



# Suicidal behaviours in LGB populations: A literature review of research trends

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## Background and Objectives

Same-sex attraction is a common feature of human sexuality (beyondblue, 2011), documented across history and cultures (Foucault, 1978). While there is nothing inherently suicidogenic about sexual minority identity or status, a degree of continued stigma at family and societal levels in relation to minority sexualities (Blosnich & Bossarie, 2012) and genders (Fitzpatrick, Euton, Jones, & Schmidt, 2005) has led researchers to believe, for some time, that there is a relationship between suicidal behaviour and sexual minorities, especially in adolescence (Shaffer, Fisher, Parides, & Gould, 1995). Early research (from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s) on the risk of suicide among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, however, showed inconsistent results (Fitzpatrick, et al., 2005; McDaniel, Purcell, & D'Augelli, 2011).

The aim of this report is to review the international and Australian literature about suicidality in minority sexual identity and/or behaviour groups. Minority sexual identity refers to those who identify or are identified by others (in the case of psychological autopsies) as having a minority sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals).

## Methodology

Two separate literature searches were conducted using the databases Scopus, Medline, and Proquest for articles published in English in peer-reviewed academic journals. The studies reviewed examine suicidal behaviour among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual individuals (LGBT; or a subset of these). Results related to transsexual/minority gender individuals are not reported here.

The first literature search focussed on recent international literature (published since 2000). In order to keep the number of search results within manageable limits, the search was restricted to articles with the terms suicid\* AND gay OR lesbian OR bisexual OR transsexual in the title.

The second literature search focussed on all Australian studies. The search was restricted to articles with the terms suicid\* AND Australia AND gay OR lesbian OR bisexual OR transsexual in the title, key words, or abstract.

Where reference was made to other important studies in the articles from the search, these additional articles were also reviewed in order to be considered for inclusion in this overview. All empirical research about suicidal behaviours among gender minorities was included.

## Results

### International Literature

The studies identified found LGB individuals to be at a higher risk for suicidal ideation (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Marshal et al., 2012; Silenzio, Pena, Duberstein, Cerel, & Knox, 2007), suicide attempt (Bolton & Sareen, 2011; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Silenzio, et al., 2007), and completed suicide (men only; Mathy, Cochran, Olsen, & Mays, 2011). A meta-analysis conducted by King and colleagues (2008) on 25 studies from seven countries revealed that non-heterosexual people are at least at twice the lifetime risk of suicide attempt than heterosexual individuals; the lifetime relative risk for gay and bisexual men is over four times that of heterosexual people. LGB adolescents appear to be at particularly high risk (Russell & Toomey, 2012). LGB students in the USA have been found to be two to three times more likely to have attempted suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006;

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Russell & Joyner, 2001), while bisexual adults have been shown to be three times more likely to attempt suicide (Bolton & Sareen, 2011).

### Australian Literature

There is only limited research from Australia. Although no population-based studies have been carried out, research by Jorm and colleagues (2002) based on a sample of 4,824 people from the electoral role showed that gay men were at a higher risk for "suicidality" than heterosexual men, and bisexual men at a higher risk than gay men. Abelson and colleagues (2006) found statistically significant differences in "feeling suicidal" between both gay and bisexual men and heterosexual men living in Melbourne.

### Risk Factors

Risk factors for suicidal behaviours specific to LGB individuals include developmental stressors, such as self-identifying ("coming out") in adolescence and early adulthood (McDaniel et al., 2011; Nicholas & Howard, 1998). Additionally, prejudice and discrimination (homophobia and heterosexism) may lead to higher prevalence of suicidal behaviours, especially as homophobia may become internalised, resulting in shame, hostility, and self-hatred (McDaniel et al., 2011).

Victimised or bullied LGB school students are 2.5 times more likely to engage in self-harm (Liu & Mustanski, 2012). Furthermore, gay individuals are at a higher risk of sexual assault and those who have suffered physical assault are at a higher risk of suicidal behaviour (Nicholas & Howard, 1998).

### Protective Factors

Based on the results of the study by Nicholas and Howard (1998), it may be that acceptance of one's sexuality by talking to others about it and engaging in (same-sex) sexual activity act as protective factors, given that suicide attempts tend to be made *before* these events occur; 12.5% of those who had attempted suicide in the study had never had a same-sex sexual experience. Having a supportive family, especially a supportive father, also appears to be protective against suicidal behaviours (Nicholas & Howard, 1998). In an overview of the research on risk and protective factors for suicide among LGB individuals, Saewyc (2007) reports that feeling safe at school, having supportive teachers and other school staff, and having a high self-esteem have all been found to be protective against suicidal behaviours.

## Conclusions and Implications

This review of the international and Australian literature revealed a greater prevalence of suicidal behaviours among sexual minorities. Nevertheless, there is an outstanding need for case-control studies, as well as population-based studies and research on completed suicides among sexual minority groups in Australia. Specifically, in order to further the understanding of suicidal behaviours and potential prevention among LGBT groups in the Australian context, analysis of data related to minority sexualities from the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing should be treated as a priority. Furthermore, a question related to minority gender roles should be included in future releases. Different school-based studies should also be carried out, as has been the case in the numerous US adolescent studies conducted to date.

Furthermore, given the LGBT specific risk and protective factors noted above, it is important for those dealing with suicide prevention to take the specific needs and circumstances of LGB individuals into account when developing, planning and administering preventative activities.

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