

crossroads connections

connecting research across communities

● volume 4, issue 1

LGBTQ Youth & the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Background

School discipline policies often disproportionately force certain students into the juvenile justice system, a process referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Existing research had shown that the school-to-prison pipeline predominantly affects youth of color, specifically African American and Latino males, and youth with disabilities. This research brief highlights new evidence (Snapp, Hoenig, Fields & Russell, 2015) that demonstrates the ways in which LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming youth may be pushed out of school and into the prison system.

Little has been known about the school discipline experiences of LGBTQ youth as compared to other youth within the pipeline population. We do know that LGBTQ youth are twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to be detained for nonviolent offenses such as running away, prostitution, and truancy. One study showed that LGBTQ youth, particularly girls and youth of color, are more likely to be expelled from school than heterosexual youth for similar infractions (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011).

In collaboration with the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Network and Tucson, AZ community based organizations, we conducted an exploratory study with LGBTQ youth and adult advocates to document experiences of discipline at school and pathways toward and through the school-to-prison pipeline. ●



crossroads collaborative
youth • sexuality • health • rights

Participants

- 19 adult advocates participated in phone interviews.
- Adults worked in schools and youth-serving and policy-making organizations across the U.S. including Arizona, California, Colorado, Washington, D.C., Georgia, Illinois, and Louisiana.
- 31 youth participated in 8 focus-groups and were from Arizona, California, and Georgia.
- Youth were selected to participate based on the following criteria:
 - ◇ they were LGBTQ identified and in grades 9-12
 - ◇ they had experienced school discipline
 - ◇ they were straight youth allies who had witnessed discipline disparities among their LGBTQ friends

We asked adults questions like:

- What is your perspective on LGBTQ youth and their treatment in terms of school discipline?
- What are the trajectories for youth who are suspended, expelled, or “pushed out”?

We asked youth questions like:

- Are there differences in the ways in which LGBTQ students are disciplined because of their sexual orientation or gender identity?
- What happened to you or others after you were disciplined?
- Are there things that happened regularly that made you not want to go school?



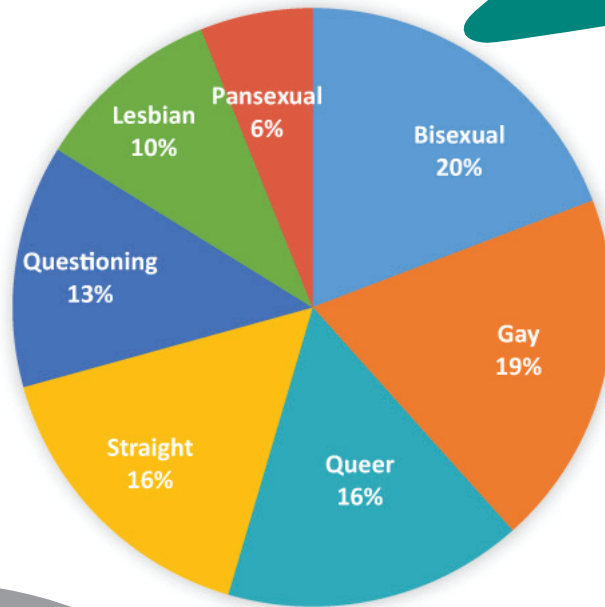
What we learned: LGBTQ youth are labeled as problems

A young man who identified as gay and was gender non-conforming down in New Orleans, they called him messy, which is typically what people would call a girl. And if teachers saw him in the midst of a bunch of girls, they would be like, "Oh, he's being messy; he must be starting some trouble. He's going to have to stay after school."

Adult, Louisiana

I got bullied, so I, like, started dressing like a boy and got this thug mentality. They looked at me like I was the bad Chola, the Mexican lesbian bitch. So no one messed with me any more at school, but the administration, they were always watching me.

Youth, Arizona



Participating youths' self-identified sexuality

Kids are like, "Well, you know they're punks." It's what they call gay kids down here. "Oh, he's a punk," like that explains it [bullying], and there's no other explanation.

Adult, Louisiana

The teachers... they thought we were selling weed in school, they thought that me and her were both selling weed 'cause like, the way we were dressing, 'cause we were the only girls at that middle school that dressed like boys. So it was like "now we're bad."

Youth, Arizona



What we learned:

LGBTQ youth are punished for self-expression, PDA, & self-defense

A student out of Louisiana was suspended for a week for wearing hair extensions... lots of the girls have colorful hair extensions, and it's disproportionate because none of the other girls are getting suspended for having hair weaves.

Adult, Georgia

Folks get in trouble because they kiss or express some kind of affection, and it goes against policy, but they don't enforce that for straight youth, and it'll happen for queer youth because that stands out to an administrator. That'll, you know, be something that catches someone's eye versus another heteronormative display.

Adult, California

I befriended these two bisexual girls, and later in the year they got into a relationship and our vice principal [...] he would always see the straight kids holding hands, and making out in the halls, and one day after school [the girls] were holding hands and the vice principal dragged them into his office and suspended my friend Elisabeth for a week and gave my friend Jenna detention for three days and later called their parents and outed them.

Youth, California

When I was in middle school... I was bullied a lot. People thought I was a lesbian, and everyone found out that I had issues with self-harm and anorexia, and I got targeted for that too. When I went to the administration – my parents had to go several times – they kinda said a lot of things like “oh well that’s just how kids are” or “boys will be boys” or they would say “oh girls are mean.” Or they would tell me “if you didn’t dress the way you did, they wouldn’t bother you.”

Youth, Georgia

He said he wasn't trying to fight back or anything. It didn't get to that point. He was literally just putting his hands up over his head to keep the guy from [hurting him] – and when the teacher saw the incident, she took both of them to the principal's office, and they both got suspended for fighting.

Adult, California

We have one classic kind of story of like a trans, young person... a handful of young people were bullying her and it went on and on. She reported it every single day. This piece of paper that's supposed to be generated never made it to the social worker. And then she brought a knife. Now, granted, it was a butter knife. She was arrested at school for that and she went to juvenile bureau and was released later that day, but then was put automatically in expulsion proceedings.

Adult, Louisiana

What we now know

- LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth are under extreme scrutiny in schools.
- LGBTQ youth are punished in schools for self-expression and violations of gender norms.
- They are frequent targets of victimization and are further punished for acts of self-protection.
- Educators and administrators:
 - ◊ may ignore or even unconsciously promote victimization and punishment
 - ◊ may enforce school policies unequally in the case of LGBTQ youth.

These conditions make it difficult for LGBTQ youth to excel and to successfully complete school.

Other experiences can contribute to LGBTQ pathways out of school:

- compromised mental health (sometimes as a result of school experiences)
- family problems & rejection
- homelessness

Homelessness is considered the “crux of the pipeline,” and is a critical vulnerability for LGBTQ youth because, once on the street, youth must prioritize survival over school: “A lot of our trans youth are homeless, so when they drop out of school, it’s also to survive as a trans youth.... they’re not able to work to support themselves, so they engage in alternative ways of getting income.” (Adult, Louisiana)

Rejection and trauma at home or in school can have profound implications for youth who encounter police. An adult mentor from Colorado explained that, “A lot of LGBTQ youth that I work with have been placed in detention centers for non-violent crimes or status offenses, for ... being put out of home ... for not going to meetings for families in need of services ... a lot of them end up in jail for pretty much not even committing a crime.”

What can be done

Because LGBTQ youth experience discipline disparities and are overrepresented in the homeless population as well as the juvenile justice system, coalitional efforts across youth-serving agencies are needed to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline (Snapp & Licona, in press). Instead of channeling marginal LGBTQ youth into the juvenile justice system, schools can serve as a “firewall” that stops the flow of oppressed and marginalized youth through the pipeline.

Check out these resources:

- GSA Network and Crossroads Collaborative (2014). School discipline disparities & recommendations. San Francisco, CA: GSA Network. http://www.gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/Recommendations_final.pdf
- Advancement Project (2014). Restorative practices: Fostering healthy relationships and promoting positive discipline in schools. A guide for educators. Washington, D.C.: Advancement Project. http://b3cdn.net/advancement/5d8bec1cdf51cb38ec_60m6y18hu.pdf

Sources and further readings

Burdge, H., Hyemingway, Z. T., Licona, A. C. (2014). Gender nonconforming youth: Discipline disparities, school push-out, and the school-to-prison pipeline. San Francisco, CA: Gay-Straight Alliance Network and Tucson, AZ: Crossroads Collaborative at the University of Arizona

Burdge, H., Licona, A.C., Hyemingway, Z. T. (2014). LG-BTQ youth of color: Discipline disparities, school push-out, and the school-to-prison pipeline. San Francisco, CA: Gay-Straight Alliance Network and Tucson, AZ: Crossroads Collaborative at the University of Arizona.

Himmelstein, K., & Bruckner, H. (2011). Criminal justice and school sanctions against nonheterosexual youth: A national longitudinal study. *Pediatrics*, 127,49-57. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-2306

Snapp, S., & Licona, A.C. (in press). The pipeline population: Interrogating the patterns and practices of its production, for Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Schooling: The Nexus of Research, Practice, and Policy, Stephen T. Russell & Stacey Horn, (Eds).

Crossroads Connections 4.1

Snapp, S., Stauber, L., and the Crossroads Collaborative*† (2015). LGBTQ Youth and the School-to-Prison Pipeline. *Crossroads Connections*, 4(1), 1-4. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona.

* Based on the article:

Snapp, S., Hoenig, J., Fields, A., & Russell, S.T. (2015). Messy, butch, and queer: LGBTQ youth and the school-to-prison pipeline. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 30, 57-82. doi: 10.1177/0743558414557625

† The Crossroads Collaborative also includes: Adela C. Licona, Stephen Russell, Amanda Fields, Casely Coan, & Jason Rivera.

The Crossroads Collaborative, funded by the Ford Foundation, brings stories and numbers together through action-oriented research with academics, youth-serving organizations, and youth from the community to develop knowledge, increase understanding, amplify youth voice, and share what we learn with the broader community.

<http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/crossroads>