

# The Promise of Adolescence:

## Highlighting the Experiences of LGBTQ Youth

In 2019, The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) released a report entitled *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*. The report's publication coincided with dramatic advances in the field of neurobiology, particularly within the understanding of the adolescent brain. By integrating brain science with sociobehavioral understandings of adolescent development, NASEM provided noteworthy methods of promoting “adolescent well-being, resilience, and development.”

The report featured a specific focus on inequity in adolescence, and placed substantial attention on gender and sexual minority youth – adolescents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ). A defining aspect of adolescence is the emergence and awareness of sexuality, gender roles, and gender expression. LGBTQ youth consequently navigate these identities in the context of their unique environments, which may or may not have the necessary infrastructure to support them.

This research brief highlights NASEM's findings on LGBTQ youth in *The Promise of Adolescence*. Significantly, this report functioned as the first major publication from the organization that centered LGBTQ youth and their experiences.



**National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.**

**About NASEM: NASEM operates as a group of private, nonprofit organizations that “...provide independent, objective advice to inform policy with evidence, spark progress, innovation, and confront challenging issues for the benefit of society.” The coalition serves the unique role of both identifying contentious societal issues and providing scientific and evidence-based solutions.**

## **Inequity and Adolescence**

Societal determinants curtail the promise of adolescence and shape life trajectories. These determinants not only limit access to opportunities available to more privileged youth, but simultaneously expose those less privileged to various risks, demands, and stressors that their heterosexual, cis-gender peers do not experience.

NASEM’s evidence has affirmed that the adults that guide and shape adolescents’ environments – educators, health professionals, child welfare system actors, and justice system actors – oftentimes treat youth differently based on their race, gender, LGBTQ identity, and ability status. This occurrence transpires during a sensitive developmental period of a young person’s life. Thus, the institutions responsible for guiding youth maintain the potentiality of undermining them.

## **Disparities**

Research from the last decade has confirmed that LGBTQ youth are disparately overrepresented in a variety of social services systems:

- The child welfare system, foster care, and other out-of-home placements.
- The juvenile justice system and solitary confinement.
- Among “cross-over” youth, or youth involved in more than one social service system.

In response to these findings, NASEM identified several sites of intervention for reducing disparities related to sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as strategies that can support the contemporary LGBTQ youth:

## **Technology**

Today’s adolescents regularly interact with digital technology, exposing themselves to potential risks, but also engaging with opportunities for a positive developmental experience. LGBTQ youth, especially, can connect with other community members, and build supportive and empowering networks, regardless of how accepting their physical environment may be. This experience was, for the most part, unavailable to previous generations.

## **Civic Engagement**

Though historically marginalized groups demonstrate lower levels of political engagement, the United States has seen an increasing number of younger elected officials, as well as women and openly LGBTQ people.

## **Families**

LGBTQ adolescents, in comparison to their heterosexual and/or cis-gender peers, are more likely to be surrounded by family who are not supportive, experience parental abuse, and suffer from homelessness. These experiences in turn lead to a higher percentage of LGBTQ youth in the juvenile system, as well as higher levels of substance use and mental health problems including depression and suicidal ideation. However, LGBTQ youth who have supportive families demonstrate higher rates of self-esteem, social support, and health.

## **Schools and Community Settings**

LGBTQ students often experience bullying based on their sexual or gender identity, leading to negative academic performance and compromised health behaviors. LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience punitive discipline — such as suspension, expulsion, and other forms of educational discipline — than other students, even for similar infractions. No evidence suggests that LGBTQ students violate rules more often than other students. However, research in the last decade has helped recognize policies, programs, and practices that facilitate safe and supportive school environments:

- Inclusive, enumerated non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies (policies that specifically include protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression).
- Professional development on LGBTQ issues for teachers, administrators, and all school personnel.
- Access to LGBTQ-related resources, both in school curriculum, but also in materials available at school – including posters on walls or books in the library.
- The presence of Gender and Sexualities Alliance clubs (GSAs, or Gay-straight Alliances) in schools.

## **Health and Health Care**

LGBTQ youth of all ages are more likely to develop mental health problems or suicidal thoughts compared to their heterosexual, cisgender peers. For LGBTQ youth, who face elevated sexual health risks and underutilized routine reproductive health care, there is a need for inclusive and affirming sexual and reproductive health care, appropriate health-related education, and adequate interventions to prevent STIs. Recent research has identified characteristics of youth-friendly health care services, such as offering welcoming and equitable treatment regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

## Data and Research Limitations

Although NASEM's report proved that there are notable disparities among adolescents based on sexual orientation and gender identity, there remains a lack of adequate data to document these disparities on a larger scale or identify intersectional disparities. For example, while the report observed that transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) youth experience distinctive stressors at the onset of puberty, they noted that most research about pubertal development has excluded TGNC youth. This information deficiency could stem from researchers' failure to collect appropriate data or potentially represent the reluctance of sexual and gender minority youths to disclose information. In either case, more research on the subject will make way for a deeper understanding of LGBTQ youths' lives and wellbeing.

## Recommendations

The report provides multiple recommendations designed to bolster the promise of adolescence. Several of these recommendations specifically mention LGBTQ youth:

- Provide training for professionals who work with adolescents — including school personnel and health care providers — on topics such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and understanding and supporting LGBTQ youth
- Improve federal and state data collection on adolescent health and wellbeing by being more intentional with data collection for sexual and gender minority youth
- Develop programs and strategies to reduce disparities based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the juvenile justice system

Suggested Citation:

Akhmadikina, N., Saba, V., and Russell, S. T. (2021). *The Promise of Adolescence: Highlighting the Experiences of LGBTQ Youth*. Austin, TX: The Stories and Numbers Project.

