Sexual minority youth task force completes report

The 18-month study offers a glimpse into the often tumultuous world of this high risk population

by Inga Sorensen

A new study estimates there are at least 50,000 lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in Oregon, many of whom experience rejection by family and friends, depression, suicidal thoughts, verbal and physical abuse, and drug and alcohol addiction. The 18-month study, *Oregon's Sexual Minority Youth: An At-Risk Population*, offers a glimpse into the often tumultuous world of this high risk, vulnerable population. The 38-page document, which is based largely upon conversations with local young people, finds that many sexual minority youth feel confused or ashamed when they begin to discover their sexual identities. When they seek support, or unbiased information, it's usually not there. In fact, the report essentially condemns social service providers and educators for failing to "identify or address the special needs of sexual minority youth." The consequences of that failure are dramatic, the report concludes, in that an entire group of young people is left without support during a very volatile period of their lives. Recommendations to help service providers, and society in general, to be more responsive and sensitive to the needs of this often ignored and overlooked population are also provided in the report.

"These young people constantly told us they didn't know where they fit in. They generally felt alienated. Many have been harassed and physically abused because of their sexual orientation," explains Judy Chambers, chair of the task force which worked on the study. "Most said they felt that they had no one to turn to. Unfortunately, that tends to be the case."

The Task Force on Sexual Minority Youth was convened in 1989, and released its findings in early August, 1991. Individuals who work with Oregon Children's Services Division, Oregon Health Division, Portland Public Schools, Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, Phoenix Rising Foundation, Lesbian Community Project, youth and family-serving agencies, and suburban school districts, were among those on the task force. They collected national research data, conducted local research including surveying area youth service providers, and hosted group meetings with sexual minority youth. Thirty young people participated in these discussions. They ranged in age from 12 to 24-- a timeframe, according to the report, when "many gay males, lesbians, and bisexuals first become aware of an attraction to persons of their own gender."

Challenges faced by youth abound

Chambers, who is a Portland Public Schools alcohol and drug counselor, says many of these youngsters run away or are kicked out of their homes by intolerant parents who cannot accept their child's sexual orientation. Many wind up homeless and living on the street. In fact, it is estimated that 30 percent of Portland's street youth are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Many young people turn to alcohol and drugs to mask their feelings of pain and rejection. If they are homeless, they may engage in prostitution to obtain money, food, shelter or drugs. Young lesbians and bisexual women may become pregnant as a result. Harassment at school by peers forces many sexual minority youth to discontinue their education.

"These kids want an education, but there's no support in the schools or at home," says Chambers. "Pressure to conform is extremely intense, especially during high school and junior high school. If they make it through without dropping out or committing suicide, they're still bound to suffer low self-esteem because of the abuse they've been through."

The young people who participated in the group discussions spoke candidly about their feelings and experiences, and their remarks are found throughout the report. This is a sampling:

–"I want to talk about my pain. The first time I considered suicide was in the sixth grade and I took twenty aspirin...my behavior was very destructive, self-mutilating. I never really wanted to kill myself but just to hurt myself because I hated myself so much for not being what people expected me to be." —Gay male college student.

–"...a lot of drugs and alcohol were frequently used as it was just very–how we deal with it I guess." —Homosexual college student.

–"(My mom) hadn't attacked me or anybody that I've ever known before. And then when I told her I was gay, she just kind of flew, you know." —Gay male youth.

–"I came out to a teacher in school, and a few months later she started acting strange. She told me things like I wasn't a good student, that I was dumb, and stuff like that. I don't know if this is because I came out to her or not, but it wrecked my self-esteem." —Lesbian high school student.

–"I always feel extremely alienated at high school, like I just don't fit in. I come from another universe, that's the way I always feel." —Portland high school student.

–"I was pushed into a garbage can and got stuck. Just several things. Dead things in my locker...But I had several incidents of violence in high school with just being attacked or people pushing me or one of my friends had his head cut with scissors because they didn't like his tail so they cut it off for him and gouged the back of his neck open and he had to have stitches." —Gay youth.

Threat of disease transmission, including HIV and AIDS infection, is also a serious problem, as is violence. The task force report cites a 1988 study that found that 40 percent of sexual minority youth seeking services at the Hetrick-Martin Institute (formerly the Institute for the Protection of Gay and Lesbian Youth) in New York said they had been violently, physically attacked. Of those surveyed, nearly half said the attack was solely gay-related; 61 percent of that violence occurred within the family. The New York State Governor's Task Force on Bias-Related Violence, meanwhile, found that teenagers reacted "more negatively to lesbian and gay people than any other minority group." The report says that teenagers are "aware that bias based on race and ethnicity can no longer be overtly condoned. There is no such awareness concerning the rights of gays and lesbians and the students were quite emphatic about their dislike for these groups and frequently made violent, threatening statement.. The perception of gays and lesbians as legitimate targets for abuse draws strength from the example set by major social institutions that continue to deny homosexuals the status of equals."

The report also finds that lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people in rural areas, and those of color, face additional difficulties. Rural youth are "geographically isolated and are even less likely to find supportive role models than their urban peers," while young lesbians, gays and bisexuals of color feel "they must align themselves with either the lesbian and gay community or their racial or ethnic group–there is no common meeting ground. These youth experience discrimination within the dominant culture because of their race and sexual orientation; within their racial or ethnic communities because of their sexual orientation; or within the lesbian and gay communities because of their race or ethnicity."

These feelings and experiences occur at a difficult juncture in these young peoples' lives. They are seeking the comradery of their peers, yet find themselves isolated and alone because of their sexual orientation. The pressure to conform may be so extreme that they are forced to deny their true feelings. Loneliness, guilt, or shame prompt their thoughts to turn to suicide. The task force report quotes a 1989 study that finds that many sexual minority youth "suffer from chronic depression and (may be) at high risk of attempting suicide when the pressure becomes too much to bear. They may run away from home without anyone understanding why...An unwitting remark by parents may be taken to mean that the youth is no longer loved by them." Studies suggest that lesbian and gay youth are "two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth."

According to Chambers, a primary problem is a lack of positive role models for these youth. "The loudest cry was for role models who are just ordinary folks," she says. Note this remark made by one youth:

"I didn't know that gay people could come out of regular families or live in regular places, that we weren't, you know, that gay people weren't people who you only saw on TV and all hung out in New York City and San Francisco, you know, were perverts or whatever..."

Many youth also expressed feelings of abandonment by lesbian and gay adults. Peg Brady, a former gay and lesbian youth counselor says, "It is very important that the gay and lesbian community embrace this issue. We must begin to address the needs of younger lesbians and gays. Many times they feel like they are not wanted, or not included in our community. We are an evolving community and I believe we must, and will, diversify to include both elderly and young gays and lesbians."

Youth lack support

Despite the myriad of hardships facing sexual minority youth, the report concludes there is only a smattering of support to help them get through the difficult times.

"Lesbian and gay youth receive services from across the spectrum–health, child welfare, education, juvenile justice–but by and large these systems have failed to address their needs," says Marilyn McManus, task force member and manager of the National Clearinghouse, Research and Training on Family Support and Children's Mental Health at Portland State University. The center promotes community-based, family-centered services for children with emotional, behavioral, and and mental disorders. She adds, "It does not even occur to most service providers to ask whether these youth are gay or lesbian, or whether their problems stem from homophobic responses."

According to the report, "Neither schools nor other youth-serving agencies have policies, programming, or staff training designed to address the needs of sexual minority youth. Accordingly, Oregon's lesbian, gay and bisexual youth do not receive appropriate services."

The problems stem from a lack of awareness and education, as well as heterosexism. Many adults bring their prejudices to work with them, while others simply overlook the needs of sexual minority youth because their training never addressed the issue. Schools in particular have been very nonresponsive to the needs of sexual minority students. Until recently, the topic has virtually been taboo among the education establishment. Glencoe High School in Hillsboro is the only school locally, and perhaps statewide, to have a school-sanctioned support group for lesbian and gay students. It joins just a handful of other schools nationally that offer such support.

There is some hopeful news–a two-year plan from Multnomah County's Children and Youth Services Commission has targeted sexual minority youth for the 1991-93 biennium. According to Barb Sussex, a county staff member who helped design the plan, the needs of young lesbians and gays have been overlooked in county programs and policies. The plan advocates for the development of social services to meet the special needs of sexual minority youth. It also recommends that all commission-funded services be "accessible, sensitive, and relevant" to gay and lesbian youth.

Another place sexual minority youth can turn is Windfire, a lesbian and gay youth support group sponsored by Phoenix Rising, a gay and lesbian resource and counseling center. Phoenix Rising's Michelle Gordon has worked extensively with these youngsters. "Kids need support, especially at an age when peer acceptance is so important," she says. "It's hard for them to get through the difficult times alone. They need to see that other gays and lesbians exist. They need someone who understands what it's like to go to school and be harassed, or what it's like to be kicked out of your house, or what it's like to be discriminated against at work. There are all kinds of issues they need to talk about with each other."

Peg Brady, who facilitated the Windfire group for a year and a half, says an incredible transformation can take place, thanks to that support. "When kids would first come to the group, they would be afraid. Their self-esteem would be very low. It was wonderful to watch them become more confident and happier over the weeks and months. The difference was like day and night."

The report outlines a variety of approaches to attack the widespread problem of poor services and homophobia. Three overall recommendations are presented:

1) Promote public policies that protect against discrimination, assure equal access to services and provide accurate and relevant information.

2) Educate the community, service providers, youth and families regarding issues facing sexual minority youth and regarding available resources.

3) Advocate for services that permit all young people to develop to their full capacity free from harassment and victimization.

According to Chambers, a multi-faceted approach must be employed if we are to truly improve the lives of young lesbians, gays and bisexuals. "We must view this problem holistically if we are to make a difference," she says. "Homophobia and a lack of awareness exist at so many levels. It's in our homes, our schools, within our organizations. We have to begin to fight the problem in all of these areas."