

LGBTQ ISSUES IN TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

**Note: all terms relating to LGBTQ identities or the LGBTQ lived experience are defined in the LGBTQ Issues in Teen Dating Violence: Glossary Information Sheet*

There exists a myth that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth do not experience Teen Dating Violence (TDV) in the same way as heterosexual teens. This widespread belief, based in “the cultural assumption of gender,” is known as the “myth of mutual abuse.”¹ The myth of mutual abuse perpetuates the idea that “violence in gay intimate partnerships is a mutual abuse or combat.”² This myth is harmful because it erases the experiences of LGBTQ TDV victims. It is crucial to debunk this myth and to understand that TDV is perpetrated in same-sex as well as heterosexual teen intimate partnerships.

In fact, TDV is even more prevalent in LGBTQ teen intimate partner relationships than in heterosexual teen intimate partner relationships, with one study stating that **24% of “youth who reported having only same-sex romantic or sexual relationships” experienced “either psychological abuse or physical dating violence.”**³ A study conducted by the Urban Institute Justice Policy Center found that

“...higher shares of LGBTQ youth reported victimization experiences [sic] of cyber dating abuse (37 percent, compared to 26 percent of heterosexual youth), physical dating violence (43 percent, compared to 29 percent of heterosexual youth), psychological dating abuse (59 percent, compared to 46 percent of heterosexual youth), and sexual coercion (23 percent, compared to 12 percent of heterosexual youth). Further, higher shares of LGBTQ youth reported perpetrating cyber dating abuse (18 percent, compared to 12 percent of heterosexual youth), physical dating violence (33 percent, compared to 20 percent of heterosexual youth), and psychological dating abuse (37 percent, compared to 25 percent of heterosexual youth).”⁴

Transgender youth are especially at risk, as the Urban Institute study shows that they report the highest rates of physical dating violence (88.9%), psychological dating abuse (58.8%), cyber dating abuse (56.3%), and sexual coercion (61.1%).⁵ These data demonstrate that LGBTQ teen intimate partnerships are as potentially dangerous as heterosexual ones, and it is clear that abuse is being perpetrated in LGBTQ teen intimate partnerships despite the “myth of mutual abuse.”

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LGBTQ teens may have trouble recognizing that they are victims of TDV, “even when the battering is severe,” because “intimate partner violence is commonly defined and discussed within a heterosexual context.”⁶ Also, if teens are living in a household or community that is not tolerant of LGBTQ individuals, their **sexual orientation and/or gender identity might prevent access to protection and resources**. For example, victims might stay with their abuser because the victims’ parents are homophobic and the victims feel that they cannot turn to their family for support. Finally, LGBTQ victims of TDV might feel too afraid to tell others about their abuse because doing so would “out” – expose – themselves and/or their partners as LGBTQ, in an environment that they perceive to be hostile towards LGBTQ individuals.

This **fear of “being outed”** complicates TDV in LGBTQ intimate partnerships in a way that heterosexual teens do not experience. **TDV perpetrators may use “outing” as a method of coercion**. For example, in a study of 521 youth attending an LGB rally, researchers found that “Bisexual males had... over 5 times the odds of gay males for being threatened to be outed by a partner” and “bisexual females had over 5 times the odds of lesbians for being threatened to be outed by a partner.”⁷ Transgender teens may be even more fearful of outing than their LGB peers, because “**transgender youth report much higher rates of harassment and assault** than [cisgender] male and female peers,” “92% of transgender youth report often hearing sexist remarks by peers in school, and 79% report often hearing sexist remarks from faculty or staff,” and “89.5% of transgender youth report feeling unsafe in school because of their gender expression compared to less than half of their [cisgender] male and female peers.”⁸

Just as in heterosexual teen intimate partnerships, technology plays a large part in LGBTQ teen intimate partnerships. As explained in *The Use of Social Media in Teen Dating Violence* Information Sheet, technology and social media can be used by TDV perpetrators to coerce, threaten, harass, emotionally abuse, and stalk victims. As noted above, “**LGBTQ youth reported significantly higher rates of cyber dating abuse victimization** and perpetration than heterosexual youth,” with 37% of LGBTQ teens reporting cyber dating abuse victimization and “about half that” reporting cyber dating abuse perpetration.⁹

Abuse of LGBTQ teens by their intimate partners, whether perpetrated in person or online, is especially harmful because **LGBTQ youth are “at an increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, suicide attempts, and suicide.”**¹⁰ More specifically, “youths with same-sex orientation are more than 2 times more likely than their same-sex peers to attempt suicide” and, as is the case with “all youths, victimization experiences [are] associated with suicidality.”¹¹ Also, “compared with their same-sex peers, boys and girls with same-sex sexual orientation reported significantly

more alcohol abuse and depression,” which are suicide risk factors.¹² The outlook is even bleaker for transgender youth; for example, **one study of 55 transgender youth found that 25% of its subjects (14 youths) had attempted suicide.**¹³

This elevated risk of depression and suicidal thoughts in LGBTQ youth can be attributed to the hardships they face due to societal stigma – invalidation or rejection of their identities; bullying; fewer resources specifically devoted to LGBTQ youth to foster mental health; difficulties transitioning for transgender youth, etc. – but when examined in the context of intimate partner violence these statistics are a large warning sign. **Abuse by intimate partners could lead already-depressed LGBTQ teens to harm themselves, cause healthy LGBTQ teens to become depressed, or lead to suicidal ideation and/or suicide.**

Alongside the risks of depression and suicide, as well as physical abuse and threats to physical safety such as stalking or verbal harassment, LGBTQ TDV is exceptionally dangerous because **LGBTQ teens are much more likely to be homeless** – with 30% of street youth identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and 6.8% of street youth identifying as transgender.¹⁴ There are “currently no known LGBT-specific domestic violence shelters in the United States,”¹⁵ and, “homeless LGBT persons have great difficulty finding shelters that accept and respect them” because they are “often at a heightened risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation compared with their heterosexual peers.”¹⁶ Homeless transgender people “are particularly at physical risk due to a lack of acceptance and are often turned away from shelters; *in some cases signs have been posted barring their entrance.*”¹⁷ If an LGBTQ young person’s family is not accepting of their identity, they may rely on their intimate partner for food, shelter, and survival. If this supportive intimate partner is abusive, **LGBTQ victims of TDV may stay with their abusive partners rather than face homelessness.**

LGBTQ teens are also highly susceptible to human trafficking due to their higher risks of homelessness and depression and/or other types of mental illness, and intimate partner abuse elevate the risk of trafficking. As explained on *The Dynamics and Consequences of Teen Dating Violence* Information Sheet, TDV perpetrators may force their victims into prostitution as part of their abuse – the perpetrators enter the victims’ lives, form intimate partnerships with the victims, garner their trust, then traffic them through varying methods of coercion. If an LGBTQ teen is already homeless and dependent upon an intimate partner for support, or if an LGBTQ teen is depressed and views an intimate partner as someone who can take care of them and make them feel better, **an LGBTQ TDV perpetrator could easily take advantage of the victim’s vulnerability and force their victim into prostitution.**

Teen Dating Violence is extremely dangerous for teen victims of any sexual orientation; however, the stakes are especially high in every case of LGBTQ Teen Dating Violence. LGBTQ youth already face more hardships than their heterosexual peers, as many studies have shown – e.g., “members of the LGBT community are at higher risk than heterosexuals for HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and various mental health problems such as anxiety and depression”¹⁹ – and if, on top of that, these teens are abused by intimate partners, the risks are compounded greatly. Even if it is difficult to understand the exact nature of an intimate partnership between two LGBTQ teens, or if the language these teens use to identify themselves is confusing, cases of LGBTQ Teen Dating Violence should be considered with the same seriousness and care as heterosexual TDV cases and cases of adult intimate partner violence.

Tips for Working with LGBTQ Teens in the Courtroom

- *Always ask* for teens’ preferred pronouns – see the *LGBTQ Issues in Teen Dating Violence: Glossary* for more information – and address them using the name *by which they call themselves*, even if it differs from that listed on state identification. Doing so will demonstrate to the teens that you respect their identity and that you are someone whom they can trust.
- School environments can be hostile towards LGBTQ youth, so working with the school to hold LGBTQ TDV offenders accountable might be challenging.
- Be aware that some LGBTQ youth may not be “out” in their community – or even to their family members – and may be reluctant to reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity in a public manner.
- LGBTQ TDV victims may also be afraid to “out” their abuser or expose details about their abuse for fear of the abuser’s retaliation, or because the victims do not want to feel as if they are “betraying the LGBTQ community” by admitting abuse at the hands of an LGBTQ partner.

Endnotes

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3. Carolyn Tucker Halpern et. al, “Prevalence of Partner Violence in Same-Sex Romantic and Sexual Relationships in a National Sample of Adolescents,” 35 *JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH* 124 (August 2004).
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6. Susan Holt, L.A. GAY AND LESBIAN CENTER – STOP PARTNER ABUSE/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAM, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Intimate Partner Violence: The California Report* (2011) at 14, <http://tinyurl.com/LALGBTReport>.
7. *Supra* note 4, at 6.
8. Joseph G. Kosciw, THE GAY, LESBIAN, AND STRAIGHT EDUCATION NETWORK, *The 2001 National School Climate Survey: The School-Related Experiences of Our Nation's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth* (2001), <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED464978>.
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13. Arnold H. Grossman & Anthony D'Augelli, "Transgender Youth and Life-Threatening Behaviors," 37 SUICIDE & LIFE-THREATENING BEHAVIOR 527 (October 2007).
14. Dr. Les Whitbeck at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, FAMILY AND YOUTH SERVICES BUREAU, *Street Outreach Program: Data Collection Project Executive Summary 2* (October 2014), http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/fysb/fysb_sop_summary_final.pdf (last visited September 24, 2015).
15. *Supra* note 6, at 14.
16. THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS, "LGBT Homelessness" (2014), <http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/lgbt/> (last visited October 23, 2015).
17. *Id.*, emphasis supplied.
18. *Supra* note 6, at 17.