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One Third of LGBT Youth Suffer Mental Disorders, Chicago Study Finds

One-third of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth have attempted suicide in their lifetime -- a prevalence comparable to urban, minority youth -- but a majority do not experience mental illness, according to a report by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The study, published online and in the December issue of the American Journal of Public Health, is the first to report the frequency of mental disorders in LGBT youth using the criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV). Previous studies have relied on questionnaire-type surveys which, the authors suggest, may overestimate mental disorders in certain groups.

The UIC researchers recruited 246 ethnically diverse 16- to 20-year-old LGBT youth in Chicago and conducted structured psychiatric interviews to assess major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide attempts, and conduct disorder.

While a third of participants did meet criteria for at least one of the mental health disorders, about 70 percent of LGBT youth did not meet criteria for any mental disorders.

"One of the most important findings from our work is that most of these youth are doing very well and are not experiencing mental health problems," said Dr. Brian Mustanski, assistant professor of psychiatry at UIC and lead author of the study.

Nearly 10 percent of study participants, met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and about 15 percent met criteria for major depression. A third had made a suicide attempt at some point in their life, and about 6 percent had made a suicide attempt in the last year.

"The big question is, are these youth more likely to have mental disorders relative to other kids?," said Mustanski, a

clinical psychologist and director of UIC's IMPACT Program. "And the answer to that is that it really depends on who you're comparing them to."

LGBT youths in the study had a higher prevalence of mental disorders than youths in national samples, but were similar to other samples of urban, racial and ethnic minority youths.

The researchers also looked at differences between sub-groups of LGBT youth to determine if bisexual youth tend to have more mental health problems than gay and lesbian youth, or if racial-minority youth experience more mental health problems than white youth.

Contrary to previous research that suggested that bisexual youth are more likely to have mental disorders than other groups, Mustanski found just the opposite. Bisexual youths had a lower prevalence of mental disorders compared with others in the study.

The study was supported by a grant from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Co-authors are Dr. Robert Garafalo of Children's Memorial Hospital and the Howard Brown Health Center and Erin Emerson of UIC.

IMPACT, a program of the Institute for Juvenile Research at UIC, conducts LGBT research to identify health issues, understand factors that put people at risk or protect them, and develop programs that advance the health of LGBT people and communities. For more information, visit at: <http://www.impactprogram.org>