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a review of the professional literature and research needs for LGBT youth of color

by caitlin ryan

nyac

A Review of the Professional Literature & Research Needs for LGBT Youth of Color

Caitlin Ryan, MSW, ACSW
Associate Director
Center for Community Research
Institute on Sexuality, Inequality & Health
San Francisco State University
caitlin@sfsu.edu

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Several years ago, the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC) embarked upon an unprecedented venture with its organizational members and with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth they serve. NYAC began the arduous task of working to become a social justice organization focused on addressing multiple oppressions. We began this work humbly, gradually expanding the organization's efforts to include a broad range of social justice issues.

preface

This path has been marked by a thoughtful, sustained effort to embody the values that launched NYAC as a unique, youth-centered enterprise. From the beginning, NYAC has envisioned a society in which LGBTQ youth are healthy, fully empowered, and engaged in the building of their diverse communities. Accordingly, charting the course for change has meant struggling with a multiplicity of threats to the health and well being of young people including economic injustice, racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism. Over time, the clear voices of LGBTQ youth expanded NYAC's vision from a youth-serving perspective to one anchored within a strong youth justice orientation.

Over these many years, NYAC has committed itself to challenging the status quo by demanding that the voices of LGBTQ young people, particularly youth of color, be heard in important policy and service provision discussions.

As one strategy for raising the profile of these young people, NYAC requested a comprehensive review of the published literature on LGBTQ youth of color and asked for research recommendations based on findings and gaps in the existing literature. This review is based on three comprehensive searches of publications on LGBT youth in the professional literature conducted between 1995-2001, with a final search in the fall of 2002.

NYAC has consistently stressed the critical importance of collecting and disseminating accurate information about the physical and mental health needs and developmental issues of LGBTQ young people. Though it should not be surprising, in this study, we found less than 1% of all adolescent research focused on this population; and only 18 studies in the past 30 years concerned LGB youth of color (3.6% of the 1%!); with not a single study addressing transgender youth of color. Research must be made a priority as it drives policy development, funding priorities, and access to resources.

We have known that substantial gaps exist in the literature on adult lesbians, gay men and bisexuals of color in basic areas, such as sexual and gender identity development, sexuality and sexual behaviors, culture, and experiences related to families, parenting, coping and resilience. This new report makes clear that the gaps are even more extreme in reflecting the experiences of LGBT youth of color.

From the report, we find that "Virtually all of the literature on LGBTQ youth and adults underscores the need to balance and prioritize the demands and allegiances of various community affiliations, few of which accept all aspects of an individual's multiple identities. This is especially difficult for adolescents who are trying to consolidate and integrate multiple stigmatized identities, meet the cultural needs and demands of their families and ethnic communities, negotiate developmental tasks, and find support for dealing with same-sex desires."

"Increasingly, youth are coming out during adolescence rather than adulthood, and in the context of the AIDS pandemic which affects risk, life course and development. Greater opportunities for social support are coupled with increased exposure to victimization and harassment. LGBT youth of color are experiencing increased visibility in mainstream gay communities. However, they still struggle with racism and a lack of validation from mainstream, ethnic and LGBT communities. And although culture is a critical aspect of understanding sexual orientation, it is frequently left out of the study of sexuality and sexual health."

Though the gaps that become evident in reading this report are nothing short of disgraceful, we are hopeful that it will provide the evidence necessary to require that attention be paid to the needs of LGBTQ youth of color.

We are confident that it will encourage researchers to prioritize study of the developmental needs of this population, recognizing of course, that their work will not be possible without a parallel commitment in new resources by our partners in the funding community.

NYAC works behind the scenes and on the front lines to ensure that LGBTQ youth have both the resources and the platform to advocate for their unique needs and perspectives. And, while LGBTQ youth have gained significant ground over the past decade, the grave threats to their well-being remain. They suffer, not because they are LGBTQ, but because as adults we are not fulfilling our responsibilities—ensuring that every youth, of every race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, grows up in a safe environment, a tolerant environment, an environment that nurtures and supports their hopes and dreams.

This report is but one step in beginning to redefine how the needs of LGBTQ youth of color are understood and prioritized. You will see a great deal more from NYAC in the coming months and years. We hope that we can count on you to help us.

NYAC is indebted to the report's author, Caitlin Ryan, whose commitment to meeting the needs of LGBTQ youth is unwavering. The publication of this report would not have been possible without her passion, experience, and wisdom. We also owe thanks to our 130+ member organizations whose direct service work helps keep LGBTQ youth safer and healthier; even as their needs fail to receive the attention they deserve from society at large. It is also important to thank NYAC's Board and staff whose values drive NYAC's commitment to social justice, even when it seems unpopular. Finally, countless young people have contributed to making the National Youth Advocacy Coalition the kind of organization that is willing to stand alone when necessary, work together when possible, and always operate strategically to provide essential leadership on cutting-edge issues. For their strength and courage, we remain in constant awe.

In Community,

Craig A. Bowman
Executive Director

the executive summary

A prior analysis of publications from 1972-1999 on health and mental health concerns of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth identified 166 publications on LGB youth (Ryan, 2000). Nine focused on LGB youth of color, including three book chapters and four empirical studies, with an additional nine published in 1999 on the social service and provider training needs of transgender youth. This represents about 1% of journal articles published during this period in professional journals serving school practitioners (Ryan, 2000). Of these, only 3.6% focused on LGB youth of color, and none addressed transgender youth of color.

Findings

In the current review, the author identified 16 articles and two book chapters published during the past 30 years on lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth of color. None focused specifically on lesbian or transgender youth of color. The first articles were published in 1989 in a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* on gay youth (Herdt, 1989). Eighty-three percent were published since 1993, and half were published between 1996 and 2001. In addition, at least 11

This report was requested by the National Youth Advocacy Coalition on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth of color an based on findings and gaps in the existing literature. The review is b searches of publications on LGBT youth in the professional literature search in 2002.

papers were published on sexual and substance-using risk behaviors of New York City youth, a majority of whom were African American or Latino (e.g., Rosario, et al., 1996; Rotheram-Borus, Reid & Rosario, 1994). However, since they did not assess these behaviors and experiences from an ethnic or cultural perspective, they are not included in this review. Other articles published in the professional literature include small proportions of youth of color, and one comprehensive study of LGB youth, of whom 60% were youth of color (Herdt & Boxer, 1993).

Unlike the literature on LGB youth, in general (see Ryan, 2000), the professional literature on LGB youth of color includes a much higher proportion of empirical studies. In fact, all but four publications (78%) are based on some form of data collection or case material. However, most samples are very small samples of convenience or snowball samples that lack diversity in terms of class, geographic area, level of acculturation, etc. Similar to the literature on LGB youth, in general, most focus on males.

Most publications discuss the impact of ethnicity on same-sex identity. Only one, (Choi, Kumekawa, Dang, Kegeles, Hays & Stall, 1999) specifically discusses HIV-related risk in the context of family and cultural values. Only two publications specifically focus on HIV (Choi, et al., 1999; Peterson, Bakeman & Stokes, 2001), and only two others mention HIV as a health concern for LGB youth of color (Chung & Katayama, 1998; Parks, 2001), a disturbing finding given the high rates of HIV infection among gay and bisexual youth of color.

Three publications provide a secondary analyses of large datasets including a 1988-90 national survey of reservation-based American Indian youth related to teen pregnancy (Saewyc et al., 1998a) and sexual orientation (Saewyc et al., 1998b), and an analysis of school performance and self-esteem related to ethnicity and romantic attraction (Russell & Truong, 2001). Six publications include discussions and

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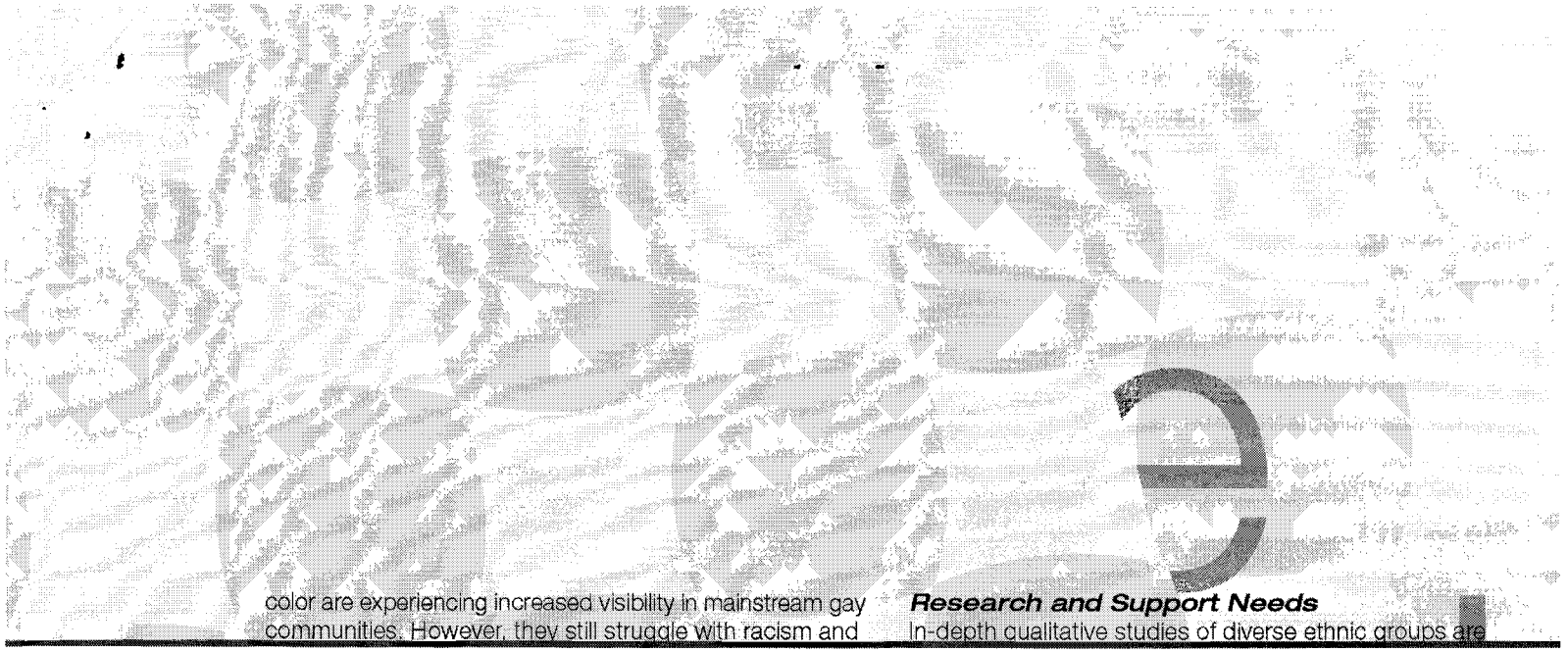
case examples. One presents cultural values for school counselors (Chung & Katayama, 1998); while two discuss African-American youth, using experiences and case examples (Monteiro, 1994; Sears, 1994); another reviews developmental challenges for urban African-American youth (Parks, 2001); and two chapters in an edited book discuss identity development, culture, family expectations and gender nonconformity among youth of color and Native American and Native Hawaiian cultures (Savin-Williams, 1996; Williams, 1996).

Discussion

Substantial gaps exist in the literature on adult lesbians, gay men and bisexuals of color in basic areas, such as sexual and transgender identity development, sexuality and sexual behaviors, culture, and experiences related to families, parenting, coping and resilience. These gaps are even more extreme in reflecting the experiences of LGBT youth.

A common fallacy within communities of color is that gay men or lesbians are perceived as "defective" men or women who want to be a member of the opposite gender (e.g., Greene). Thus, understanding the meaning of same-sex behavior in ethnic minority cultures requires an appreciation of the importance of gender roles and traditional gender stereotypes. Indirectness and not discussing sexuality is seen as the cost for family and ethnic community acceptance, while being openly lesbian or gay is seen as rejecting appropriate social roles or traditional culture. Virtually all the literature on LGB youth and adults underscores the need to balance and prioritize the demands and allegiances of ethnic and mainstream LGBT communities, neither of which accept all aspects of an individual's multiple identities. This is especially difficult for adolescents who are trying to consolidate and integrate multiple stigmatized identities, meet the cultural needs and demands of their family and ethnic community, negotiate developmental tasks, and find support for dealing with same-sex desires.

Non-heterosexual youth and adults construct a variety of identities to provide social roles and a cultural framework for same-sex desires and behaviors. An understanding of these meanings is essential in studying risk and health outcomes. LGBT youth are a separate, evolving culture that is vastly different than previous generations of LGB adults. Increasingly, youth are coming out during adolescence rather than adulthood, and in the context of the AIDS epidemic which affects risk, life course and development. Greater opportunities for social support are coupled with increased exposure to victimization and harassment. LGBT youth of



color are experiencing increased visibility in mainstream gay communities. However, they still struggle with racism and

Research and Support Needs

In-depth qualitative studies of diverse ethnic groups are