# Three in ten LGBTQ+ school children diagnosed with disability



A newly released report from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) reveals that three in ten LGBTQ youth have at least one formal disability diagnosis, making them notably susceptible to victimisation and exclusion within school environments. The report, developed in collaboration with researchers at the University of Connecticut, draws from data gathered in a 2022 survey of LGBTQ youth aged 13 to 18.

The data reveals that LGBTQ teens are twice as likely as the overall student population to have a medically documented disability. The most common issues are mental health diagnoses such as depression and anxiety, affecting three-fourths of disabled LGBTQ students, followed by neurodevelopmental disabilities like autism, present in nearly 60% of participants. Physically disabled LGBTQ students make up one-fourth of the respondents, with more than half having more than one diagnosis.

Nearly two-thirds (62.5%) of disabled LGBTQ students reported experiencing physical or verbal harassment in the month preceding the survey. Half reported being made fun of, and one in ten faced physical violence from other students. The report underscores the compound challenges these students face due to their dual identities, noting that they are more susceptible to bullying compared to their straight, cisgender disabled peers.

An overwhelming majority of the disabled LGBTQ students surveyed, over 80%, identify as transgender or nonbinary. This demographic faces significant challenges, ranging from the availability of suitable restrooms to barriers in participating in school sports. The report specifically notes that gender-inclusive restrooms and locker rooms are a rarity, contributing to heightened access barriers. Separate research by the U.S. Government Accountability Office supports these findings, revealing that two-thirds of school buildings are not physically accessible to many people with disabilities, with restrooms being a particularly problematic area.

Interestingly, the high number of barriers that disabled LGBTQ+ youth encounter may account for their increased likelihood of being out to the adults in their lives. The report reveals that three-fourths of disabled LGBTQ students have disclosed their gender identity or sexual orientation to at least one school staff member, compared to 64% of all LGBTQ youth. Additionally, nearly 90% are out to at least one member of their immediate family, versus 83% overall.

Over the past four years, there has been a surge in bills introduced by right-wing lawmakers across state legislatures and Congress aimed at curtailing LGBTQ+ student protections. This legislative activity coincides with a dramatic rise in in-school victimisation, with many young people reporting that safety in school settings like bathrooms and locker rooms has significantly deteriorated.

A poignant and tragic example of the consequences occurred in February in Oklahoma, where a nonbinary teen, Nex Benedict, died by suicide after being assaulted by three students. This incident, which is currently under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education, led to a sharp increase in calls to mental health crisis lines.

The rising hostility against LGBTQ+ youth in schools has emotional and psychological tolls. A 2023 report by The Trevor Project found that nearly half of LGBTQ teenagers aged 13 to 17 had contemplated suicide in the previous year, compared to 19% of high school students overall. Anxiety afflicts 70% of these young people, and 57% suffer from depression.

In schools, the process of establishing an Individualised Education Program (IEP) may play a role in the higher likelihood of disabled LGBTQ+ students coming out to school staff. The IEP involves a collaborative effort between caregivers and educators to outline the specific accommodations a special education student needs. According to Shoshana Goldberg, HRC Public Education and Research Director, this process can establish teachers as trusted adults, fostering an environment where students feel more comfortable disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity.

Participation rates in school athletics reveal further disparities. While two-thirds of disabled queer youth participate in extracurricular activities, only 18% engage in sports. Overall, LGBTQ+ students are half as likely to participate in school athletics than their straight, cisgender counterparts — 22% versus 49%. Moreover, 37% of transgender and nonbinary youth aged 13 to 17 are banned from participating on teams aligning with their gender identity.

Data on LGBTQ+ youth accessible by demographic subgroup remains rare as sexual and gender minority status is seldom recorded by census, education, or public health officials. This renders studies like the one conducted by the Human Rights Campaign particularly valuable for understanding the specific challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth with disabilities.