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## I KID YOU NOT

### The numbers game

*Are statistics on the suicide rate among queer youth exaggerated? Does it matter?*

by Beren deMotier

I am notably melodramatic. I cling to the negative in life and am attracted to the sordid bits in any media display. I read about hate crimes, and children left at home while the parents party in Vegas, and the latest murder or suicide and every little detail about it. Not that I'm lying in bubble baths with a true crime novel hanging from my soapy fingers and a towel around my head, mind you, but when the paper comes in, it's not the weather I'm heading for.

That is, when I don't have a loving leech clinging to my leg demanding dinosaur dominos at 7 am and the wife isn't hoping for a cup of coffee if I have the time, honey.

Fortunately I don't have a lot of time to indulge my taste for the morbid. But on May 22 an article caught my eye in the *Oregonian*. It was titled "Gay teen suicide figure lacks scientific base."

Now to be totally, completely, probably foolishly frank, I myself was a suicidal teen, and certainly heading hard in the direction of gayness at the time (though to be even more frank, my straight relations would have made anyone slit their wrists—being madly crushed out on my ex-boyfriend's little sister was the least of my problems).

Let's just say this article was of interest to me.

The gist of the story was this: though the figures often cited are that 30 percent of teen suicides are by gay, lesbian or bisexual youth, and

adolescent and unsure of yourself, thus, a high suicide rate seems rational and shouldn't we all do something about it.

And, even if the new information is true and we're not inordinately offing ourselves, you could say we should still be doing something to improve the lives of gay and lesbian youth. Amen.

Or you could look at it like, Hey, we're not crazy after all, since sometimes the far right will use this high suicide thing to say that we're cracked up and who'd want to be gay anyway, just a bunch of alcoholic suicidal perverts. We can now rest assured that we're as sane and resilient as the rest of the bunch and are doing just fine thank you very much, just let us take our dates to the prom and we'll be fine.

It's an angle.

Or you could ask who it is who's doing this accounting of suicidal tendencies and how are they determining anyone's orientation anyhow, which, as mentioned in the article, is problematic at best.

It made me feel like Lady Liberty holding the scales of justice in my hand, on one side was a statistic strong enough to make people—straight people—sit up and take notice and think that improving the lives of gay and lesbian teens was of vital importance because we were dropping like flies. On the other side could be proof that we are everyday, normal people with no more drastic problems and maladjustment than anyone else, which could either be a cue for greater acceptance or for a general sweeping under the rug of any



that a teen fitting that category is two to three times more likely than a straight one to attempt suicide, there is no study which upholds these claims. The article goes farther and says that a panel of "experts," including gay and lesbian advocacy and service groups, the Centers for Disease Control and the American Psychological Association among others, found no correlation between sexual orientation and suicide.

Of course everyone's heard the statistics. No one wants to be anti-kids these days, and those numbers are marched out a lot, mostly to do good. I think this article came out because of the interview last April with Ellen DeGeneres by Diane Sawyer on *PrimeTime Live*, which is mentioned in the *Oregonian* article, where Sawyer cites this statistic and says that Ellen did the interview in part to reach these teens.

So apparently Ellen has heard them, too.

You could look at this new "truth" a couple of ways, at least. You could say that it's a load of bull and don't we all know the real truth. That it's tough to face a load of antagonism when you're an

notice of the existence of gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans teens.

Not an easy call.

Of course, having been on the receiving end of a phone call informing me of the suicide of a 17-year-old friend, I'm biased. She'd shot herself in the head after living through drug and alcohol recovery, homelessness and the unfortunate predatory impulses of older lesbians who should have known better (and if I had them before me now I would still slap them silly).

Tomorrow there may be another article refuting this claim of suicidal homogeneity. Or next week. Or next year. Or there may be new evidence that gay and lesbian teens are finding greater acceptance and are becoming well-adjusted adults who accept that there is a future ahead that can include happiness, love and everything any human being wants. I just don't want them to disappear—under the rug or under the ground. And if it takes an exaggerated statistic to get some attention, well, whatever works.

As long as it's not a gun to the head.

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