

Wingspan's Project Q

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Sexual violence prevention with LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/ questioning) youth is a burgeoning and vastly exciting endeavor. Very few programs of this sort exist in this county, so this is an incredible opportunity.

The situation for LGBTQ survivors of sexual assault in Southern Arizona is dire. LGBTQ people, especially young people, are more frequently survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault by strangers than heterosexuals, and are survivors of assault and harassment by partners at a similar rate to heterosexual people. In a sample of 412 university students, 16.9% of the subjects reported that they were lesbian, gay, or bisexual; the remainder identified themselves as heterosexual. Of the lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual subjects, 42.4% (30.6% female and 11.8% male) indicated they had been forced to have sex against their will, as opposed to 21.4% of the heterosexual (17.8% female and 3.6% male) respondents.¹ The Gender, Violence, and Resource Access Survey found that 50% of transgender respondents had been raped or assaulted by a romantic partner, as opposed to 5 – 30% of the non-transgender population.²

LGBTQ youth especially experience compounded factors that put them at extremely high risk of sexual violence victimization. LGBTQ youth receive little or no support proven to reduce risk factors of sexual violence. Communities such as neighborhoods and churches tend to ostracize LGBTQ youth, and effectively exclude them from opportunities for social involvement. Parents and other family members frequently reject their LGBTQ youth. In fact, many LGBTQ youth are kicked out of their parents' homes, with the result that nationally 18% of local homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. Schools are also sources of isolation and psychological harm, with 75% of youth regularly hearing homophobic speech at school, 19% hearing homophobic comments *from their teachers*, and 64% feeling unsafe at school because of their orientation. Similarly, LGBTQ youth are often rejected by their friends and other peers when they come out.³

Despite the disproportionate number of LGBTQ people experiencing sexual violence, and the elevated risk factors effecting LGBTQ youth, nearly all images of sexual harassment and sexual assault portray a male perpetrator and a female survivor. This not only minimizes and invalidates the trauma of sexual violence for LGBTQ survivors, but creates a dangerous gap in prevention messaging to LGBTQ youth.

Mainstream social service providers are, unfortunately, not always equipped to assist LGBTQ survivors of sexual assault, because they do not fully understand the issues that LGBTQ people face. Moreover, LGBTQ people and their allies are not aware of resources and protections that are available to them. Many LGBTQ people are reluctant to seek mainstream services because they fear that providers may be homophobic, and many do not seek legal action since they are unaware that they are protected under Arizona law.

For LGBTQ youth, all of these factors are compounded by other elevated risks resulting from having less access to family, peer, and school support than heterosexual youth. LGBTQ youth have alarmingly high rates of suicide, substance abuse, and depression, as well as a higher instance of experiencing sexual violence and a lower likelihood to report sexual violence or seek help.

With guidance from the Arizona Department of Health Services' Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Program, Wingspan is addressing these issues through its Project Q intervention. Project Q workshop participants are the LGBTQ youth who use the services of the Eon Youth Lounge; the youth range in age from 13- 23, and are culturally diverse. Eon is a collaboration between Wingspan, the Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation, CODAC Behavioral Health Services and the Pima County Health Department. The center includes a mini-library, computer stations, video games, and art, and it presents programs of interest to the youth that drop in.

The goal of Project Q is to increase the protective assets of LGBTQ youth, assets which are so often lacking in this community due to the internal and external barriers discussed previously. Youth are encouraged to examine their relationships to their communities, their cultures, religious and state institutions, their families and friends, and to assess the presence or absence of positive adult role models. By increasing their protective assets, and by strengthening levels of empowerment along all levels of the CDC's socio-ecological model, youth can reduce their risk for experiencing or perpetrating violence.

¹ Waldner-Haugrud, L. K. & Vaden Gratch, L. (1997). Sexual coercion in Gay/Lesbian relationships: Descriptives and gender differences." *Violence and Survivors* 12, 87-98.

² Courvant, D., & Cook-Daniels, L., (1998). Transgender and intersex survivors of domestic violence: Defining terms, barriers and responsibilities. Available at <http://www.survivorproject.org/defbarresp.html>

³ Harris Interactive & **Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network** (2005). *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America, A Survey of Students and Teachers*. New York: GLSEN. Available at http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/499-1.pdf