

Queer runaways are at significantly greater risk for negative outcomes than are their heterosexual counterparts, according to a study published in the May issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Among the grim statistics: Gay, lesbian, bi and trans runaways had twice as many lifetime sexual partners (24) as their straight peers; they were twice as likely to report not using protection "all of the time" during sex; they were more likely to have used illegal drugs and more types of those drugs; and they were more likely to have been the victim of physical abuse, both before they left home and as runaways.

Bryan H. Cochran, a graduate student at University of Washington, analyzed a survey of 375 adolescents 13 to 21 years old conducted in Seattle between 1995 and 1998. The information was gathered during interviews that could last up to two hours.

The overwhelming majority of the queer youth—71 of 84—identified as bi rather than any of the other categories. "Sexual orientation is a dynamic variable" that can change over time, particularly with youth who are in the process of establishing their sense of self, Cochran said.

He pointed to other recently published work demonstrating "adolescents who identified as bisexual are at a particular risk even above those who identified as gay or lesbian." That could be because in many places gay and lesbian youth have community support and resources to draw upon, while "you really don't have a bisexual community, per se."

The "double stigma"—the combination of being homeless and queer—"is what leads

QUEER RUNAWAYS AT RISK

University of Washington study reveals grim statistics

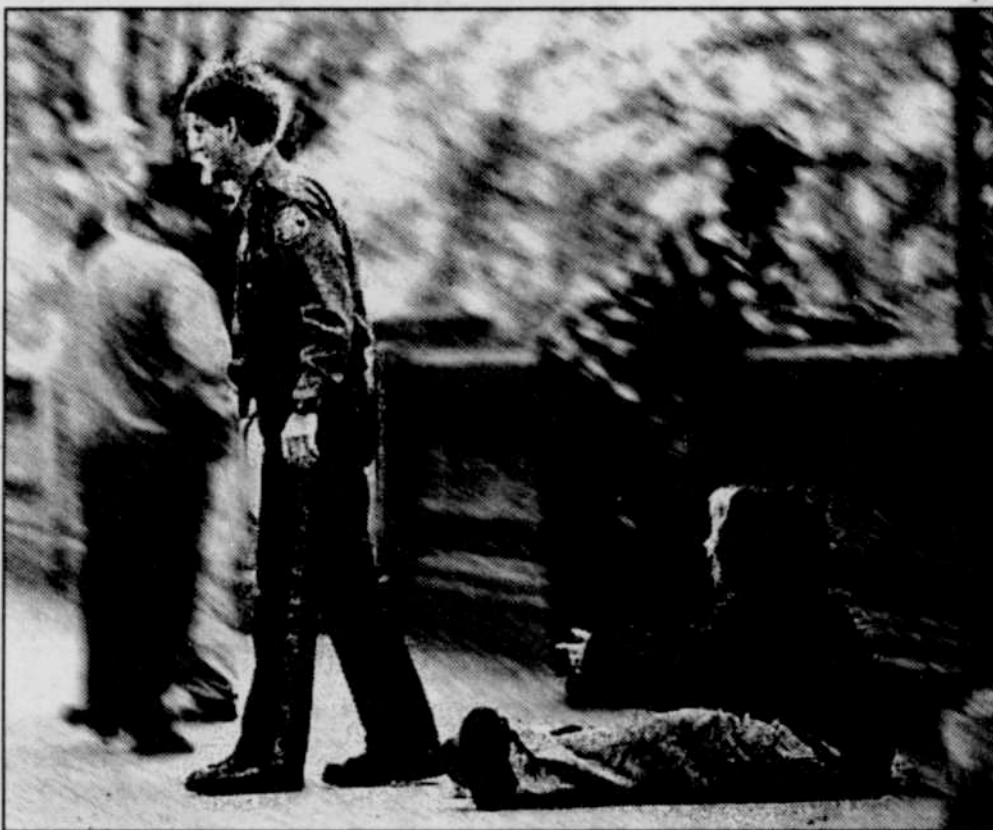
by Bob Roehr

adolescents to have these difficulties," Cochran said.

Increased societal awareness of homosexuality can be a double-edged sword. It can lead to kids coming out of the closet at an earlier age, when they are more dependent on their families. It also can result in parents being more aware and pressing questions that in an earlier time they might have overlooked. This has the potential for creating both affirming and destructive family dynamics.

Cochran believes the first step to improving the situation is to try to reduce the overall incidence of runaways. That means increased services for families in turmoil and for questioning youth. He suggested programs that teach kids how to come out to their parents and deal with those issues "so that they are not running away out of fear of how their family might react."

Once a youth does run away, "street outreach workers need to recognize that sexual orientation is an important factor in determining the experience that these kids will have on the



streets. It's not enough to say, 'This is a homeless adolescent.'

As kids go in and out of the system, Cochran believes "they are encountering homophobia at many different levels. They may be encountering it with the social service system, maybe in foster home placements, maybe with their family of origin. So it really is a matter of no place to go."

Cochran recently received his first "wacko" homophobic letter in response to the article. He said, "Seeing things like this makes me realize that there is still work to be done." □

BOB ROEHR is a free-lance reporter based in Washington, D.C.

PORTLAND RESOURCES

Earlier this year Outside In moved out of two near-dilapidated turn-of-the-century homes downtown into a \$5 million, four-story building with about 27,500 square feet at 1132 S.W. 13th Ave. Queer and questioning kids constitute

nearly 40 percent of the homeless clients served by the agency.

"This one-stop service site for homeless youth will provide not only housing but a state-of-the-art medical clinic, case management, an employment resource center, day program and both alcohol/drug and HIV prevention services," executive director Kathy Oliver told *Just Out* in February. "Programs in this facility will offer sound, long-term solutions for Portland's homeless youth."

For more information call 503-535-3801 or visit the Internet site www.outsidein.org.

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