide attempt.
- The clinical rates of mood disorders are elevated for this population compared to other studies of community-based and population-level samples of youth.
- Rates of suicidal behaviors are similar to other community-based samples of SGM young people; although higher than other studies.
- A key takeaway is that the burden of mental health problems can underscore the need for tailored services and interventions for system involved LGBTQ youth. Over half of youth identified as transgender or gender diverse. These youth called attention to the need for gender affirming counseling and medical services.