Factors That Contribute to the Increase of Homosexual Teen Suicide

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Abstract

This research paper will show there is a major issue with teen/adolescence suicide in America. Suicide (taking one’s own life) is a serious public health problem that affects young people. Suicide affects all youth, but some groups such as the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender population are at higher risk than other youth. The LGBT population attempt suicide far more than heterosexual teenagers due to the increase in harassment and bullying they experience. There are many factors that contribute to the increase of LGBT youth suicide. This paper will share what those factors are as well as share what can be done to decrease the number of suicides in this population.
Factors That Contribute to the Increase in Homosexual Teen Suicide

Everyone is homophobic. (Johnson, 1996, p. 152) The question is not whether one is homophobic; the question is to what degree one is homophobic. According to (Johnson, 1996) it is my strong belief that gay/lesbian individuals, prior to coming out, are among the most homophobic people on earth. It is to (Johnsons, 1996) belief that the struggle of the homosexual youth is the identity they that they are have been taught to hate it. This means that homosexual youth have been taught to hate themselves.

Today homosexual teens are committing suicide at an alarming rate. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services puts the annual rate of suicide in the U.S. between 35,000 and 40,000 per year. Sadly of that number, almost 20 percent are teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers in the U.S. Studies by Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgender show that LGBT teenagers are between 30 and 40 percent more likely to attempt suicide than straight peers.

There are many factors that contribute to the increasing number of homosexual teens committing suicide. Whether homosexual teens are open or in the closet they experience open hatred from their peers and society. They also experience lack of support from their love ones (family and friends); as well as school. There was a recent incident of a student being beat in a classroom with a teacher present. The student decided to drop out and attend independence school. These factors contribute to the increasing number of suicide amongst teenagers. If one cannot turn to their church, school, family, or society; who do they turn to?
Is Suicide common among children and young people?

According to the (National Institute of Mental Health) in 2007, suicide was the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24. Of every 100,000 young people in each age group, the following number died by suicide.
Is Religion Killing Our Youth?

Religion plays a huge part in our lives which define who we are as a person, community, society, and citizen. Religion has been considered to be a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that establishes symbols that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral values. Many households are built on religious beliefs from one of the many denominations practiced in the world today. Their religious belief is what drives our households and society to create hate and not love amongst one another, because of the “so called” moral values being taught. Americans believe that messages about homosexuality come from religious institutions which contribute to the increase teen suicide rate. There was a recent poll conducted that showed that religious institutions contribute to negative views of gays. (Neroulias, 2010, p.14) Many Americans including homosexuals are divided on whether same-sex relations are sinful. (Neroulias, 2010, p.14) Being a teenager is a challenging time for adolescence; and for them to struggle with their sexuality is even more of a challenge. When religious institutions...
teach negative views about homosexuality; this causes teens to feel isolated, lonely and eventually turn to suicide. When lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender teens are trying to come to terms with who they are and their own identity; it causes major conflict in their minds when religious institutions are embedding negative thoughts about who they are, may be or possible become one day. When teens are taught that God does not love them because of their sexuality this is yet another factor that increases their risk of committing suicide. According to (Neroulias, 2010), nearly three-quarters of Americans (72 percent) say religious messages about homosexuality contribute to “negative views” of gays and lesbians, and nearly two-thirds (65 percent) see a connection to higher rates of suicide among gay youths.

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There are many non-profit organizations across the nation that supports homosexual teens. The one in my city is like a community center for all ages to go to for support whether it is counseling, food, shelter, or clothing. It’s a place where they can communicate with people that are homosexual as well as heterosexual that support the cause. Brent Childers,
executive director of Faith in America, a non-profit organization founded in 2005 to combat negative religious messages about homosexuality. He feels that progress is being made to bring awareness and understanding about the harm that is caused when society places a religious or moral stamp of disapproval on the lives of gay and lesbian individuals, especially youth. (Neroulias, 2010, p. 14).

Religion seems to be the way of the world, but it is also attributing to our youth feeling like they have nowhere to turn. In the case of the Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old Rutgers University student who jumped off the George Washington Bridge between New Jersey and New York after his roommate allegedly filmed him having sex with another man felt he had nowhere to turn. After the suicide of Clementi, Purple Day was created to support gay teens. (Ayuso, 2010). This caused the LBGT activists to begin to speak out more about the increase of teen suicide and bullying laws. In the state of Tennessee there are anti-bullying laws against gays, but these laws could be changed to allow students to speak out against gays for religious reasons. This is so unfortunate for the youth in the state of Tennessee. This is another form of oppression, and once again promoting hate in the name of religion.

Is Your Child’s School Killing Them?

Adolescents spend a lot of time in school. Some adolescent are at school as early as 6 am and leave as late as 6 pm or later because parents have to be at work during the day. I work at a Memphis City Middle School which has before and after care and is a performing arts school where students have many after school activities and rehearsals. School provides students social, intellectual, emotional and sexual development for young people. (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, p. 33) It’s teachers’ duty to protect, as well as educate LGBT students in the classroom.
Many students have reported that they feel unsafe in schools and are less likely to report it because they are in fear of retaliation amongst their peers. According to the 2005 National School Climate Survey of middle and high schools students concluded that “anti-LGBT language, as well as bullying and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression remain common in America’s schools” (p.xii). The question yet remains who is protecting our children in the schools? The school counselors once were there to assist and counsel with our children, but with the many changes in the Memphis City Schools our children are not getting the support from guidance counselors. Currently Memphis City School counselors are too busy doing administrative duties that they have no time to have group with students who may have issues that many LGBT students may face. This causes our youth to feel ostracized with no one to turn to so the continued isolation persists and eventual wins the mind of our adolescent students.

Educators across the nation should be required to attend professional development courses in efforts to gain knowledge about LGBT youth. While attending the University of Memphis I was fortunate to take a course called, “Teaching Schools in Urban Setting” which taught about diversity. It allowed students taking this course to educate our youth based their beliefs not ours, but to respect and educate students individual needs. This class brought to our awareness that there may be students in your class as an educator who have same sex parents which is a growing trend. There were many students taking this course that wanted to impose their beliefs on students instead of respecting the beliefs the students currently had or that were being taught in their homes. These situations occur frequently in our children schools today. In the south I have found that many of the educator’s religious beliefs have been imposed upon the
students when students share with them about their sexual identity. This is a huge problem because at no point should religion come into play in our school system or another teacher’s belief about a student’s sexuality. There is always talk about separation of church and state but somehow ones religious beliefs are often brought up when they speak with students about sexuality. Smith (2001) felt that teachers should not condemn or condone students’ private behaviors but rather serve as a positive role model. (p. 154) the school systems could play an important role in decreasing LGBT suicide rate if they would educate themselves and teach their classes about diversity and having love for human kind despite their differences. It’s our differences that make us all unique. According to the Suicide Risk and Prevention for LGBT youth (2012) Educators can play an important role by taking the following steps:

- “Ensuring that the school is a safe and supportive environment for LGBT youth by instituting and enforcing policies that prohibit harassment and discrimination.”
- “Including specific content about the needs of LGBT youth in trainings for staff, teacher, and parents on youth development, mental health issues, gatekeeper skills, and violence prevention.”
- “Including material on LGBT youth in curricula and resources in the library related to sexuality.”
- “Integrating specific activities on and for LGBT youth in evidence-based programs that help all youth develop life skills and critical-thinking skills, and to resist violence, substance abuse, and other risk factors.” (p. 34)

In addition to teachers creating a safe environment; Biology teachers can play an important role in educating students. Biology teachers can educate students on the genetic
side of how chromosomes work in the human body that may cause some students not to be heterosexual. They can also provide unbiased information about personally relevant biological issues, be good listeners and trustworthy confidantes, and value every student, irrespective of race, gender, class, or sexual orientation (Smith, 2001, p. 154).

A school near Seattle stepped outside of the box and allowed a lesbian student to be crowned prom king. This caused quite a story in the local news. One of the reporters interviewed a councilman and he stated, “It was better when they were in the closet.” (Kloverdanz, 2001, p. 90) Remarks like this causes the LGBT students to feel harassed and these are the type of comments that create a hostile environment for LGBT students. School should be a place where all students feel welcomed and supported despite their sexual identity. According to (Kloverdanz, 2001) In one school year, as many as 2 million adolescents are harassed physically and verbally for being- or for appearing to be-gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, according to a study released in May by Human Rights Watch, a nongovernmental international human rights organization. Even though teens are being harassed at an alarming rate teens still continue to “come out” regarding their sexual orientation.

As A Family Are You Supporting Your Youth?

Being a teenager is truly a difficult time in one’s life. The transition from childhood to adolescent years involves negotiating the difficult gauntlet of peer pressure, trying to fit in among people who aren’t entirely sure of themselves, all while dealing with raging hormones. During teen years especially middle school years this can be the most confusing and time in a one’s life. Parents are just as frustrated because at that point they are losing their babies to another world that the teen nor parent is neither ready nor prepared for. Family support and
Running head: HOMOSEXUAL TEEN SUICIDE

understanding during this period is significantly important for all youth but especially the LGBT youth. Suicide is a major adolescent health concern—in fact, it’s the third major cause of death among U.S. teens, after unintentional injury and homicide. These numbers are even higher for LGBT teens. Adolescent females are at far greater risk of attempting suicide (10.3%) than males (6.2%), but in a study of adolescent males presenting at a social service agency for lesbians and gays in New York, the rate of attempted suicide was 39%. The gay youth that would attempt suicide were more likely to have dropped out of school, to be ejected from their homes, and to have friends or relatives who had attempted suicide (Clymo, 1995, p. 61). According to the Journal of Preventive Medicine protective factors for LGBT teens and suicide, find that love and acceptance by family and friends are key suicide preventive factors.

Families are just as uneducated about homosexuality as the churches and schools are. Many youth try to keep their sexual identity a secret from their families but sometime it shows in their behavior or how they dress that draw attention to them. Many families are aware of the signs but they ignore them because they are either in denial or do not know how to deal with the situation. As long as the teen keeps it a secret from family and friends the more comfortable it is for the family. The coming out experience occurs when the internalized pain of being gay becomes greater than their fear. If the initial coming-out experience is a negative one filled with judgments and condemnations rather than support, the potential is heightened even more for suicide attempts (Johnson, 1996, p. 153). Once teens come out or families find out about their loved ones sexuality they experience many emotions. Many of those emotions do not allow them to respond in a supportive loving manner. Some families make very negative and derogatory comments to their youth i.e. you are going to hell for being homosexual. Many
families feel like it is a choice to be homosexual which is a debatable topic. There are many myths out about sexual orientation; i.e. one must be an adult before they know if they are gay, they are gay because their friends are lesbian, gay, or bi-sexual, and it’s just a phase they’re going through. There is a family I am aware of personally which the mother placed her on punishment for an entire year; confiscating her cell phone, not allowing her to talk to anyone but family, she also drug her to church constantly for prayer and counseling. Needless to say this occurred when she was in middle school and she’s a recent graduate of Spellman College and has been living as an active lesbian since high school. My mother did not want my daughter to have lesbian friends as if it was going to jump off on her like a tic. Some families put their teens out of the house in hopes that because they need some where to live they will no longer feel the way they do about their sexual identity. In many cases this strategy does not work either. Many youth are forced to live with friends, other youth that have been abandoned by their families due to their sexual identity; some live on the streets and drop out of school.

There are families that try exorcism. Exorcism is a religious practice of evicting demons or other spiritual entities from a person or place which they are believed to have possessed. The person performing the exorcism is often a member of a church or someone thought to have special powers or skills. They may use prayers, religious material, gestures, symbols, and icons. These exorcisms has been studied and proven that they do not cure homosexuality. Exorcism cannot cure homosexuality because it is clearly not a disease such as breast cancer.

Is Your Community Protecting Our Youth?

According to (Thomas, 2011) September 4-10 was earmarked as National Suicide Prevention Week. It was created to bring awareness to the increase suicide rate amongst the
LGBT youth. The gay community or LGBT community is very supportive of all youth that have and don’t have family support. LGBT communities are united by a common culture and civil rights movement because not to be accepted as a person because of one’s sexual orientation is violation of one’s civil rights. These communities also celebrate pride, diversity, individuality and sexuality. However it is going to take more than the LGBT community to bring awareness to this growing trend of homosexual teen suicide. It is the responsibility of the community and community leaders to save our youth against violence. According to the (Caribbean News Now, 2011) On September 12, the Guyana Stabroek News featured a young man who told his story of how, as a homosexual teen, three men grabbed him off the street in Georgetown. They took him to a dark alley where they raped him, then left him bleeding and broken. He felt so ashamed that he never told anyone the real story about what happened to him. The men claimed that they wanted to teach the boy a hard lesson, the young man contracted HIV. This incident is a clear cry out to communities nationwide about violence, harassment, and bullying against LGBT teens. This young man was forced to feel ashamed because of his sexual preference. LGBT teens should be treated equally just as if this was a violent act against a heterosexual youth. Community leaders must bring more awareness to the issue of teen homosexual suicide being the third leading cause of death in that age bracket. This is should be a serious concern for our communities. Education through programs, outreach in churches, school, community and homes will help with the increasing number of homosexual suicides.

In Conclusion

Many people are uncomfortable with the topic of suicide. When you hear of someone committing suicide one normally never hears about it again after the initial report of the incident.
According to the (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/youth_suicide.html)

Often time’s victims are blamed and families are left stigmatized. As a result, people do not communicate openly about suicide (p.1). There are organizations and studies in place to create ways to bring more attention to this issue of teen suicide. Suicide is greater in the LGBT population. The good news is that research over the last several decades has uncovered a wealth of information on the causes of suicide and on prevention strategies. There are websites to provide support for teens such as; “It Gets Better.” Teens are able to log into this site and have live conversations with people across the nation that have the same struggle. It Gets Better was created by a teenager who faced many struggles such as rejection from family, friends, school, church and community. Although it appeared that his life was getting better he ultimately decided to take his own life.

Homosexuality is a very uncomfortable topic for many just as suicide. I too have been placed in positions, such as the work place; where I have not given my honest opinion about homosexuality. I would never speak against it however I have found myself remaining silent about the topic in the work placed in fear of being judged or discriminated against. Therefore, I can’t imagine what our LGBT youth are faced with when they have to keep their entire life silent as if it does not exist. Living a life where one is felt to disregard who they really are is how no one should live. One would assume that a life is not worth living if one can’t be who they really are. This causes LGBT youth to commit suicide at such an alarming rate. Where does it end? It is clear that we are aware of one place it begins, religious institutions.
Religious institutions are the one place people feel like they can go to receive love, acceptance, knowledge, and guidance. However, this has become the last place for LGBT youth to go for anything other than constant judgment and condemnation. Recently on YouTube there was a video displaying a religious organization protesting a gay pride in Denver, Colorado. The religious organization shouting derogatory comments to the crowd of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender such as, "God hates you, you are going to hell, fagot." One must ask themselves is this what God has called people to do? Some people in the crowd ignored them and some shouted back with comments of judgment. One would think that a permit would not be given so such a protest but this was accepted. Our youth do not have a fighting chance with this type of hatred and bigotry going on in the name of religion. The only answer to the problem is to bring more awareness to the homosexual suicide rate to the nation in order for change to occur.

Another place our LGBT youth should be able to go to for education, protect, and support is our schools. Our educational systems need to be educated on how to handle students who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered. LGBT situations with students should be treated no differently than; all children do not learn the same. Children should all be treated equally despite their sexual orientation. Discrimination against LGBT students should be no different from racial discrimination. Educators should be sent to professional development annually to learn more about diversity in the school system. It would take a life time to deprogram some educators on how not to judge students on their personal or religious belief system but to teach them based on being a human being despite sexual orientation. This would not be an easy task; although this is one that needs immediate attention. How many of our LGBT youth will have to commit suicide before more is done sooner and swifter?
Family is a very important institution. Family has previously been defined as mother, father, two children and a dog. Family would normally consist of people who share the same blood line. The dynamics of family has changed drastically over the years. Family for LGBT youth are those who love and support them in spite of their sexual identity. Parents initially do not always respond in a supportive and loving manner when their children “come out” or if their sexual identity is found out. As a parent I would want what is traditionally accepted in our society for my children because of the harassment that comes with being lesbian, gay, and bisexual or transgendered. However, if one of my daughters chose an untraditional lifestyle I would love and embrace them as I always have about decisions that they choose for their lives. This would not be an easy transition but I would be open to counseling and support groups to learn how to accept their lifestyle. It’s hard to understand or embrace the concept of how families abandoned their love ones because of the sexual identity. How does that change the person one has known all of their lives/? The gruesome fact is that it does not change who an individual is because of their sexual preference. Family is love and our LGBT youth need their families support.

There’s an old cliché’ “it takes a village to raise a child.” This is one we all should live by because it there is a lot of truth to this saying. Our community members and leaders must bring awareness to our LGBT youth suicide rate. Our community leaders have the means to get this information distributed to the public. This could be done by adding it to their political campaign. It can also be communicated at town hall meetings, flyers, as well as public service announcements. Community leaders should offer classes to assist families with the warning signs of teen suicide and how to help support their LGBT children instead of putting them out on
the streets. Community members can also come together and do research to provide more ways to reach this population of youth. Communities much step up to the plate and help protect and save our LGBT teen population with the issues they are facing.

To bring awareness to this epidemic of homosexual teen suicide one should ask themselves a few questions. Are you contributing to the homosexual teen suicide rate? Is your religion teaching hate for homosexuals? Is your child’s school promoting bullying against homosexual students in the name of religion? Is your community not reporting homosexual hate crimes? These are some question we all should think about and get more involved in our society to help save and protect our youth.

Factors That Contribute to the Increase of Homosexual Teen Suicide
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