

Digital Commons
@ LMU and LLS

Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry
and Practice

Volume 7 | Issue 4

Article 4

6-1-2004

Catholic High School Students' Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: A Snapshot of Incoming College Freshmen

Michael J. Maher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Maher, M. J. (2004). Catholic High School Students' Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: A Snapshot of Incoming College Freshmen. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 7 (4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0704042013>

This Focus Section Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, please email CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu.

CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY: A SNAPSHOT OF INCOMING COLLEGE FRESHMEN

MICHAEL J. MAHER

Loyola University Chicago

This study is a survey of incoming freshmen at a Midwestern Catholic university on their agreement with Church teachings on homosexuality. In general, females had more homo-positive attitudes than males, graduates of Catholic high schools had more homo-positive attitudes than graduates from non-Catholic high schools, and graduates from coeducational Catholic high schools had more homo-positive attitudes than graduates from unisex Catholic high schools. Also, if respondents agreed with the Church's teaching against homosexual activity and that homosexuality is a disorder, they were less likely to agree with the Church's teachings that gay and lesbian people have rights that the Church should protect.

The purpose of this article is to report the results of a survey study conducted at a Midwestern Catholic university in 1995 with a gay and lesbian student organization. The student organization was interested in discovering the attitudes of incoming freshmen on the topic of homosexuality, and the study also served broader research purposes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY

The term "homophobia" is credited to Weinberg (1972). While the term has become widely used, researchers have questioned if it can be applied universally to all negative attitudes toward homosexuality and gay and lesbian people (LaSalle, 1992; Plasek & Allard, 1985; Sepekoff, 1985). Friend (1993) defined the term as "the fear and hatred of homosexuality in one's self and in others" (p. 211). Friend also defined "heterosexism," another term in common use, as "the belief that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual" (p. 211). Herek (1985a, 1985b) argued that not all negative attitudes toward homosexuality and gay and lesbian people can be described as "phobic." Herek went on to create three categories of negative attitudes toward homosexuality. *Experiential attitudes* are the result of negative experiences with gay and les-

bian people. *Defensive attitudes* describe fear of homosexuality within one's self. *Symbolic attitudes* derive from ideologies, such as religion. Studies have also shown that the AIDS epidemic increased homophobia in the American public in the 1980s, and that homophobia is related to attitudes toward people with AIDS (Ellis, 1989; McClerren, 1992; McDevitt, 1987; Reynolds, 1989; Russell & Ellis, 1993; Walters, 1990).

A number of studies have demonstrated a relationship between religious beliefs and attitudes toward homosexuality (Reinhardt, 1997). Fledderjohann (1996) found that among freshmen at conservative Christian colleges, those who graduated from Christian high schools were more conservative on the topic of homosexuality than those who graduated from public schools. The Barna Research Group (2001) found that Born Again Christians were more conservative than mainline Protestants in their attitudes toward homosexuality, and that Evangelical Christians were by far more conservative than either group.

Several researchers have sought to give a picture of attitudes toward homosexuality among college and university students. Simoni (1996) found that college students were more likely to have negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians if they were younger, less educated, had less educated parents, and were male. Students with low self-esteem tended to have less positive experiences with gays and lesbians, which led to greater heterosexism. In a study of university students who had strong negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians, Dowler (1999) found that negative attitudes tended to fall into five major categories: repulsion, fear-discomfort, moral/religious righteousness, abnormality, and conditional acceptance. Similarly, LaSalle (1992) found that negative comments about homosexuality from university students, faculty, and staff showed four themes; religious or moral beliefs, that homosexuality is a private matter that should not be discussed, that people were "tired of" or "fed up with" the issue, or that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people were psychologically or behaviorally abnormal. Mohr and Sedlacek (2000) found a high number of incoming college freshmen were open to having a gay or lesbian friend (40%). One perceived barrier to such a potential friendship was religious commitment.

A number of studies have shown that homophobia can be reduced through gay and lesbian speakers' panels, role-playing exercises, and through knowing a gay or lesbian person (Aitken, 1993; McCleskey, 1991; McClintock, 1992; Papas, 2002; Reinhardt, 1994). Reinhardt (1997) found that college students who had gay and lesbian friends and acquaintances or who had positive interactions with gays and lesbians were less likely to have homophobic attitudes. Pirtle (1994) found that college students had less negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians after interacting with a panel of gay and lesbian people.

Male Attitudes

Several researchers have found that men tend to have more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than women (D'Augelli, 1989; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Herek, 1985b; Kite, 1985; Reinhardt, 1994; Watter, 1985). This has been found in college males specifically (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Manning & Nicoloff, 1995; Simoni, 1996). Negative attitudes toward homo-

sexuality tend to be related to strongly rigid perceptions of appropriate gender roles or to sexist attitudes (Black & Stevenson, 1985; Bleich, 1989; Ellis, 1989; Newman, 1985). Reinhardt (1997) found that male college students were more homophobic than female students, that all were more likely to be homophobic toward gay men than toward lesbian women, and that those who attended church regularly were more likely to be homophobic. Goff (1990) found that college males who had difficulty forming intimate relationships with women often feared that they were sexually abnormal or gay. Goff termed this, "reactive homophobia." Levant (1992) found that homophobia was a major element in gender role identity for men in the United States.

In his study of both heterosexual and gay males, Plummer (1999) found that homophobia is built into Western culture as part of the initiation of boys into manhood. Plummer calls this the "Homophobic Passage." Homophobia is first ambiguous, non-sexual, and used to ostracize "the other." The other can mean racial minorities, the immature, loners, or those who in some way act effeminate. Boys use homophobic terms, such as "fag" but do not think of them in sexual terms; they do not really believe (or even have a concept of) the object of the insult having to do with sex with other males. This applies to both individuals and behaviors. Some boys are called "fag" when they do something babyish (like crying), or effeminate (like playing with girls), or not conforming to male group dynamics (like being a loner). Some boys who continue to do this are called "fag" all the time. It serves a function of defining what masculine behavior is so that boys are "initiated" into manhood. Some boys are excluded by the group from this initiation. Homophobia eventually takes on sexual meaning, which orchestrates male behavior further. It regulates how close two males can be in friendship, how two males may express friendship, male expectations to be sexually active with females, and complex male contact situations such as sports and public nudity (such as in locker rooms). Homophobia serves a group function because it defines the group (men) and "the other" (those who are not men; "fags"). Plummer argued that homophobia reaches a crescendo in males in late adolescence because it is part of the initiation into male adulthood. It is at this age that males are most likely to commit violence against gays. It also explains why violence against gays is usually committed by groups; it is an initiation ritual more than an expression of individual hatred.

Verbal and Physical Violence

A study published by the U.S. Department of Justice concluded that gays and lesbians are probably the most frequent victims of hate violence (Finn & McNeil, 1987). Researchers found that half or more of anti-gay violence is perpetrated by family members (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Hunter, 1990). The New York Governor's Task Force on Bias Related Violence (1988) found that teenagers act more negatively toward gays and lesbians than any other minority. Bohn (1985) found that victims of anti-gay violence are less likely to know their assailants, more likely to be outnumbered by their assailants, and more likely to experience extreme forms of violent attack than victims of other hate

crimes. Friend (1993) found that gay male youth who act out in effeminate ways are the most likely targets of harassment in schools. Such behavior is often seen as an excuse for perpetrators. School-age youth are over-represented as perpetrators of anti-gay violence.

In a study of heterosexual college students, Rey (1997) found that 94.9% of those surveyed admitted to perpetrating some form of anti-gay behavior. Over 32% engaged in an anti-gay behavior rated as moderately harmful or more. Males were more likely to engage in anti-gay behavior than females. Gustavsson and MacEachron (1998) reported that both physical and non-physical violence are common experiences of gay and lesbian youth in schools. In a study of pejoratives used by high school students, Thurlow (2001) discovered that 10% of those used were homophobic. High school students rated these as less serious than racist pejoratives. Interestingly, boys used homophobic pejoratives more frequently than girls and rated them as much more serious pejoratives.

Mahan (1998) found that many gay and lesbian youth experienced harassment in schools as a result of stereotyping, especially of "gender inappropriate behavior." Often teachers did nothing to stop this harassment, and in some cases encouraged it. Students often believed that they were in danger for their physical safety. Witlock (1989) found that teachers as well as students often engage in verbal harassment of gay and lesbian students. The victim is frequently blamed for the harassment. Herdt and Boxer (1993) found that gay and lesbian youth typically do not see teachers as a source of assistance or protection. Bochenek and Brown (2001) documented the abuse experienced by gay and lesbian students in American high schools from fellow students and in some cases from teachers and school administrators. Bochenek and Brown pointed out the lack of legislative protection against such abuse and argued that this constitutes a violation of human rights.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2001 *School Climate Survey Report* showed that gay and lesbian high school students face verbal abuse and threats in school on a regular basis. Faculty and staff often contribute to the problem either actively by making comments themselves or passively by failing to intervene. The majority of gay and lesbian high school students did not feel safe at school, and many reported skipping classes or skipping whole days of school out of fear for their personal safety. In schools that had support groups (such as "gay-straight alliances"), students did report a greater sense of belonging at their schools. GLSEN's 1999 *School Climate Survey Report* showed that 90% of gay and lesbian high school students frequently heard homophobic remarks in their schools from other students, 69% reported experiencing some form of harassment or violence, and 14% reported experiences of physical assault.

ATTITUDES OF CATHOLICS

In this section, findings from mostly survey or statistical studies are presented. They have been divided into categories of general Catholic population, Catholic youth, and Catholic educational professionals. Unfortunately, specif-

ic statistics about the attitudes of Catholics on the topic of homosexuality cannot be concluded from an overall look at these studies; numbers are simply not consistent between studies. Most likely, this is probably due to the wide variety of wording of survey items used in these studies. Some differences may be due to regional factors. It does appear that American Catholics are becoming more positive in their attitudes toward homosexuality over time.

General Studies

Smith (1994) argued that during the 1970s and 1980s, American culture was becoming more tolerant of gay and lesbian people, including many religious bodies and some Catholic institutions. American Catholics became more tolerant of gay civil rights during this period, but not more tolerant of same-sex sexual activity. The Vatican reacted by emphasizing a split between homosexual orientation and homosexual sexual activity. The Vatican also emphasized non-discrimination based on sexual orientation.

A 1998 study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago (Smith, 1999) found that American Catholics are more accepting of homosexuality than American Protestants. Of Catholics, 33% agreed that homosexuality is "not wrong at all," compared to 19% agreement for Protestants. At the same time, 51% of Catholics indicated that homosexuality is "always wrong" (Smith, 1999). Also with NORC, Greeley (1991) reported that the attitudes of American Catholics had not changed greatly during the 1980s on the morality of homosexuality (two-thirds stating that it was "always wrong") but that Catholics had become more supportive of the civil liberties of gays and lesbians. On the other hand, Kapp (1999) argued that decreased Catholic affiliation with the Democratic Party in recent decades is influenced in part by the party's liberal stance on gay and lesbian issues.

D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Meyer (2001) reported on findings from their 1987 and 1999 studies of Catholics. The researchers divided American Catholics into three age groups; Post Vatican II (ages 18-34), Vatican II (ages 35-59), and Pre-Vatican II (60 and older). Younger Catholics saw moral decision making based more on the individual conscience rather than on the authority of the Church. Of the Post-Vatican II cohort, 56% indicated that individuals should have the final say on homosexuality, while only 36% of the Pre-Vatican II cohort agreed with this statement. This was a shift from these same age cohorts in their 1987 study. In 1987, 47% of the Post-Vatican II cohort indicated that individuals should have the final say on homosexuality, and only 18% of the Pre-Vatican II cohort agreed with this statement. When compared by gender, in 1987, 31% of Catholic men believed that Church leaders were the locus of moral authority on the issue of homosexuality compared with 23% of women. In 1999, the percentage of Catholic men agreeing with this had increased slightly to 33%, while the percentage of Catholic women had decreased to 17%. The authors argued that Vatican II and the positions of the Catholic hierarchy following the Council emphasized the role of individual conscience for Catholic questions of morality, but that Pope John Paul II has worked to re-centralize the Catholic hierarchy in moral decision making.

Catholic Youth and Catholic School Students

Fee, Greeley, McCready, and Sullivan (1981) studied attitudes of youth and adults in the United States and Canada on a number of topics. Of American Catholic youth, 77% agreed with the statement that sex between two persons of the same sex was wrong. There was no significant difference between their responses and those of American Protestant youth. Interestingly, French-speaking Canadian youth were much less likely to agree with the statement (50% agreement). Adult Catholics showed about 68% agreement with the statement, while unchurched adults only showed 30% agreement. Catholic youth tended to disagree with Church teaching on a number of social issues, such as birth control, divorce and remarriage, mercy killing, and abortion in the case of a defective baby, but they tended to agree with Church teaching on the topics of abortion on demand and homosexuality.

In a 1983 survey study of seniors graduating from Catholic high schools in the Washington, DC area, McAuley and Mattieson (1986) found that 30% of students agreed that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle.

Kane (1987) conducted a study of 1,643 freshmen at two metropolitan colleges. Kane found no difference in attitudes toward homosexuality among college freshmen between those who attended Catholic high schools and those who attended public high schools. This is interesting given that significant differences were found in their attitudes on other social issues such as prayer in public schools, euthanasia, capital punishment, aid for the oppressed, and on the role of teachers in instilling moral values in their students.

McNamara (1992) found that support for a city ordinance to protect gay and lesbian people from discrimination grew in seniors at a Catholic high school from 44% support in 1977 to 52% in 1989. Females only grew from 50% to 53%, but male support grew from 35% to 50%. McNamara also found that seniors valued the aspect of community in the Catholic high school. Seniors appreciated Church teaching on moral issues, but were more likely to rely on their own consciences for moral decision making. They felt that Catholic education had caused them to probe social issues more deeply.

In a review of studies into Catholic education over a 25-year period, Convey (1992) found that students in Catholic high schools displayed values that were less self-centered than values of students in public high schools. Students in Catholic high schools were found to support equal opportunities and rights for women. Interestingly, studies did not indicate that students in Catholic high schools felt a strong responsibility to work for creating a more just society. Convey argued that in general, Catholic high school students do not value justice as strongly as they should, given the emphasis on justice education in Catholic high schools. Researchers found that Catholic high schools placed greater emphasis on community as a part of their culture than did public high schools. Catholic high schools were more successful in achieving community for a number of reasons, including their smaller enrollments, their emphasis on shared religious identity and values, and through intentional efforts. In studies that compared the cultures of coeducational and single-sex schools, the role of "adolescent subculture," which valued physical beauty and heterosexual popularity, was a key factor. Studies indicated that this subculture

was strongest among boys in single-sex schools and lowest among girls in single-sex schools.

Professionals in Catholic Education

Kushner and Helbling (1995) conducted a survey of Catholic elementary school teachers in the United States on a variety of topics and compared responses to previous studies also sponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). The survey did include a few items about gay and lesbian people. Of Catholic elementary school teachers, 52.2% believed that a teacher in a Catholic elementary school should not be terminated if it is discovered that he or she is homosexual, while 34.6% indicated agreement that homosexuals should not be allowed to teach in Catholic schools. The vast majority (84.8%) agreed that Catholic elementary schools should have a "comprehensive sex education program." With the statement, "I think boys should be encouraged as girls are to be gentle and caring," 98.3% expressed agreement. Teachers were asked to rank in order elements that they believed were most important in Catholic schools on a number of topics. "Compassion," "An understanding of what it means to treat others justly," "Tolerance," and "A healthy self-concept" were ranked among the highest.

Harkins (1993) had conducted a similar study of Catholic elementary school principals. The majority (64%) of principals agreed that homosexuals should not be hired to teach in Catholic elementary schools. Males (73%) were more likely to take this position than females (62%). Those who were principals in inner-city schools were less likely to take this position (50%) than those in other schools (65.5%). Given a choice of 35 statements to select as the most important elements for Catholic elementary schools, the top two choices were, "There is a schoolwide emphasis on treating others with respect" (61.8%) and "Students know that the school cares about them" (60.2%).

In a 1984 study of Catholic secondary school teachers conducted by the NCEA, Benson and Guerra (1985) reported a number of interesting findings. Civil rights protection for homosexuals was supported by 44% of teachers. This was higher than the average support in the general adult Catholic population as compared with other studies. The majority (62%) of teachers believed that sexual relationships between two consenting adults of the same sex were "usually morally wrong" or "always morally wrong." The top characteristics that teachers felt Catholic schools should emphasize (out of 17 options) were "A healthy self-concept" (98%, most popular), "Compassion" (79%, second most popular), "A vibrant, mature religious faith" (72%, third most popular), "Tolerance" (69%, fourth most popular), and "Understanding and commitment to justice" (68%, fifth most popular). On an item asking teachers what are the most important teaching goals (out of 13 options), the most common answer was "Help students develop a compassion for other people" (82%).

METHOD

The survey instrument was slightly adapted from an instrument used in another study in 1990 (Maher, 1990). That instrument was field tested through a

focus group in its development. Slight changes in wording were made for the 1995 study based on results from the 1990 study. The instrument consisted of 16 statements paraphrased from Catholic magisterial documents on the topic of homosexuality. Respondents were asked to use a Lickert-type scale of five options: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *unsure*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. Respondents were also asked to indicate their sex, their age, if they graduated from a Catholic high school, and if they graduated from a coeducational or unisex high school.

The 16 statements were paraphrased from three magisterial documents, the *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics (Persona Humana)* from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1975), *To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life* from the United States Catholic Conference (USCC; 1976), and the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (Sacred Congregation, 1986). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) was not available at the time the instrument was originally developed, but the points of the survey items are reiterated there. The statements fall into three categories: "Nature and Morality of Homosexuality," "Rights of Gay and Lesbian People," and "Church Responsibilities to Gay and Lesbian People." These categories did not appear on the survey instrument itself. "Nature and Morality of Homosexuality" included four items that dealt with the magisterial teachings that homosexual activity is morally wrong, that homosexuality is a disorder, that homosexual orientation is not morally wrong, and that gay and lesbian people are not responsible for their orientation. "Rights of Gay and Lesbian People" included seven items that dealt with the magisterial teachings that gay and lesbian people are children of God possessing basic human rights including respect, friendship, justice, and freedom from verbal and physical abuse. "Church Responsibilities to Gay and Lesbian People" included five items that dealt with the magisterial teachings that the Church should treat gay and lesbian people with understanding, welcome them into the Church, provide pastoral support groups for them, assist in their integration into society, and speak out against the verbal and physical abuse they suffer.

Survey instruments were distributed in the fall of 1995 by campus mail service to incoming freshmen living in university residence halls within their first month of college. Respondents returned surveys by campus mail service to the office of the gay and lesbian student organization. The return rate was 11.6%; 103 surveys were returned out of 887 distributed.

RESULTS

Responses to the survey are presented in the following three tables, which are divided to demonstrate key patterns in responses. Table 1 distinguishes between male and female respondents. Table 2 distinguishes between respondents who graduated from Catholic high schools and respondents who graduated from non-Catholic high schools. Table 3 distinguishes between respondents who graduated from coeducational Catholic high schools and respondents who graduated from unisex Catholic high schools.

Table 1. Percentage of Catholic University Incoming Freshmen Expressing Agreement with Statements as Compared by Sex

Statement	Total N=103	Males N=32	Females N=71
Category: Nature and Morality of Homosexuality			
1. Homosexuality is a disorder.	16.5%	34.4%	8.7% *
2. Sexual acts between persons of the same sex are morally wrong.	40.7%	68.8%	28.2% *
3. Being sexually attracted to persons of the same sex is not morally wrong.	67.0%	46.9%	76.1% *
4. Gay and lesbian people are not responsible for their sexual preferences.	43.7%	25.0%	52.1% *
Category: Rights of Gay and Lesbian People			
5. All people (gay, lesbian, and heterosexual) are children of God.	87.0%	75.5%	91.3% *
6. Gay and lesbian people have basic human rights.	94.2%	81.3%	100% *
7. Gay and lesbian people deserve respect.	79.4%	74.2%	81.7% *
8. Gay and lesbian people deserve friendship.	95.0%	78.2%	100% *
9. Gay and lesbian people deserve justice.	92.1%	77.4%	100% *
10. Words such as "fag" and "dyke" as well as jokes about gay and lesbian people are not acceptable.	78.6%	46.9%	92.9% *
11. Physical violence against gay and lesbian people is not acceptable.	95.1%	84.4%	100% *
Category: Church Responsibilities to Gay and Lesbian People			
12. Church leaders should speak out against derogatory terms, jokes, and violence directed against gay and lesbian people when they occur.	70.6%	51.7%	78.9% *
13. The Church should treat gay and lesbian people with understanding.	75.2%	43.4%	88.8% *
14. The Church should have special programs for gay and lesbian people.	32.7%	18.8%	39.1% *
15. The Church should help gay and lesbian people move more into society.	42.6%	31.3%	47.8% *
16. Gay and lesbian people should have an active role in the Christian community.	63.4%	35.5%	75.7% *

For all tables, a "*" indicates a statistically significant difference in responses (Chi-Square $p < .05$).

Table 2. Percentage of Catholic University Incoming Freshmen Expressing Agreement with Statements as Compared Between Graduates from Catholic High Schools and Graduates from Non-Catholic High Schools

Statement	Catholic School N=44	Non-Catholic N=59	
Category: Nature and Morality of Homosexuality			
1. Homosexuality is a disorder.	14.3%	23.8%	*
2. Sexual acts between persons of the same sex are morally wrong.	34.1%	45.7%	*
3. Being sexually attracted to persons of the same sex is not morally wrong.	79.5%	57.6%	*
4. Gay and lesbian people are not responsible for their sexual preferences.	45.5%	42.4%	
Category: Rights of Gay and Lesbian People			
5. All people (gay, lesbian, and heterosexual) are children of God.	88.6%	85.7%	
6. Gay and lesbian people have basic human rights.	97.7%	91.6%	*
7. Gay and lesbian people deserve respect.	90.9%	87.9%	
8. Gay and lesbian people deserve friendship.	95.4%	91.5%	
9. Gay and lesbian people deserve justice.	93.2%	92.8%	
10. Words such as "fag" and "dyke" as well as jokes about gay and lesbian people are not acceptable.	77.2%	72.4%	
11. Physical violence against gay and lesbian people is not acceptable.	97.7%	93.2%	
Category: Church Responsibilities to Gay and Lesbian People			
12. Church leaders should speak out against derogatory terms, jokes, and violence directed against gay and lesbian people when they occur.	76.7%	66.1%	*
13. The Church should treat gay and lesbian people with understanding.	86.1%	67.3%	*
14. The Church should have special programs for gay and lesbian people.	45.4%	22.8%	*
15. The Church should help gay and lesbian people move more into society.	52.2%	35.1%	*
16. Gay and lesbian people should have an active role in the Christian community.	61.4%	56.1%	

For all tables, a "*" indicates a statistically significant difference in responses (Chi-Square $p < .05$).

Table 3. Percentage of Catholic University Incoming Freshmen Expressing Agreement with Statements as Compared Between Graduates from Coeducational Catholic High Schools and Graduates from Unisex Catholic High Schools

Statement	Catholic Coed N=21	Catholic Unisex N=23	
Category: Nature and Morality of Homosexuality			
1. Homosexuality is a disorder.	10.6%	17.3%	*
2. Sexual acts between persons of the same sex are morally wrong.	38.1%	30.4%	
3. Being sexually attracted to persons of the same sex is not morally wrong.	85.7%	73.9%	*
4. Gay and lesbian people are not responsible for their sexual preferences.	47.6%	39.1%	
Category: Rights of Gay and Lesbian People			
5. All people (gay, lesbian, and heterosexual) are children of God.	95.2%	82.6%	*
6. Gay and lesbian people have basic human rights.	100%	95.7%	*
7. Gay and lesbian people deserve respect.	95.2%	86.9%	*
8. Gay and lesbian people deserve friendship.	100%	91.4%	*
9. Gay and lesbian people deserve justice.	100%	87.0%	*
10. Words such as "fag" and "dyke" as well as jokes about gay and lesbian people are not acceptable.	85.7%	69.5%	*
11. Physical violence against gay and lesbian people is not acceptable.	100%	95.7%	*
Category: Church Responsibilities to Gay and Lesbian People			
12. Church leaders should speak out against derogatory terms, jokes, and violence directed against gay and lesbian people when they occur.	90.5%	68.2%	*
13. The Church should treat gay and lesbian people with understanding.	90.5%	81.8%	*
14. The Church should have special programs for gay and lesbian people.	57.1%	34.7%	*
15. The Church should help gay and lesbian people move more into society.	61.9%	43.4%	*
16. Gay and lesbian people should have an active role in the Christian community.	71.4%	73.9%	

For all tables, a "*" indicates a statistically significant difference in responses (Chi-Square $p < .05$).

Another important statistic in this study is the relationship of responses to the first two items and responses to all other items. The first two items could be called "homo-negative"; they deal with the Church's condemnation of homosexual activity and its judgement that homosexuality is a disorder. All other items could be called "homo-positive"; they deal with the moral neutrality of homosexual orientation, rights of gay and lesbian people, and the Church's pastoral responsibilities to gay and lesbian people. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient of $-.653$ exists between responses to the first two items and all other items on the survey. In short, this means that if a respondent agreed with the first two items, he or she was unlikely to agree with the remaining items, and vice versa. This effect can be seen in response differences; where one group responded with higher agreement on the first two items when compared to another group, they also responded with lower agreement on most or all of the remaining items.

While this finding is helpful in reading the tables, it also has significance in terms of Catholic educational outcomes. The magisterial teaching on a topic is expected to be consistent and whole. When belief in one part of a teaching results in disbelief in another part of the teaching, Catholic educators are left with a dilemma; what aspect of the teaching will the Catholic educator choose to emphasize with students? Even the American bishops have acknowledged the difficulty in this "split" in the teaching. "The distinction between *being* homosexual and *doing* homosexual genital actions, while not always clear and convincing, is a helpful and important one when dealing with the complex issue of homosexuality, particularly in the educational and pastoral arena" (USCC, 1991, p. 56).

Table 1 shows that males and females differed in responses to every item on the survey. Males gave homo-negative responses compared to females. The only strong level of agreement in Catholic teaching on the morality and nature of homosexuality came from females agreeing that homosexual attraction is not in itself morally wrong (76.1%). It is important to note, however, that nearly one out of four females did not agree with this statement. Strong majorities for both males and females expressed agreement to all statements regarding rights of gay and lesbian people with the exception of males responding to the unacceptability of verbal harassment (46.9%). There is need for caution here, however. While the majority of males agreed that physical violence is unacceptable (84.4%), it must be remembered that one out of six males did not agree with this statement. The category of Church responsibilities to gay and lesbian people showed low agreement overall. Strong majorities were shown in females that the Church should speak out against harassment of gay and lesbian people (78.9%), that the Church should treat gay and lesbian people with understanding (88.8%), and that gay and lesbian people should be active in the Christian community (75.7%). Only 51.7% of males agreed that the Church should speak out against harassment of gay and lesbian people. For all other statements regarding the Church's responsibilities to gay and lesbian people, agreement was less than 50% for males.

In comparing graduates of Catholic high schools to graduates of non-Catholic high schools, a significant difference was found in eight items. Non-

Catholic school graduates were more likely to agree that homosexuality is a disorder and that homosexual acts are morally wrong. Catholic school graduates were more likely to agree that homosexual attraction is not morally wrong and that gay and lesbian people have basic human rights. They were also more likely to agree with all statements regarding the Church's responsibility to gay and lesbian people. In general, graduates of Catholic high schools gave more homo-positive responses than graduates from non-Catholic high schools.

In comparing coeducational Catholic school graduates to unisex Catholic school graduates, a significant difference was found in 13 items. Graduates from unisex schools were more likely to agree that homosexuality is a disorder. Graduates from coeducational schools were more likely to agree that homosexual attraction is not morally wrong. They were also more likely to agree with all items regarding the rights of gay and lesbian people and the Church's responsibility to gay and lesbian people with the exception of the statement that gay and lesbian people should have an active role in the Christian community. In general, graduates of coeducational Catholic high schools gave more homo-positive responses than graduates of unisex Catholic high schools.

CONCLUSION

What are we teaching our students? Some may be proud that Catholic high school students appear to be less homophobic than students in non-Catholic high schools. This is certainly something to be proud of. Are we doing enough, however? Given that it appears that agreement with the Church's teaching against homosexual activity and the Church's teaching that homosexuality has a negative correlation with the Church's teaching that gay and lesbian people have rights that should be protected by the Church, what choices do Catholic educators face? In an all-male Catholic high school, if *only* 1 out of every 20 boys believes that violence against gays and lesbians may be acceptable, is that low enough? The killing of Matthew Shepard in 1998 did not require a majority in order to be carried out.

The American bishops (USCC, 1979, 1981, 1991) and the Congregation for Catholic Education (1983) have stated that the topic of homosexuality must be addressed in Catholic education. The American bishops have outlined the content of this in the schools by stating,

First and foremost, we support modeling and teaching respect for every human person, regardless of sexual orientation. Second, a parent or teacher must also present clearly and unambiguously moral norms of the Christian tradition regarding homosexual genital activity, appropriately geared to the age level and maturity of the learner. Finally, parents and other educators must remain open to the possibility that a particular person, whether adolescent or adult, may be struggling to accept his or her own homosexual orientation. (USCC, 1991, p. 56)

The USCC, NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family (1997) recommended that Church ministers accept gay and lesbian children and adults, welcome them in the faith community, provide pastoral services for them, and educate themselves on gay and lesbian issues. How are gay and lesbian students able to accept their identity in a school where many believe that the Church has no responsibility to meet their pastoral needs, some believe that they deserve to be called "fag" or "dyke," and even a small number believe that they should be beaten or worse?

REFERENCES

- Aitken, J. E. (1993, November). "Privileges": A student activity designed to increase interpersonal communication competence regarding gay and lesbian concerns. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Miami, FL.
- Barna Research Group. (2001, July 23). *Born again adults remain firm in opposition to abortion and gay marriage* [Press release]. Ventura, CA: Author.
- Benson, P. L., & Guerra M. J. (1985). *Sharing the faith: The beliefs and values of the Catholic high school teachers*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Black, K. N., & Stevenson, M. R. (1985). The relationship of self-report sex-role characteristics and attitudes toward homosexuality. In J. P. De Cecco (Ed.), *Bashers, baiters, and bigots: Homophobia in American society* (pp. 83-94). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Bleich, D. (1989). Homophobia and sexism as popular values. *Feminist Teacher*, 4(2-3), 21-28.
- Bochenek, M., & Brown, A. W. (2001). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Bohn, T. R. (1985). Homophobic violence: Implications for social work practice. In R. Schoenberg, R. S. Goldberg, & D. A. Shore (Eds.), *With compassion toward some: Homosexuality and social work in America* (pp. 91-114). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Catechism of the Catholic church*. (1994). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
- Congregation for Catholic Education. (1983). *Educational guidance in human love: Outlines for sex education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference.
- Convey, J. J. (1992). *Catholic schools make a difference: Twenty-five years of research*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- D'Antonio, W. V., Davidson, J. D., Hoge, D. R., & Meyer, K. (2001). *American Catholics: Gender, generation, and commitment*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- D'Augelli, A. R. (1989). Homophobia in a university community: Views of prospective resident assistants. *Journal of College Student Development*, 30(6), 546-552.
- D'Augelli, A. R., & Rose, M. L. (1990). Homophobia in a university community: Attitudes and experiences of heterosexual freshmen. *Journal of College Student Development*, 31(6), 484-491.
- Dowler, K. (1999). Intolerance, ignorance, and insensitivity: An examination of anti-gay attitudes and behaviours within a university population (Masters thesis, University of Windsor, Canada, 1999). *Masters Abstracts International*, 39(02), 340.
- Ellis, D. D. (1989). The impact of the AIDS epidemic stigma on homophobia and sex-role rigidity over time. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 1989). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 50(7), 1943A.
- Engstrom, C. M., & Sedlacek, W. (1997). Attitudes of heterosexual students toward their gay male and lesbian peers. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38(6), 565-576.
- Fee, J. L., Greeley, A. M., McCready, W. C., & Sullivan, T. A. (1981). *Young Catholics in the United States and Canada: A report to the Knights of Columbus*. New York: William H. Sadlier, Inc.

- Finn, P., & McNeil, T. (1987). *The response of the criminal justice system to bias crime*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Fledderjohann, D. D. (1996). Moral views of freshmen in selected Christian colleges (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, 1996). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 57(03), 1080A.
- Friend, R. A. (1993). Choices, not closets: Heterosexism and homophobia in schools. In L. Weis & M. Fine (Eds.), *Beyond silent voices: Class, race, and gender in United States Schools* (pp. 209-236). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (1999). *GLSEN's national school climate survey: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and their experiences in schools*. New York: Author.
- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (2001). *The national school climate survey 2001: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and their experiences in schools*. New York: Author.
- Goff, L. J. (1990). Sexual confusion among certain college males. *Adolescence*, 25(99), 599-614.
- Greeley, A. (1991, December 4). Live and let die. *The Christian Century*, 1124-1125.
- Gustavsson, N. S., & MacEachron, A. E. (1998). Violence and lesbian and gay youth. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 8(3), 41-50.
- Harkins, W. (1993). *Introducing the Catholic elementary school principal: What principals say about themselves, their values, their schools*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Herd, G., & Boxer, A. (1993). *Children of horizons: How gay and lesbian teens are leading a new way out of the closet*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Herek, G. M. (1985a). Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men: A factor-analytical study. In J. P. De Cecco (Ed.), *Bashers, baiters, and bigots: Homophobia in American society* (pp. 39-52). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Herek, G. M. (1985b). Beyond "homophobia": A social psychological perspective on attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. In J. P. De Cecco (Ed.), *Bashers, baiters, and bigots: Homophobia in American society* (pp. 1-22). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Hetrick, E. S., & Martin, A. D. (1987). Developmental issues and their resolution for gay and lesbian youths. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 14(1/2), 25-43.
- Hunter, J. (1990). Violence against gay and lesbian youths. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5(3), 295-300.
- Kane, J. P. (1987). A comparative study of Catholic and public school high school graduates on the differences in attitudes toward selected contemporary and moral issues (Doctoral dissertation, Seton Hall University, 1987). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 48(11), 2843A.
- Kapp, L. J. (1999). The political values and voting behavior of American Catholics: Changes and continuities from 1984 to 1998 (Doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1999). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 60(09), 3511A.
- Kite, M. E. (1985). Sex differences in attitudes toward homosexuals: A meta-analytic review. In J. P. De Cecco (Ed.), *Bashers, baiters, and bigots: Homophobia in American society* (pp. 69-82). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Kushner, R., & Helbling, M. (1995). *The people who work there: The report of the Catholic elementary school teacher survey*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- LaSalle, L. A. (1992, April). *Exploring campus intolerance: A textual analysis of comments concerning lesbian, gay, and bisexual people*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.
- Levant, R. F. (1992). The male role: An investigation of contemporary norms. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 14(3), 325-337.
- Mahan, V. A. J. (1998). Heterosexism within educational institutions: Coping efforts of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in West Texas (Doctoral dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1998). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59(11), 4056A.

- Maher, M. J. (1990). *Attitudes of Catholic youth regarding homosexuality and gay and lesbian people*. Unpublished masters thesis, University of Kansas, Lawrence.
- Manning, T., & Nicoloff, J. (1995). *Comparison of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians among students at Bowling Green State University* (University Report). Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University.
- McAuley, E. N., & Mattieson, M. (1986). *Faith without form: Beliefs of Catholic youth*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward.
- McClerren, E. L. (1992). An exploratory study concerning homophobia among clergy and its relationship to attitudes toward Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. (Doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1990). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52(11), 3833A.
- McCleskey, K. E. (1991). The effects of a special training program about homosexuality on the knowledge and attitudes of counselor trainees. (Doctoral dissertation, East Texas State University, 1991). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52(4), 1213A.
- McClintock, M. (1992). Sharing lesbian, gay, and bisexual life experiences. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 15(3), 51-55.
- McDevitt, T. M. (1987, August). *Attitudes toward individuals with AIDS and homosexuals*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, New York City.
- McNamara, P. H. (1992). *Conscience first, tradition second: A study of young American Catholics*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mohr, J. J., & Sedlacek, W. E. (2000). Perceived barriers to friendship with lesbians and gay men among university students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(1), 70-80.
- New York Governor's Task Force on Bias-Related Violence. (1988). *Final report*. Albany, NY: New York Division of Human Rights.
- Newman, B. S. (1985). Development of heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1985). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 47(05), 1881A.
- Papas, K. L. (2002). The study of the learning process of acceptance of gay and lesbian people. (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 2002). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 63(06), 2192.
- Pirtle, D. D. (1994). Changing prejudiced attitudes through exposure and interaction (Masters thesis, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 1994). *Masters Abstracts International*, 33(04), 1153.
- Plasek, J. W., & Allard, J. (1985). Misconceptions of homophobia. In J. P. De Cecco (Ed.), *Bashers, baiters, and bigots: Homophobia in American society* (pp. 23-38). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Plummer, D. (1999). *One of the boys: Masculinity, homophobia, and modern manhood*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Reinhardt, B. (1997, August). *Examining correlates of homophobia in heterosexual college students*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Chicago.
- Reinhardt, B. M. (1994). Effects of gay and lesbian speaker panels on self-report measures of individual homophobia. (Doctoral dissertation, Texas A & M University, 1994). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 55(10), 3143.
- Rey, A. M. (1997). Beyond high school: Heterosexuals' self-reported anti-gay/lesbian behaviors and attitudes. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 7(4), 65-84.
- Reynolds, A. J. (1989). Social environmental conceptions of male homosexual behavior: A university climate analysis. *Journal of College Student Development*, 30, 62-69.
- Russell, D. C., & Ellis, J. B. (1993, March). *Religiosity, gender, sex anxiety, and AIDS attitudes as they affect attitudes toward homosexuals*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA.
- Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. (1975). *Declaration on certain questions concerning sexual ethics (Persona Humana)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference.

- Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. (1986). *Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons*. Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference.
- Sepekoff, B. (1985). The development of an instrument to measure homophobia among heterosexual males. (Doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1985). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 47(01), 93A.
- Simoni, J. M. (1996). Pathways to prejudice: Predicting students' heterosexist attitudes with demographics, self-esteem, and contact with lesbians and gay men. *Journal of College Student Development*, 37(1), 68-78.
- Smith, R. L. (1994). *AIDS, gays, and the American Catholic church*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.
- Smith, T. W. (1999, January). *American Catholics* (National Opinion Research Center Report). Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Thurlow, C. (2001). Naming the "outsider within": Homophobic pejoratives and the verbal abuse of lesbian, gay and bisexual high school pupils. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24(1), 25-38.
- United States Catholic Conference. (1976). *To live in Christ Jesus: A pastoral reflection on the moral life*. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Catholic Conference. (1979). *Sharing the light of faith: National catechetical directory for Catholics of the United States*. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Catholic Conference. (1981). *Education in human sexuality for Christians: Guidelines for discussion and planning*. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Catholic Conference. (1991). *Human sexuality: A Catholic perspective for education and lifelong learning*. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Catholic Conference, NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family. (1997). *Always our children: Pastoral message to parents of homosexual children and suggestions for pastoral ministers*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
- Walters, A. S. (1990, February). *The influence of homophobia and knowledge of AIDS on the empathy for persons with AIDS*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Sex Education, Counselors, and Therapists, Arlington, VA.
- Watter, D. H. (1985). The relationship of teaching methodology, gender, and religiosity on the positive modification of attitudes toward homosexuality among heterosexuals in a college population. (Doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1985). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 47(01), 94A.
- Weinberg, G. (1972). *Society and the healthy homosexual*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Witlock, K. (1989). *Bridges of respect: Creating support for lesbian and gay youth*. (R. Kamel, Ed.). Philadelphia: The American Friends Service Committee.

Michael Maher has served as the chaplain to the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago since 1996. This article is the second of a series of four to present the research he conducted for his book, Being Gay and Lesbian in a Catholic High School: Beyond the Uniform. The first article, "Review of Research: Some Background on Addressing the Topic of Homosexuality in Catholic Education," appeared in Volume 6, Number 4 of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Michael Maher, University Ministry, Loyola University, 25 E. Pearson, Room 1461, Chicago, IL 60611.