LGBTQ YOUTH OF COLOR:

Discipline Disparities, School Push-Out, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

gsanetwork

AUTHORS:

Hilary Burdge, M.A., Research Manager, Gay-Straight Alliance Network

Adela C. Licona, Ph.D., Co-Director, Crossroads Collaborative & Director and Associate Professor, Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English, University of Arizona

Zami T. Hyemingway, B.A., Researcher, Crossroads Collaborative, University of Arizona

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Gay-Straight Alliance Network
1550 Bryant Street, Suite 600
San Francisco, CA 94103

(415) 552-4229

www.gsanetwork.org

Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English
University of Arizona
PO Box 210067
Tucson, AZ 85721-0067

(520) 621-7216

http://english.arizona.edu/rcte/crossroads-collaborative

Frances McClelland Institute
Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences
McClelland Park, Suite 235
650 N. Park Avenue
Tucson, AZ 85721-0078

(520) 621-8067

www.mclellandinstitute.arizona.edu

INTRODUCTION

About the Research

The Crossroads Collaborative at the University of Arizona and Gay-Straight Alliance Network collected data for this research brief through a series of adult interviews, youth focus groups, and survey distribution beginning in early 2012. Adult interviewees were invited to participate based on their local and national work related to the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) and their knowledge of disciplinary practices and disparities. Focus group participants were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning (LGBTQ), and straight-allied youth. These youth participated in a survey designed to learn more about disciplinary practices within schools and the possible effects on LGBTQ youth and those perceived as LGBTQ, as well as youth of color, and disabled youth. Youth surveys were accessed online as well as given out in paper form to GSA clubs in high schools, drop in centers, youth conferences, and youth camps across the country.

In our focus groups, youth self-identified across lines of race, class, ability, gender, sexuality, and region. Their stories provide important insights into school push-out practices that are connected to the ongoing production of the STPP and the criminalization of youth who are LGBTQ, gender nonconforming, low-income, disabled, and/or youth of color.

LGBTQ Youth of Color and School Climate

Research shows that schools nationwide are hostile environments for LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students of color. According to one study, "1 in 5 LGBT students report being bullied due to race, ethnicity, or national origin."[1] Another study reporting on bullying and harassment of LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students finds that in the last year:

- 81.9% were **verbally harassed** because of their sexual orientation, and 63.9% because of their gender expression
- 38.3% were **physically harassed** because of their sexual orientation, and 27.1% because of their gender expression
- 8.3% were **physically assaulted** because of their sexual orientation, and 12.4% because of their gender expression[2]

Students who are harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation report higher levels of risk on a wide array of academic, health, and safety measures. For example, they are more likely to report being threatened or injured with a weapon; being hurt by a boyfriend/girlfriend; lower grades; missing school because they felt unsafe; depression; and seriously considering and/or making a plan for suicide. In addition, youth who are harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation are also more likely to report weaker connections to school, adults, and their larger community.[3]

Findings in this study support previous research on the prevalence of bullying and harassment in schools. However, LGBTQ youth of color are bullied based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, or all of the above at once. While harassment and bullying of any kind negatively affects students' ability to thrive in school, student's who experience multiple forms of bulling and harassment face even greater challenges.[4]

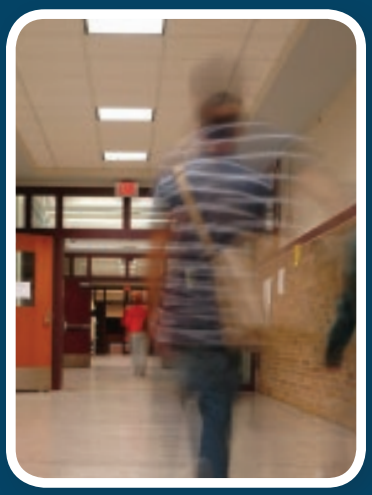
Such compounded bullying and harassment has a significant negative effect on learning environments and on student's feelings of safety.

Gender Nonconforming Youth

Gender nonconformity, or GNC, is a term used to describe a person's identity or expression of gender. A GNC person may express their gender through the clothes they wear, the activities they engage in, the pronouns they use, and/or their mannerisms. This expression may embrace masculinity, femininity, neither, or both.

Gender nonconformity is also an umbrella term used to describe various gender identities such as genderqueer, gender fluid, boi, gender neutral, and/or transgender. In general, GNC youth do not conform to stereotypical expectations of what it means to be and to look like a male or a female.

Young people and adults from this study overwhelmingly report that like LGBTQ youth of color, GNC youth are also frequently and repeatedly harassed and bullied at school. In addition, participants report that school staff do not adequately protect GNC students when harassment and bullying occur; and, in some cases, school staff are even described as the perpetrators of harassment. Finally, GNC youth from this study report numerous incidents of harsh school discipline for the same or similar infraction as their peers and are also consistently blamed for their own victimization.[5]



LGBTQ Youth of Color and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline, or STPP, refers to a set of school policies and practices that push students away from education and onto a pathway toward juvenile detention and the prison industrial complex. School policies and practices that promote the STPP include "zero tolerance" policies, increased police presence, suspension and expulsion, and harsh and disparate disciplinary practices.

Research has demonstrated that students pushed out by such policies, practices, and disciplinary disparities are disproportionally students of color and low-income students. However, findings from this research study are consistent with other recent studies suggesting that disabled, LGBTQ, and GNC students are also facing discipline disparities and school push-out.[6] **Our research shows that LGBTQ youth of color in particular face persistent and frequent harassment and bias-based bullying from peers and school staff as well as increased surveillance and policing, relatively greater incidents of harsh school discipline, and consistent blame for their own victimization.**

School Push-Out

School push-out is a term that addresses a student being marginalized in school and/or driven out of school prior to graduation. It differs from the term "drop-out" in that it acknowledges the multiple school-based conditions and forces at play in marginalizing students in the classroom and in school as well as pressuring students to leave school prematurely. Students who are pushed out of school stop going to school altogether, enroll in alternative or disciplinary school, or enroll in a GED program.

> “...When you’re talking about the [STPP] you do need to consider every piece of someone’s identity. So if you’re a youth of color and you’re also LGBT you are at a higher risk of being pushed out of school because...of racism within our school system and because of homophobia within our school system.[7]”

FINDING ONE

LGBTQ Youth of Color Report Increased Surveillance and Policing

Participants in this study overwhelmingly report cases in which LGBTQ youth of color are targeted by school staff with increased surveillance and policing. For example, when students were asked whether or not LGBTQ youth of color are treated differently by administrators or teachers, one student explains how she not only feels "watched" but that she and her friends are labeled as "gangsters."

> "We do get watched, a group of like your friends, and you're all Mexican or all black, they do watch you more. Like, 'Oh, there's a group of gangsters right there.'[8]"

When asked to elaborate, she adds,

> "A lot of times the kids who look like they're more studious because of their race and what they wear are, you know, paid less attention to because they're not thought of as a threat…[9]"

This feeling of being labeled a "problem student" and the ensuing experience of hyper surveillance is echoed repeatedly by LGBTQ youth of color. For example, another participant explains that while her school "has zero-tolerance policies" administrators "monitor certain kids" and impose harsher punishments "with the kids that they don't like."

> ‘Cause the administration likes certain kids. They monitor certain kids. So if [the kids they like] get in certain kinds of trouble, like violence trouble, they kind of don’t punish them as bad...[10]

Another participant explains how a GNC gay student of color is monitored by teachers, labeled as “messy,” and assumed to be “starting trouble” simply because of the way he looks.

> A young man who identified as gay and was gender nonconforming, you know, 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.’[11]

Our research shows that LGBTQ youth of color perceive a higher level of surveillance and feel as though they are “not liked” or supported by school staff. This finding is consistent with previous research on the STPP illustrating race-based bias and criminalization of youth of color, but it is important to note that these students are also targeted due to sexual orientation and gender identity, expression, or presentation

FINDING TWO

LGBTQ Youth of Color Report Incidents of Harsh School Discipline and Biased Application of Policies

In addition to increased surveillance and policing, LGBTQ youth of color also report incidents of harsh school discipline and biased application of policies. For example, one LGBTQ youth of color who was frequently bullied explains that his principal was much less tolerant of bullying when the perpetrator was a youth of color as opposed to a white youth.

> "Like, every Latina that bullied me...[the principal] would try his best [to stop the bullying] but all of a sudden this white kid comes and [it takes the principal] like three or four months to get him to stop [bullying].[12]"

In this case, it seems race-based bias influences the principal's response to bullying and harassment where youth of color who are bullying are disciplined with more regularity than white youth who are bullying.

> *"Harsh responses to bullying can actually wind up harming the very students they are intended to protect...In fact the self-preservation techniques used by many LGBTQ youth in response to harassment have led them to become victims of this zero-tolerance [type] approach. Indeed many students identified as "bullies" have previously been the victims of bullying, and vice versa. Moreover, the use of harsh disciplinary action typically leads to increased reporting, which can inadvertently "out" many LGBTQ youth to their parents or peers, and can be both traumatic and dangerous for young people."* [13]

LGBTQ youth of color were also targeted for "infractions" involving gender identity, expression, or presentation. According to one participant,

> [A black, gay student] was suspended for a week for wearing hair extensions in his hair...he goes to a pretty much all black school, lots of girls have colorful hair extensions...[but] none of the other girls are getting suspended for having hair weaves. [14]

In another case, a GNC, gay student of color missed a half-day of class instruction for bringing nail polish to school.

> A gay, young man was going through metal detectors, and he was detained for like half a day and kind of had in-school suspension because he had nail polish in his backpack.[15]

In these last two examples, school staff use exclusionary discipline to single out LGBTQ and GNC youth of color. Exclusionary discipline, which has increased dramatically in recent years, includes removal from classrooms, suspension, expulsion, and/or involuntary transfers. Students subjected to such disciplinary practices are more likely to be "cited for future behavioral problems, have academic difficulties, and drop out of school."[16] Overall, participants in this research study report numerous incidents of harsh and differential school discipline that affect feelings of safety, health and well-being, and academic achievement of LGBTQ youth of color.

FINDING THREE

LGBTQ Youth of Color Report Being Blamed for Their Own Victimization

LGBTQ youth of color report frequent harassment and bullying from school staff, yet when they seek help they are often told the bullying is their own fault.

> I'm thinking of a young black woman who identifies as gay, but has a really short haircut, like people would see on a boy--what you would call a 'fade'...it's almost okay to discriminate or talk about [her] or relegate [her] to a [lower] status because it's like, 'Well, she chose to put that in my face,' you know? And, 'She didn't have to.'[17]

This participant explains how a student's gender presentation is perceived as problematic and that her school community therefore feels entitled to talk behind her back, devalue her, or discriminate against her. In another case, after a transgender student of color repeatedly reported harassment and bullying to school staff who she explains, "did nothing," she finally brought a butter knife to school to protect herself. Subsequently, she was arrested at school and automatically put in expulsion proceedings. According to school staff,

> When she wore hair [extensions] to school she was basically asking to be bullied.[18]

In this case school staff blamed the student for the bullying and harassment she endured from her peers instead of taking responsibility for their inability and/or refusal to intervene when the student asked for help.

Another participant explains how an LGBTQ youth of color who faced constant bullying from peers did not report the abuse to school staff because, as she put it, “No one [was] going to do anything.”

> [After] months and months of harassment she blew up and really hurt another student. She ended up getting extended suspension so, you know, she just dropped out. She was sixteen at the time and just didn’t see the point of that anymore. And she felt like she wasn’t going to be supported in the school.[19]

In this case “extended suspension” amounted to 45 days, as opposed to the 10 days of suspension her bully received. This lack of protection from harassment and bullying, exposure to violence, along with differential and harsh discipline ultimately resulted in the students departure from school altogether. While seemingly a choice, such departure is part of a larger pattern of school push-out.

In all three cases, when LGBTQ youth of color are bullied and harassed they are blamed for their own victimization and, in many cases, students are even suspended, expelled, arrested, or pushed out of the school system altogether.

CONCLUSION

LGBTQ Youth of Color Face Vast Challenges

Harassment based on a student's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity is common in schools. Similarly, harassment based on a student's racial or ethnic identity is also common in schools and research reveals that there is significant overlap in race and sexual orientation-based harassment. According to one study, nearly one-third of students who are bullied are subjected to both types of harassment. While students facing any type of bullying or harassment report feeling unsafe at school, students experiencing multiple forms of bullying or harassment are even more likely to feel unsafe at school.[20]

In addition to harassment and bullying from peers based on race, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity, participants also report:

- Lack of support or protection from teachers, administrators, and school staff
- Accounts of harassment and bullying perpetrated by school staff[21]
- Increased surveillance and policing and an overall criminalization of LGBTQ youth of color
- Discipline disparities such as frequent and/or harsher punishment for the same or similar infraction in comparison to their peers
- Marginalization such as exclusionary discipline used to deny educational time
- Victim blaming where LGBTQ youth of color are labeled as the ultimate problem

CONCLUSION

The vast challenges facing LGBTQ youth of color build upon one another to create "school push-out," where many students are pushed out of the school system altogether, enroll in alternative or disciplinary school, or enroll in a GED program. This exclusion influences academic success and well-being and, moreover, sets LGBTQ youth of color on a path towards the juvenile justice system, perpetuating the STPP.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that LGBTQ youth make up approximately 15% of the juvenile detention population but only 6% of the general population;[22] or that black students make up 27% of those referred to law enforcement and 31% of those subjected to school-related arrests but only 16% of students enrolled in school.[23]

Given these statistics and the findings from this research study, it is clear that further research is needed to learn more about the specific challenges facing LGBTQ youth of color, how to stop school push-out and dismantle the STPP, and how to support the academic success and well-being of LGBTQ youth of color in schools.

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4. See note #1

5. 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.

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7. Adult Participant

8. Focus Group Youth Participant

9. Focus Group Youth Participant

10. Focus Group Youth Participant

11. Adult Participant

12. Focus Group Youth Participant

13. Advancement Project, Alliance for Educational Justice, and Gay-Straight Alliance Network. (2012). *Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right: Why Zero Tolerance is Not the Solution to Bullying.* http://www.gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/APJ-005_D5-FINALsmall.pdf

14. Adult Participant

15. Adult Participant

16. *Discipline in California Schools: Legal Requirements and Positive School Environments.* https: //www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/discipline_in_california.pdf

17. Adult Participant

18. Adult Participant

19. Adult Participant

20. See Note #1

21. See Note #5 for more about accounts of harassment and bullying perpetrated by school staff.

22. Irvine, A., *"We've Had Three of Them": Addressing the Invisibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Gender Non-Conforming Youths in the Juvenile Justice System.* Columbia Journal of Gender and Law. (19) 3, 676-677 (2010).

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Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network) is a national youth leadership organization that empowers youth activists to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools by training student leaders and supporting student-led Gay-Straight Alliance clubs. GSA Network operates the GSA Network of California and the National Association of GSA Networks, which unites 39 statewide networks of GSA clubs.

The Crossroads Collaborative, a think-and-do research lab co-directed by Adela C. Licona and Stephen T. Russell, University of Arizona (UA) faculty, also includes postdoctoral research associates, graduate students, youth participants, and youth-oriented community partners. The collaborative is dedicated to advancing and engaging in action-oriented research, graduate training, public conversation, and ultimately social change in the area of youth, sexuality, health, and rights (YSHR). The Crossroads Collaborative aims to lead and engage others in an informed and productive dialogue around YSHR. We seek to shift discourses and practices and to generate and enhance discussions at the crossroads between academic disciplines, researchers and community organizations, youth, media, experiential knowledge, and public advocacy and policy.