

OUT HEALTH AND
WELLNESS

Nearly a third of young gay people have attempted suicide, study finds

Coming out earlier in life is a double-edged sword, experts say.



— NBC News; Getty Images

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By Dan Avery

Suicide rates among young people [have been on the rise](#) in recent years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but gay and bisexual youths are almost [five times as likely](#) to have attempted suicide as their straight peers.

And, despite advances in the fight for LGBTQ equality, a new report finds that young gay people today are even more likely to have attempted suicide than in previous generations.

Researchers at the Williams Institute, a sexual orientation and gender identity think tank at UCLA School of Law, found that 30 percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents ages 18 to 25 reported at least one suicide attempt, compared to 24 percent of those 34-41 and 21 percent of those 52-59.

The [study](#), published last month in the journal PLOS One, also revealed that these young adults are experiencing higher levels of victimization, psychological distress and internalized homophobia than older generations.

"We had really expected it would be better for the younger group," said lead author Ilan H. Meyer, a distinguished senior scholar of public policy at the institute. "But at the same time, we knew data from other studies has shown LGB youth do a lot worse than straight youth – and not much better now than in earlier times."

Meyer and his colleagues surveyed 1,518 respondents who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual (trans people were included in a separate study). Participants were divided into three cohorts: the "Pride" generation, those born from 1956 to 1963; the "Visibility" generation, born from 1974 to 1981; and the "Equality" generation, born from 1990 to 1997.

Using the Kessler Scale, a clinical measure of psychological distress, they found that members of the Equality generation reported almost twice as many

symptoms of anxiety and depression as the Pride generation. Many factors influenced the data, Meyer said, including the fact that people are coming out younger than ever.

"That can be a positive, of course," he said. "But it can also backfire and expose you to a lot of harassment and victimization. You might not be prepared for the consequences."

Members of the Equality generation reported coming out to a family member at age 16 on average, compared to 22 for the Visibility generation and 26 for the Pride generation.

That can put them at risk of rejection at a time when they rely most on family for emotional and financial support, said Amy Green, vice president of research for The Trevor Project, an LGBTQ youth crisis intervention and suicide prevention organization.

According to a [survey by the organization](#) last year, 40 percent of LGBTQ youths ages 13 to 24 had seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous 12 months.

"It's not that the world isn't making progress for LGBTQ people, it's that recent progress has resulted in an amazing community of young people who understand who they are but still live in a world where others may be unkind to them, reject them, bully them or discriminate against them," Green said in an email. "And we know these experiences of victimization can compound and produce negative mental health outcomes."

The advent of social media and the internet has also greatly affected the Equality generation's sense of identity.

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"When we asked them about other people in the community, the younger group's answers were always – always – about social media, not about real-life encounters," Meyer said. "People are very cruel online, whether it's Twitter or Grindr."

Meyer said that before he examined interviews accompanying the survey, he expected to hear people in their teens and 20s present "a different way of being gay."

"But one of the first narratives I listened to was from an 18-year-old Latino from San Francisco, and his narrative was the same as we've heard for generations – homophobia, exclusion, shame. The evolution [in LGBTQ rights] hadn't impacted his life as much as you'd expect."

Members of the Equality generation reported more anti-LGBTQ victimization than their older counterparts, Meyer said. Nearly 3 out of 4 (72 percent) said they had been verbally insulted about their identity, and almost half (46 percent) said they had been threatened with violence. More than a third (37 percent) reported having been physically attacked or sexually assaulted.

"I believe in the power of institutions and social structures changing. I really do," Meyer said. "But I think real progress takes longer than we think. Just because we're seeing change doesn't mean every gay kid's parents are accepting or that their friends are embracing them."

There were some silver linings: Of the three groups, members of the Equality generation most reported feeling connected to the LGBTQ community.

"That was actually surprising, because we hear so much about people feeling like they don't belong," Meyer said. "But this suggests there is still pride, despite the difficulties and negativity, sometimes even from within our own community."

Coming out younger has also given them more resiliency, he added.

"Coming out earlier gives you a great start on life, even if you face hardships," he said. "This generation is already out when they get to college. They have

a better sense of who they are. Older generations had to wait longer to live their authentic lives."

If you are an LGBTQ young person in crisis, feeling suicidal or in need of a safe and judgment-free place to talk, call the [TrevorLifeline](#) now at 1-866-488-7386.

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