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$2M national study on “making it better” for lesbian, gay, bisexual – and straight – youth

Just how effective school and community programs are in reducing homophobic bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) – and straight – youth is the focus of a $2-million, five-year study led by Prof. Elizabeth Saewyc at the University of British Columbia.

The study is funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR). To date, it is the agency’s single largest investment aimed at improving health and school outcomes for sexual minority youth.

“We know from previous research how common stigma and anti-gay bullying is in schools across Canada, and the health problems such violence can lead to,” says Saewyc, professor of nursing and adolescent medicine at UBC’s School of Nursing.

“Schools and communities are using a lot of different strategies to try to change this, but very few of these strategies have been evaluated, to see not only if they work, and how well they work, but why they work,” says Saewyc.

Researchers from 10 universities – representing seven Canadian provinces and several U.S. states – are co-investigators on the study. Their research partners also include ministries of education and health, national teacher and public health associations, school districts, and community programs that work with schools.

The researchers will document and assess the types of strategies that schools are using to foster connectedness and reduce bullying, and track trends in health and safety among youth. The team will also study the experiences of heterosexual teens who are harassed because people assume they are gay.

“Homophobia can affect anyone,” explains Saewyc. “In any high school, there are far more heterosexual teens than lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning teens, and because of this, we have found half or more of those targeted for anti-gay harassment actually identify as straight.

“There isn’t much research about them, but what there is suggests they have the same health consequences as LGBTQ youth who are bullied.”
Prof. Joy Johnson, Scientific Director of CIHR’s Institute of Gender and Health stresses that it is essential for CIHR to support this kind of research. “We hope the results of this study will lead to measures that will help to make school a positive experience for sexual minority youth in Canada,” she says.

The study is funded by CIHR’s Institute of Population and Public Health and Institute of Gender and Health and will continue through 2016.

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is the Government of Canada's health research investment agency. CIHR's mission is to create new scientific knowledge and to enable its translation into improved health, more effective health services and products, and a strengthened Canadian health care system. Composed of 13 Institutes, CIHR provides leadership and support to more than 14,100 health researchers and trainees across Canada.
• Explore LGBTQ youth health issues regionally, among boys and girls, and within ethnic groups, including among youth who identify as heterosexual (straight) but are targeted because they’re perceived to be gay

• Use in-depth case studies of school districts and community programs to better evaluate how change happens, and not only what works to ‘make it better,’ but how it works

Co-Investigators include:

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• Prof. Jacqueline Gahagan, Dalhousie University, Halifax
• Prof. Line Chamberland, Université du Québec à Montréal
• Asst. Prof. Dominic Beaulieu-Prevost, Université du Québec à Montréal
• Asst. Prof. Gilbert Emond, Concordia University, Montreal
• Assoc. Prof. Hilary Rose, Concordia University, Montreal
• Asst. Prof. Robb Travers, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo
• Assoc. Prof. Catherine Taylor, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg
• Assoc. Prof. Tracey Peters, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg
• Prof. Andre Grace, University of Alberta, Edmonton
• Postdoctoral Researcher Kris Wells, University of Alberta, Edmonton
• Prof. Stephen Russell, University of Arizona, Tucson
• Assoc. Prof. Sheila Marshall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
• Exec. Director Annie Smith, McCreary Centre Society, Vancouver
• Exec. Director Warren O’Briain and his senior team, B.C. Ministry of Health