

The Impact of Homophobia and Racism on GLBTQ Youth of Color

As members of more than one minority group, GLBTQ[†] youth of color face special challenges in a society which often presents heterosexuality as the only acceptable orientation *and* in which nonwhites have disproportionately higher rates of negative sexual outcomes. Economic and cultural disparities, as well as sexual risk taking and other risk-taking behavior, make these youth vulnerable to HIV, pregnancy, and sexual violence. Holistic, culturally competent health care is essential to their well-being.

Sexual identity *formation* is not significantly influenced by cultural factors; that is, studies have shown no significant differences between white youth and youth of color in mean age of being “out to self” (16 for young women, 15 for young men); age coming out to others (17 for young women and young men); or age of first homosexual sexual experience (17 for young women, 16 for young men).^{1,2,3} Black and Latino youth also did not differ from white youth in acceptance of their own sexuality.² But while GLBTQ youth of color develop similarly to white youth, they must bear the twin burdens of racism and homophobia.

GLBTQ Youth of Color Face Challenges in a Homophobic Society

- After coming out to their family or being discovered, many GLBTQ youth are thrown out of their home, mistreated, or made the focus of their family's dysfunction.⁴
- Youth of color are significantly less likely to have told their parents they are GLBTQ: one study found that while about 80 percent of GLBTQ whites were out to parents, only 71 percent of Latinos, 61 percent of African Americans, and 51 percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders (APIs) were out to parents.¹
- One study found that African American same-sex attracted youth were more likely to have low self esteem and experience suicidal thoughts than their counterparts of other ethnicities. African American same-sex attracted young men were also more likely to be depressed.⁵
- In a large survey of attendees of Black Pride events, over half reported that their church or religion viewed homosexuality as “wrong and sinful.”⁶
- In many Latino communities, *machismo* and Catholicism contribute to homophobic attitudes that hamper efforts to reach Latino gay and bisexual youth with HIV prevention information.⁷
- Asian American and Pacific Islander GLBTQ youth often feel that they have shamed their families when they diverge from cultural expectations to marry and have children.⁸
- GLBTQ youth of color report feeling pressure to choose between their ethnic and their sexual identities; these youth are less likely to be involved in gay social and cultural activities than their white counterparts.^{2,3}

Racism Coupled with Homophobia Leads to Negative Sexual Outcomes

- Young men of color (ages 15-22) who have sex with men are at disproportionate risk of acquiring HIV: research shows HIV prevalence at 16 percent for blacks and seven percent for Latinos, compared to only three percent for whites.⁹ Meanwhile, one study of young men who have sex with men found that African Americans engaged in more behaviors that put them at risk for HIV than do white men.¹⁰ Latino and multi-ethnic young men also have an elevated risk compared to young white men.¹⁰ Researchers have characterized the increasing rates of HIV and sexual risk behavior among young API men who have sex with men as “an epidemic.”¹¹
- In one study, more than half of ethnic minority transgender youth had experienced forced sex, while almost 60 percent had traded sex for money or resources. The researcher characterized ethnic minority transgender youth as “at extreme risk of acquiring HIV.”¹²

* GLBTQ stands for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.

† Homosexuality/“being gay” refers to persistent emotional and physical attraction towards people of the same gender; bisexuality, towards people of both genders. Same-sex sexual behavior may not reflect either a homosexual or a bisexual identity.

- One study showed that while bisexual and lesbian teenage females were about as likely as heterosexual peers to have had intercourse, they reported twice the rate of pregnancy as heterosexual and questioning young women (12 percent vs. five to six percent respectively).¹³ Research has also shown that most women who identify as lesbians had sex for the first time as teenagers, and experienced first sexual intercourse with men.¹⁴
- Research has found that while black men who identify as homosexual do not have difficulty getting their partners to wear condoms, black men who have sex with men but identify as straight have great difficulty getting their male partners to wear condoms.¹⁵

GLBTQ Youth of Color Are At High Risk for Homelessness and Harassment

- A disproportionate number of GLBTQ youth are homeless: one nationwide report found that while only about three to five percent of the population is estimated to be GLBTQ, 42 percent of homeless youth are GLBTQ.¹⁶ An estimated 65 percent of homeless people are members of racial minorities.¹⁷
- A nationwide study of homophobia in schools found that *the majority* of GLBTQ youth of color had experienced victimization in school because of either race or sexual identity in the last year, while half reported being victimized because of both race and sexual identity.¹⁸ More than a third of GLBTQ youth of color had experienced physical violence because of their orientation.¹⁹

GLBTQ Youth of Color Need Culturally Competent Education, Programs, and Health Care

- A recent study of GLBTQ youth who received gay-sensitive HIV prevention education in school showed they engaged in less risky sexual behavior than similar youth who did not receive such instruction.²⁰
- Researchers recommend that HIV prevention messages for Latino and African American gay and bisexual men not only be culturally competent, but also address the larger social, health, and psychological issues which affect them.^{21, 22}
- Researchers who worked with GLBTQ Latina and African American women stressed the importance of affordable, nonjudgmental health care, as well as the need for services accessible to those who speak little or no English.²³
- A study of 758 young African American men who have sex with men found that those who carried condoms and reported that their peers normally use condoms were less likely to have had unprotected anal intercourse. Therefore, researchers recommend strengthening social norms for condom use among these young men.²⁴

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