Race/Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, and Suicide Risk among Youth

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An analysis of Youth Risk Behavior Survey data found that although young people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB, also referred to as “sexual minority” in this article) experience higher levels of several suicide-related risks (including attempts) than their heterosexual peers, such risks differ both by sex and by ethnic/racial group. The authors theorize that cultural values associated with some ethnic identities (e.g. “sanctions against any self-harming behaviors”) may help protect LGB youth against self-harm. The authors also suggest that their findings warn against using overly general categories such as “youths of color” while conducting research or developing interventions.

The six outcomes studied were feeling sad, suicide ideation, suicide plan, suicide attempt, self-harm, and, for youth who had attempted suicide, whether the attempt had led to being treated by a doctor or nurse. LGB youth were found to be three times more likely than heterosexual youth to have attempted suicide in the past year. Among youth who had attempted suicide, LGB youth were significantly more likely than heterosexual youth to have been treated by a doctor or nurse. Female sexual minority youth were at higher risk than male sexual minority youth for all suicide-related behaviors except suicide attempts.

Results by sex and ethnicity/race within the LGB youth group were complex. Asian and black LGB youth reported significantly less ideation, planning, and self-harm than did white LGB youth (in contrast to the lack of difference in risk between Asian and white youth when sexual orientation was not included in the analysis). Native American/Pacific Islander and Latino LGB youth reported significantly more attempts than white LGB youth. Latina sexual minority youth were the only group of girls reporting a higher rate of attempts than white sexual minority females.

Asian and black sexual minority female youth were significantly less likely to have been involved in suicide-related behaviors than their white peers. This relationship did not hold true for male sexual minority youth. Native American/Pacific Islander youth were at greater risk than members of the other racial/ethnic groups on most outcomes regardless of their sex or sexual orientation.

The surveys did not ask about transgender status. Thus no conclusions about transgender youth could be drawn. The authors also warned that jurisdictions that collect information on sexual orientation as part of the YRBS generally have a more liberal culture than other jurisdictions. Thus, it is likely that this data analysis underestimates the overall suicide risk among LGB youth in the United States as a whole.

