



Suicide Risk Higher Among Sexual Minority Youth

While many Albertans are finally opening their eyes to the risks of suicide among our youth, they may be overlooking a particular group of adolescents who are at an even higher risk for suicide injury. Alarming research demonstrates that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth are at an increased risk for suicide.

Twenty years of research shows that approximately 30% of gay, lesbian and bisexual male and female youth have attempted suicide.¹ A study from Calgary reported that homosexually oriented young adult males were at about 14 times more risk for a serious suicide attempt than their heterosexual counterparts.²

Suicide is the second most common cause of death for Canadians between 15 and 24 years of age.³ In 1999, 438 Albertans died as a result of suicide.⁴ Another 2200 were hospitalized due to intentional self-inflicted injuries.⁵ The sexual orientation of the deceased, however, is not known since that information is not collected.

“Suicide continues to be the leading cause of injury death among Albertans and we’re troubled by the almost total silence about the added risks that homosexual, bisexual and transgendered youth face,” says Dr. Louis Hugo Francescutti of the Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research (ACICR). “We must be attentive to suicide signals and willing to support everyone to find the help they need.”

In general, gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are more at risk for the factors that are known to be associated with youth suicide such as family problems or alcohol abuse. Plus they are at risk for some very unique factors associated with simply not being heterosexual or gender-conforming. They may experience anti-gay harassment and threats of violence from their peers and family and feel that it is better to be dead than to be gay.

For bisexual and transgendered youth, suicide risk may be even significantly higher as they face some of the most overt and severe forms of discrimination and harassment. Bisexual people are reported to be disliked and abused by both homosexual and heterosexual people.

Warning signs for suicidal behaviour vary greatly between people and any clue should be treated very seriously. Situations such as recent loss, sadness, grief or physical pain have been linked to suicide. Symptoms of depression such as trouble sleeping or concentrating, withdrawal from other people, or complaining of feeling worthless are other signals. Sometimes people give verbal warnings and say things like, "I give up" or "It's hopeless" or joke about killing themselves. Friends and family members may also notice a change in behaviour such as when a previously troubled person appears suddenly calm and at peace, or casually gives away prized possessions. Sexual minority youth are more likely to be experiencing homelessness, prostitution, drug or alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, feelings of isolation, family problems and school difficulties.

ACICR advises Albertans to be observant to recognize possible warning signs. If you suspect someone is suicidal, reach out to the person and ask directly about suicidal intentions. Ask if they have a suicide plan. It is important to show respect and take the situation seriously. Offer your support by encouraging them to talk and urge them to get help. If they won't seek help, get help for them. Never promise to keep their suicidal thoughts secret but let them know you will keep their sexual orientation secret. Get help for them from a suicide prevention resource that knows how to work sensitively with these issues.

For more information about suicide or to learn more about suicide prevention training programs, contact the Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research at 780-492-6019 or the Centre for Suicide Prevention at 403-245-3900.

If you are suicidal or concerned about someone who is, contact the Mental Health Help Line at 1-877-303-2642, the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or call local crisis centre or family doctor.

Web Resources:

Centre for Suicide Prevention
www.suicideinfo.ca

YouthSafe.net
www.youthsafe.net

Kids Help Phone
www.kidshelp.sympatico.ca

¹ Personal communication with Pierre Tremblay (see note from P. Tremblay)

² Bagley C, Tremblay P. (1997). Suicidal behaviors in homosexual and bisexual males. *Crisis*, 18(1), 24-34. Internet: <http://www.youth-suicide.com/gay-bixesual/suicide.htm>

³ Suicide and Self-Inflicted Injuries, FACT Sheet, Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research

⁴ Suicide and Self-Inflicted Injuries, FACT Sheet, Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research

⁵ Suicide and Self-Inflicted Injuries, FACT Sheet, Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research