



# Writing Themselves In

A National Report on the  
Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of  
Same-Sex Attracted Young People

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Lyn Harrison  
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Lesley Matthews  
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### **A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People**

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## Abbreviations

SSAY	Same-Sex Attracted Young People
STD	Sexually Transmissible Disease
HIV/AIDS	Human Immuno-deficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
IDU	Injecting Drug User
AFAO	Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations
VR	Virtual Reality
RL	Real Life

## Transcript Notation

Young people quoted in the body of this report have been supplied with a pseudonym by the authors, followed by their age. Where possible, a culturally appropriate name has been provided.

## Terminology

*Queer* Used in this report as a cover all term referring to 'non-heterosexual' sexuality or sex, and also as a generic term for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. Context will determine which usage is in effect. More specialised usages of the term queer (as outlined in Jagose, 1997), as well as its historical use as an abusive label for homosexuals are not intended.

*Hyperlink* An active address or link to an Internet site, accessible via computer mouse or keyboard stroke.

*URL* Internet address.

*Webmaster* Person responsible for creating and/or maintaining an Internet site.



## Quan wrote...

It's hard to pinpoint when I really started to believe I was gay. I remember when I was in about grade 4-5, I would watch 'Beyond 2000' for information on technological breakthroughs, etc. At night, I used to make believe that Simon Reeve (one of the presenters) was my father, snuggling up to him at night (like a baby). As far as I can recall, I didn't think there was anything majorly wrong with this, as this was sort of an 'imaginary friend' situation.

When I was growing up, I was looked after very well by my mum, dad, grandparents and three sisters. As a family, we are reserved and passive, being Asian and Catholic. In primary school, I would always feel more comfortable playing 'jacks', 'elastics' or some other game with the girls. I wasn't into football, cricket or basketball. As a result, I was teased by my male classmates, always being called a 'girl'. Looking back at those days, the insults were quite tame compared to secondary school. Whilst in primary school, I did 'like' some people (boys) more than others.

When I went into year 7, I realised that there were more guys around me (and a greater variety). If any time period can be pinpointed as the turning point, this would be it. By this age, I had heard and read a great deal about homosexuality, so I knew what was going on. I felt attracted to the 'cute' guys in my class and year level. I would try to be friends with those I really liked, but to them, I was just a fat Asian with glasses. Year eight was a terrible year. In my class, there were 4 or 5 people who were always teasing me, for whatever reason they could find. Mostly, it was the fact that I spoke like the 'stereotypical' gay. Up until year 10, I took everything so seriously. I let the teasing get to me. I soon learnt to laugh. When someone called me a name, I would agree and make a joke out of it. This way, they could never be satisfied in their quest to visibly hurt me. It took the 'sting' out of their attack.

Year 11 & 12 were the best years I have had. By this time, my fellow classmates and I knew each other much more and redefined our perceptions based on the whole person. I was considered as a kind and caring person who would lend a hand when needed. I like to believe that people were less 'scared' of me because they knew what (who) I was as a person. I wasn't teased anymore. At the beginning of year 12, I was having a discussion with a friend, who I trusted greatly. We were asked to come up with a few words of wisdom about ourselves so, me being me, I thought "why not say 'I am gay?'" Using my better judgement, I decided against this.

Now that I am at uni, I'm surrounded by guys. The thing is, I'm attracted to those I consider to be good-looking, even though I know nothing about them. Therefore, my whole life is based on lust at the moment. I consider myself to be ugly, I'm overweight, short and very much a loner. It seems very funny that I should be lusting after the cute and slim guys. I don't fit the stereotype for a 'wanted' gay male. I have next to no confidence in what I do, I feel uncomfortable around other people, I know I've got to do something about my weight, but I've got no willpower. At the moment, I'm happy with what I've done in this life, but at the same time, unhappy with what I've done. The problem is, I try so hard to be noticed and liked by those I'm attracted to, but who would want a fat ugly Asian?

(Quan, aged 19)

## **Executive Summary**

This report is about young people who are attracted to their own sex. The need for accurate baseline figures about young people of non-heterosexual orientation has developed as part of a general concern about the spread of the HIV virus into the adolescent population and a specific concern around these young people's emotional well-being. In the past three years, Australian adolescent research conducted by the National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University, has revealed that a significant minority of young people are not unequivocally heterosexual, with numbers ranging between 8 and 11% in recent research (Hillier et al, 1996, Lindsay et al, 1997).

Research which specifically targets this population has, until now, been conducted retrospectively and/or with people who identify as gay or lesbian recruited through gay and lesbian youth groups or the gay press. As researchers we know little about young people at pre-identity or pre-disclosure stages because their need for anonymity means they cannot be contacted through the usual channels.

The young people represented in this project were accessed through an advertising campaign in National magazines, via radio and the Internet . A survey was available on a website and from the Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmissible Diseases. Surveys were also inserted in the gay and street press.

These surveys sought information regarding sexual feelings and experiences as well as sexual and drug-taking practices in regard to STDs (including HIV) and related diseases. The source and adequacy of sexual health information for this group and their levels of support and experiences of abuse and discrimination were also elicited. The survey also charted young people's perceptions of their quality of life and emotional well-being. In addition, participants were also asked to write stories about their experiences, including when they first knew about their sexual feelings, their relationships with family and friends, and their hopes for the future.

Seven hundred and fifty young people aged between 14 and 21 participated in the study (average age of 18). Although there were no gender differences in numbers (49% male, 51% female), the young women were, on average, six months younger than the young men.

Forty-two percent of the sample were attending a University or TAFE, whilst 31% were at school. Those attending school were almost exclusively in the 14-18 age group (97% or 228), and there were

more female students than male (35% or 132 females, and 27% or 101 males). Outside of schooling (secondary and tertiary), participants were most likely to be in full-time employment. One fifth (20% or 72) of all male participants were working full-time, while female full-time workers represented only half of this number (10% or 36).

### ***Sexual Feelings***

Participants were asked about sexual attraction, sexual identity and how they felt about their sexuality. With regard to attractions, participants largely fell into two even groups: those who were exclusively same-sex attracted (46% ) and those attracted to both sexes (46%). A minority of young people were 'unsure' about their sexual attractions. Young women were far more likely than young men to be attracted to both sexes. Twice as many young men were only attracted to their own sex.

With regard to labelling their sexual identity, most respondents chose the categories 'gay/lesbian' (45%) or 'bisexual' (35%) with a sizeable minority selecting 'heterosexual' (9%). The remainder chose 'other' (8%) or 'unsure' (4%). Young men were more likely to identify as 'gay' than 'bisexual' and young women in each age group were more likely to identify as 'bisexual' than 'lesbian'. Two thirds of the group who said they were 'unsure' about their sexual identity were young women. The older age group (19-21 year olds) were more likely than the younger group (14-18 year olds) to identify as 'gay' or 'lesbian' (rather than 'bisexual').

When asked “How do you feel about your sexuality?”, one-third of the young people who answered said they felt 'great' and did not document problems. However, large numbers of those who said 'pretty good' and 'ok' were experiencing a lot of difficulties. Sixteen percent of those who responded to this question were feeling very negative and despondent.

### ***Treatment by others***

The survey asked about unfair treatment and any verbal and physical abuse suffered by participants because of their sexuality. Nearly one-third of participants believed they had been unfairly treated or discriminated against, because of their sexuality. Young men were more likely to be the target of verbal abuse, and 46% of participants overall stated they had been verbally abused. Thirteen percent of participants had been physically abused.

More young people (70%) were abused at school than anywhere else, including the streets, with other students being the perpetrators for 60% of abuse cases. Ten percent had been abused by family members. Verbal and physical abuse had a profound effect on these young people. It affected their feelings of safety at home and at school and was related to the use of drugs and a reduction in their sense of well-being.

Despite these high levels of abuse, there is evidence that many young people are creatively using limited resources, are thinking carefully about strategies to dismantle prejudice and are working for change.

### ***Sexual behaviour***

Nearly three-quarters of participants had had sex (73%). One-third (33%) had had sex with both sexes, nearly half (45%) reported they had had sex with guys only and 22% reported they had had sex with girls only.

More young women had had sex with both males and females, and nearly one-third of same-sex attracted young women had had sex only with males in the past year. Young women were more likely than young men to be same-sex attracted, while at the same time only heterosexually active, although a substantial number of young men were also heterosexually active.

Participants' reported use of condoms in heterosexual encounters was on a par with that of young people in the general population. About 50% of young men reported 'always' using protection during sex, regardless of the gender of their sexual partner. Nearly 70% of young women reported they 'never' used protection in same-sex encounters.

### ***Drug use***

Participants were asked about their use of a number of drugs, both legal and illegal. These young people were far more likely to be using a number of illegal drugs than young people in the general population. Eleven percent of participants stated they had injected drugs and more of those were young women. The younger injecting drug users (IDUs) reported higher levels of sharing of injecting equipment than the older users.

Thirty percent of participants had used party drugs, such as speed, ecstasy and LSD (acid). Sixty-two percent had smoked marijuana, more of whom were young women.

### ***Disclosure and support***

An item in the survey asked about disclosure to a range of people and the level of support received. One-fifth had never spoken to anyone about their sexuality. Although young people rarely sought support from professionals (doctors, youth workers, student welfare coordinators, teachers, counsellors), when they were consulted these people were found to be, on the whole, supportive.

Young people were slightly more likely to disclose to family members than professionals. Mothers and sisters were more likely to be chosen to confide in than fathers and brothers. One in three had spoken to their mothers. Two-thirds of those who had spoken to mum found her supportive and half who had spoken to dad found him supportive. Three-quarters of the young people who had told a sister found her supportive and two-thirds who had spoken to a brother had found him supportive.

Three-quarters of young people had spoken to a female friend and two-thirds a male friend. Three-quarters found their female friends supportive, and two-thirds found their male friends supportive.

Young people who had disclosed their sexuality to at least one person were no more likely to feel better about their sexuality or their lives than young people who had not disclosed to anyone. However, young people who disclosed and received support did feel better about their sexuality than those who did not.

### ***Sexuality education***

Information about heterosexual relationships and safe sex was easily accessed and readily available with most young people learning about this topic from family, media, friends and 70% from school. However, rural young people reported less access to heterosexual safe sex information from the media than young people living in metropolitan areas.

Information about gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex was far more difficult to access. Around half had received information about gay and lesbian relationships from the media and friends, one-tenth from the family and about 15% from school. At school, there was little information about gay or lesbian safe sex and the situation was even worse in the context of the family. Rural young people

were particularly disadvantaged compared with urban dwellers, with regard to access to gay information from all sources, and also access to information about gay relationships from school.

### **Implications for practitioners working with Same-Sex Attracted Young People (SSAY)**

This research has clear implications for all practitioners working with SSAY, particularly in the context of schooling.

Sexuality is a structuring force in the lives of all young people, and it is suggested that a framework which takes a whole school approach to supporting sexual diversity in all aspects of school life is needed. Given the high levels of sexuality based harassment identified in this project, consideration needs to be given to developing policy which explicitly addresses homophobia along with sexism, racism and other forms of violence. Equal Opportunity and Human Rights legislation provides a framework for policy development in this area. Young people who have suffered discrimination on the grounds of their sexuality should also be made aware of their legal rights under this legislation.

This research has pointed to a dearth of information available to students on sexual diversity, including an absence of basic knowledge about STD prevention for all but heterosexual sex. When seeking to address this gap, schools need to avoid discussing homosexuality only in the context of disease prevention.

This research has demonstrated that SSAY are heavily reliant on the media for information about queer sexuality. Media representations of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people often draw on a very limited range of negative and misleading stereotypes which can be interrogated within a socially critical curriculum which includes teaching and learning around sexual diversity. Programs need to be inclusive of *all* sexualities in order to ensure young people are not forced to seek information from less reliable sources i.e. media and friends.

This research has revealed that some young people who are exploring their sexuality will do so relatively unproblematically, whereas others will require intensive support. Some young people will clearly identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, whereas others will experience homosexual behaviours and attractions as having little meaning for future identity. A number of SSAY will be labelled as gay or lesbian by their peers, while others will remain invisible. It is important for practitioners to acknowledge the heterogeneity of young people's attractions and experiences, adopt a non-judgemental approach to sexuality, and avoid making assumptions.

Living a queer lifestyle is not a concept which translates easily across a number of non-Western cultural boundaries. SSAY from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds (CALDB) may need specific support related to this issue. The research also produced evidence that SSAY from rural areas were particularly isolated and face a more severe information deficit than their urban peers, and this issue needs attention at a local, State and National policy level.

Encouraging SSAY to 'come out' is not necessarily the best solution. This research has demonstrated that disclosure of sexuality only increases young people's well-being if the people they choose to come out to are supportive. Sixty-five percent of the young people participating in this research were living in the family home, many with a fear of violence or of becoming homeless should their sexuality be disclosed. What is important is providing a range of options: eg. access to gay, lesbian, bisexual adult role models; linkages to youth peer support groups and the opportunity to discuss sexuality in private and in confidence with a sympathetic and informed adult.

## **Introduction**

In this report we move the stories of Same-Sex Attracted Young People (SSAY) to centre stage in an effort to redress their invisibility, and to provide accurate information about their daily lives. The young people represented in this report struggle with issues concerning: family; friendship; school life; sexual identity; loyalty and betrayal; fears and hopes; ways of surviving; and in some cases, their attempts at suicide, yet they also reveal the more positive and affirming aspects of sexual diversity. They have provided a window to inner debates about the pros and cons of coming out, as well as fantasies and fears about people's reactions to that often hidden part of themselves, their sexuality. Within the following pages, a grim picture of the hostility and SSAY encounter often co-exists with creative and celebratory stories of resistance.

Adolescence is depicted in popular culture and experienced by many young people and their families as a time of turmoil, partly because of perceptions of the range of risks and dangers that need to be safely negotiated (Leeming, Dwyer & Oliver, 1996). Consequently, much has been written about the importance of a positive affirming home and social life for young people, and we as a community like to think that we provide this. It is within supportive environments that young people learn about independence, self-worth, skills for the future and intimacy in relationships.

However, those who experience same-sex attraction are far less visible than young heterosexuals and are less likely to feel affirmed and supported throughout their teenage years or to have access to positive discourses in their peer culture about sexual difference. Hass (1979) noted that 11% of young women and 14% of young men aged 15 to 18 have had at least some homosexual experience, whether or not they associate this experience with 'being' homosexual. Often young people feel embarrassed, guilty or anxious about what meanings this holds regarding their future sexual identity. Condemnation, abuse, or dismissal of attractions and behaviours with the same sex as a 'phase' may prevent young people seeking help when this is needed.

Adolescent theorists have also pointed to the many ways in which growing up gay, lesbian or bisexual can be a particularly lonely and stressful time in comparison with the experiences of other minority youth (Martin and Hetrick, 1988, Savin-Williams, 1990). Young people who are members of racial or religious minority groups, most often share their status with their families and there is always that opportunity for affirming their identity. However, this is almost never the case for SSAY whose



parents are overwhelmingly likely to be heterosexual. Telljohann and Price noted this when they wrote:

Thus the homosexual [and lesbian or bisexual] youth grows up without the sense of "us" versus "them" which is the essence of group identity afforded other minorities....Instead the gay youth is socialised into values and beliefs discordant with their self definition. (1993: 42)

Young people who are attracted to the 'wrong' sex often find they are forced to choose between two ways of living their lives, neither of which necessarily promotes emotional or psychological well-being. The first is a life in a shadowy world of silence and denial in which 'passing as normal' requires a constant monitoring of every word and deed. The second road of disclosure means risking rejection and the potentially negative reactions of friends, family and the community. Despite the popularised view of the positive social and psychological dimensions of coming out, research has demonstrated that disclosure in itself does not necessarily enhance well-being (Savin-Williams, 1990).

It is not uncommon for young people to be rejected by the family when disclosures about sexuality are made, and lesbian, gay and bisexual young people have been found to represent a higher than expected proportion of the homeless youth population (Hillier et al., 1997; Irwin, Winter, Gregoric & Watts, 1995). SSAY may also be disadvantaged because of the lack of positive role models and information about queer sexuality at home and in the school community. Because of widespread discrimination, few gay and lesbian teachers are prepared to be open about their sexuality, or to pass on lesbian and gay friendly information (Jennings, 1994). Moreover, in sexuality education classes, gay and lesbian issues are rarely afforded the coverage given to heterosexual issues, leaving the real danger that these adolescents may be ill-informed about sexual health (Cranston, 1992, Uribe & Harbeck, 1992).

Research conducted in the United Kingdom, the U.S.A. and Australia attests to the greater likelihood that SSAY will turn to alcohol and other drugs, as a way of alleviating the pain often associated with these attractions (Sanford, 1989). Further to this, in recent years there has been mounting research evidence which demonstrates a link between homosexuality and suicide, particularly among young men (Remafedi et al., 1997; Bagley and Tremblay, 1997; Rotheram-Borus et al., 1994; D'Augelli and Hershberger, 1993). Several small Australian studies have supported the findings of this largely U.S. centric body of work on youth suicide (Fordham, 1998; Emslie, 1996; Brown, 1996).

The need for accurate baseline figures about young people of non-heterosexual orientation has developed as part of a general concern about the spread of the HIV virus into the adolescent population and a specific concern around these young people's sense of emotional well-being. In the

past three years, Australian adolescent research conducted by the National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University, has revealed that a significant minority of young people are not unequivocally heterosexual with numbers ranging between 11% in recent rural research (Hillier et al, 1996) and 8-9% in a large national survey of over 3,000 senior secondary students (Lindsay et al, 1997). Research which specifically targets this population has, until now, been conducted retrospectively and/or with people who identify as gay or lesbian, recruited through gay and lesbian youth groups or the gay press. As researchers we know little about young people at pre-identity or pre-disclosure stages because their need for anonymity means they cannot be contacted through the usual channels.

### **Aims of the research**

The research was conducted with the following aims in mind:

- To document levels of sexual and drug risk-taking by SSAY in regard to STDs (including HIV) and related diseases.
- To investigate the adequacy of a number of potential sexual health information resources.
- To document sources and levels of support available to SSAY in the course of their daily lives.
- To document experiences of verbal and physical discrimination and abuse.
- To chart perceptions of quality of life and emotional well-being.
- To gather the personal stories of this group with a view to having their voices heard for change.

**Jim wrote...**

My childhood up until I reached high school was pretty good. I wasn't sporty or out going, but I had a couple of close friends and I enjoyed doing the stuff you do when you live in the country, yabbing, swimming in the river etc. I loved reading and I was top of the class academically.

When I entered high school everything changed. On my first day there a boy who was from out of town who decided because I wasn't wearing the same shoes as everyone else that I would be his target to pick on. From that point my life very quickly became a nightmare. This boy was a natural leader and he soon had those whom mattered in the school pecking order on his side and against me. Fairly quickly his focus came around to my sexuality. I'd known at that point I liked men, even fantasised about them but hadn't realised what it really was...When the name calling started I then started to hate myself because although I was denying everything they said I knew it was probably true. I believed at the time it was evil and sinful and dirty and people like that would die from AIDS. I didn't want to be a faggot, but every day other kids were reminding me that I was (whether or not they believed it themselves).

I never felt I could discuss this with any adults including my teachers. The only time I ever told anyone that I was having problems was when I had a nose bleed that wouldn't stop (another kid had hit me in the locker rooms and the teacher had seen him). The teacher had told me to forget about it.

When I finally decided to end it all by swallowing tablets, that's when I was able to get some help. I talked to a counsellor who arranged for me to get away from the situation. I moved out of home into a refuge and started school in the city. Things were ok here but the other kids at the refuge scared the shit out of me sometimes. They were pretty wild and expected me join in with them. I started smoking cigarettes, tried drinking alcohol and smoking dope...I must admit I ended up enjoying the freedom I had in this situation, perhaps too much, and went wild myself for a time. In the end I was failing at my new school, and really didn't care... I ended up running away and wound up living in the streets for about 6 months.

To cut a long story short, I ended up getting myself together and with help from a fantastic woman who took me in, going back to high school and getting my HSC and now I'm studying Economics at Uni...

These days I'm in a relationship with a guy who I've been seeing for about a year. I'm fairly confident about my sexuality and don't worry about people finding out, although I can be nervous if I feel it's necessary to tell people I don't know. This is mostly the case with people of whom I may feel physically threatened, but has diminished since I began taking karate lessons as part of my fitness regime. As I get to a point where I feel I could physically defend myself if the need arose (I hope it never does) I've developed more confidence in being myself in any company.

(Jim, aged 18)

## **Methodology**

### **Project reference group**

A reference group was convened to guide the research team in developing the methodology and ensuring that the project remained relevant to the needs of same-sex attracted youth. Government and community representatives were invited in accordance with their expertise in working with young people and their specific knowledge of sexuality issues.

In the initial stages of the project, the reference group provided particular support in: developing the recruitment strategy for the project; honing the questionnaire design; providing feedback on publicity materials and piloting the questionnaire with young people.

### **Questionnaire design and development**

Data was gathered for the project by means of a short questionnaire designed to generate a mixture of forced-choice and open-ended responses from young people, and was therefore qualitative and quantitative.

### ***Format***

The questionnaire was made available in 'hard copy' and electronic formats. The hard copy version could be folded and sealed so it did not require a stamp if posted in Australia.

The electronic version, apart from slight changes in formatting, was identical to the hard copy version and was produced on the La Trobe University World Wide Web site as a 'mail-back form'. Young people could complete the survey anonymously 'on line' via the World Wide Web then electronically mail it to the research team's alias e-mail address. To ensure anonymity was maintained, the mail-back process was configured to conceal participants' e-mail addresses.

### ***Terminology regarding sexuality***

Sexuality is a complex phenomenon, and the questionnaire was designed to explore that complexity. For example, using the phrase 'same-sex attracted' was felt to be inclusive of a range of 'non-heterosexual' behaviours, feelings and identity labels among young people. Particular care was taken not to make the assumption that same-sex *attractions, feelings* and *behaviours* necessarily lead to gay, lesbian, bisexual or other *identities*. The huge body of post-HIV/AIDS research in this country has clearly established that same-sex desire (whether physical or emotional) and behaviour does not necessarily lead to a more holistic sense of oneself as 'being' homosexual, gay or lesbian, bisexual etc. Rather, the nature of the links between many different facets of young people's sexuality was sought.

Where respondents were asked about sexual identity, the options given were 'heterosexual', 'gay', 'lesbian', 'homosexual', 'bisexual' and 'other'. The 'other' category allowed for self-generated labels rather than requiring that young people slotted themselves into the labels we had chosen.

### ***Content***

The questionnaire was divided into nine subject categories:

- 'About You' which requested demographic information;
- 'About your Sexual Feelings'; which contained questions about sexual attractions, identities and general feelings about being same sex attracted;
- 'How do People Treat You', where young people could outline their experiences of abuse or discrimination and places in which these occurred;
- 'About your Sexual Behaviours' which sought information about sexual activity and safe sex;
- 'About your Drug Use' where items about alcohol, injecting, and use of other substances was gauged;
- 'About your Family and Friends', where young people were asked about disclosure to and levels of support from various individuals in their lives;
- 'Your General Well Being' which contained four items from an adapted scale of well-being;
- 'Sex Education Information' where respondents could report sources of information regarding sexuality, as well as ask questions of their own they would like answered, and finally;
- Young people were asked to tell their story about their experiences:

We want to know about your own story including when you first knew about your sexual feelings, your experiences with friends and family, your good times and your bad, and your hopes for the future.

Internet respondents were provided with a text box where this question could be completed on-line. Postal respondents were asked to enclose their stories within the survey booklet on a separate sheet of paper.

### ***Piloting***

The questionnaire was piloted with groups of same-sex attracted young people accessed via the project Reference Group in order to ensure that language used was clear and appropriate for the target audience, and questions were unambiguous.

### **Ethics**

The questionnaire and research process conform to the ethical guidelines provided by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee. Contact details for a nationally- accessible youth support service were made available to all questionnaire participants. Information obtained remains confidential, and where necessary, personal details have been changed in the writing-up process to protect anonymity.

### **Sampling**

The target group nominated for this project was young men and women between the ages of 14 and 21. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the difficulties in reaching a potentially stigmatised and emotionally vulnerable population of young people, it was considered important and ethical that participants self-select. The sample generated is not random, and no claim is made that results can be generalised to the broader population of young people.

Every attempt was made to ensure that young people in all states and territories of Australia were sampled in proportion to the general population, with attention paid to attracting equal numbers of young men and women; and sizeable numbers of young people from both rural and urban settings.

## **Recruitment**

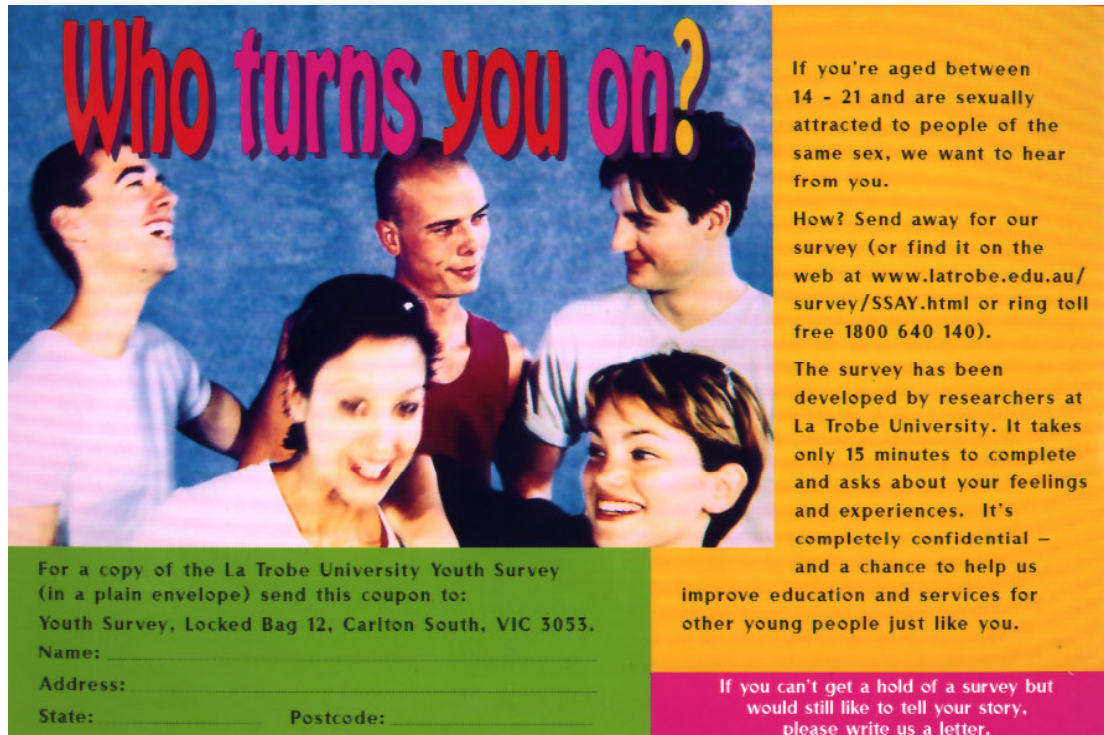
A priority established for the research was to make contact with young people who did not currently identify with the queer community and who were isolated from support services. Following on from this, publicising the project through the mainstream youth press was the favoured strategy.

Young people were recruited initially via national youth magazines and the Internet. The more popular youth magazines and free music press are known to attract a diverse socio-economic cross section of youth. The Internet was favoured as an initial recruitment strategy given that it provides anonymity.

Recruitment commenced in January 1998, with the publication of the survey on the website; and continued through to the end of May 1998, at which time the web page was closed, the toll-free number was disconnected, and mail back of survey booklets ceased.

### *Youth Press*

Coupons appeared in the March 1998 issues of *Dolly*, *Juice* and *Smash Hits* magazines, under the caption 'Who turns you on':



**Who turns you on?**

If you're aged between 14 - 21 and are sexually attracted to people of the same sex, we want to hear from you.

How? Send away for our survey (or find it on the web at [www.latrobe.edu.au/survey/SSAY.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/survey/SSAY.html) or ring toll free 1800 640 140).

The survey has been developed by researchers at La Trobe University. It takes only 15 minutes to complete and asks about your feelings and experiences. It's completely confidential – and a chance to help us improve education and services for other young people just like you.

For a copy of the La Trobe University Youth Survey (in a plain envelope) send this coupon to:  
Youth Survey, Locked Bag 12, Carlton South, VIC 3053.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
State: \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

If you can't get a hold of a survey but would still like to tell your story, please write us a letter.

The coupons directed young people to the Internet address (URL) for the electronic questionnaire, provided a nationally accessible toll-free phone number and gave a postal address for La Trobe University. This allowed participants three options: going straight to the survey website; calling up and having a survey sent out ; or writing in to obtain the hard copy version.

Questionnaires were also placed as inserts into *X-Press* ; a free music-oriented youth magazine available in Western Australia.

### *Internet*

Extensive networking and liaison was undertaken on the Internet in order to ensure the questionnaire website was publicised to as wide an audience of young people as possible. Generalist and queer specific youth sites were targeted. The World Wide Web search engine *Yahoo* placed a link to the survey site in their 'Picks of the Week', which provided a great deal of exposure, as did a project



description and front page link from the Australian Broadcasting Commission's youth radio station *Triple J*.

A number of organisations were contacted by e-mail and consented to placing a hyperlink from their respective websites to the survey URL on the La Trobe University website. These, along with mailing lists used to publicise the survey appear at Appendix One.

### ***Further recruitment***

A second-stage recruitment strategy targeted young people already linked in with the gay community, queer friendly support services, university campuses and youth agencies:

- A questionnaire and project description appeared in the February and March 1998 newsletters issued by youth peak bodies in Victoria, NSW, Queensland, Northern Territory, ACT, South Australia and Tasmania;
- Sexuality officers on key University campuses in each state and territory were approached, and all consented to make surveys available to students in Orientation and Sexuality weeks;
- Surveys were included in a mass-mailout organised through the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO);
- Surveys were also placed as inserts in the following queer community publications: *Brother Sister* magazine in Brisbane; the *Sydney Star Observer* and *GT* magazine in Adelaide;
- Finally, the principal researcher was interviewed on *Triple J*.

### **Data analysis**

A number of statistical comparisons are made in this report, which include t-tests and chi-square analyses. All significant differences reported are significant at  $p < .05$ . To ensure clarity and readability for a diverse audience, the details of these analyses do not appear in the report.

## 1. Participant Profile

Dear La Trobe Uni,

Thank you for this survey because I have never been able to talk to anyone about this before. I am enclosing a sticky label with my name and address on it. I hope this helps you out a bit...

(Greg, aged 15)

### Response rates

It is impossible to calculate response rates for the project as there is no way of knowing how many of the young people exposed to the questionnaire were eligible members of the target group.

Recruitment via the Internet was the most successful method of accessing participants (see Table 2). Overall, the response to the advertisements in the youth press was disappointing. Only 266 people Australia-wide, 175 of whom were young women, sent in or phoned to have a survey posted out. Only 160 completed surveys arrived in response to a magazine coupon. Eleven questionnaires were returned marked 'Not known at this address'.

### Invalid questionnaires

Several hundred invalid surveys were received, largely due to the anonymous nature of the recruitment process. With the advent of the link from the 'Yahoo' search engine, the overseas audience for the survey greatly expanded. Large numbers of otherwise valid questionnaires from young people outside of Australia were received, which unfortunately had to be discarded. Some of the reply-paid questionnaires were sealed and posted by ineligible members of the public who came across them in the West Australian free press and the gay press in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide. A sizeable number of young people who claimed no same-sex experience or attractions and identified as heterosexual submitted surveys electronically. In many instances, the motive for this was to demonstrate support for same-sex attracted peers. In a small number of cases, homophobic or obscene intentions appeared to be motivating completion of the questionnaire.

<b>Reason invalid</b>	<b>Via Internet (n)</b>	<b>Via mail (n)</b>
Participant too old	37	32
Participant too young	8	-
Heterosexual on <i>all</i> sex. variables	45	56
Abusive response	5	7
Blank, illegible or incomplete response	23	11
Overseas respondent	309	2
Arrived after closing date	-	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>427</b>	<b>136</b>

Invalid surveys n = 563 Total surveys received (valid and invalid) n = 1312

**Table 1.** Invalid surveys

### Source of valid responses

Participants were asked where they found out about the project. The majority of young people (55%) cited the Internet (including e-mail and chat rooms). Finding out about the survey in a youth magazine was the next most popular response (21%). Seven percent of participants heard publicity about the project on the radio, with the remainder stating they found out via a friend, a community organisation, their university campus or from another undisclosed source.

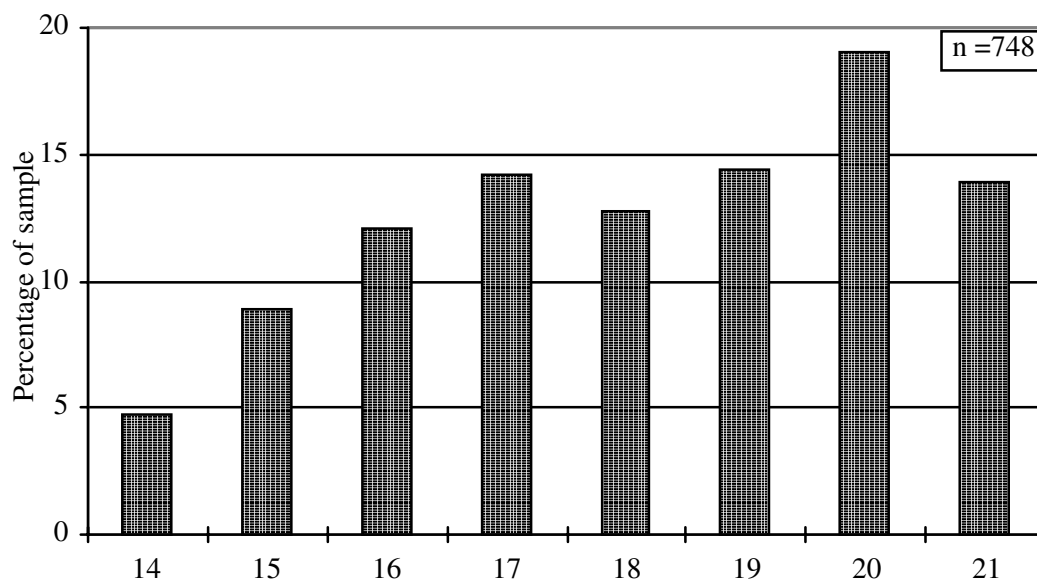
<b>Where did you hear about the survey?</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Internet	415	55%
Magazine	160	21%
Radio	53	7%
Community organisation	39	5%
University campus	28	5%
A friend	27	4%
Other	25	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>747</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2.** Sources of knowledge about the survey.

## Age

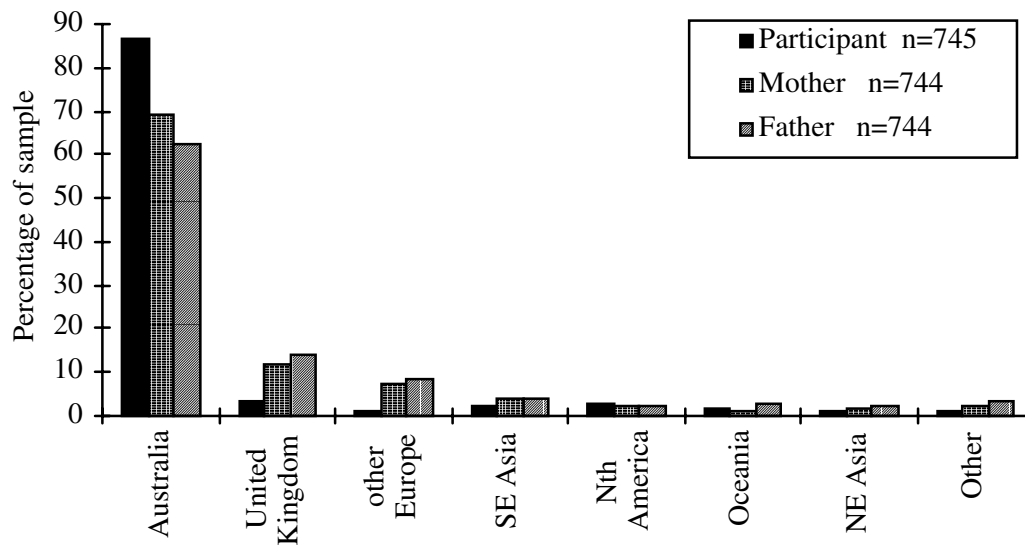
Participants recruited ranged between 14 and 21, with twenty year olds accounting for almost one-fifth of the sample (19%) and 14 year olds one-twentieth (5%). The sample was skewed towards the older age groups. The average age of participants was 18 years, and for the purposes of analysis this was used as the mid-point with which to divide the sample into a younger and older age group. Although there were no gender differences in numbers (49% male, 51% female), the young women were, on average, six months younger than the young men.

**Figure 1.** Age of participants



## Participants' country of birth

Most young people (87% or 646) and their parents (69% of mothers and 63% of fathers) were born in Australia. Of the 13% born elsewhere, the majority had emigrated from the United Kingdom and Ireland, other parts of Europe or South East Asia. The 'other' category was divided equally between Central and South America, South Asia, Middle East and North Africa and Africa. This is slightly less than the general population figure of sixteen percent of young people born overseas (McLennan, 1997). Two percent of the sample (14 people) were of Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander descent. This percentage is just below the 1996 census figure of 2.7% of 15-24 year olds of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent in the general population (McLennan, 1997).

**Figure 2.** Country of birth of participants and their parents.

### State or territory of residence

Every attempt was made to recruit numbers of participants from each state and territory, in proportion with numbers of young people in the general population of Australia.

State/Territory	Study Sample %	General youth Population %
New South Wales	28%	33%
Victoria	24%	25%
Queensland	17%	19%
Western Australia	16%	10%
South Australia	8%	8%
Tasmania	3%	2%
ACT	2%	2%
Northern Territory	1%	1%

Sample n=740

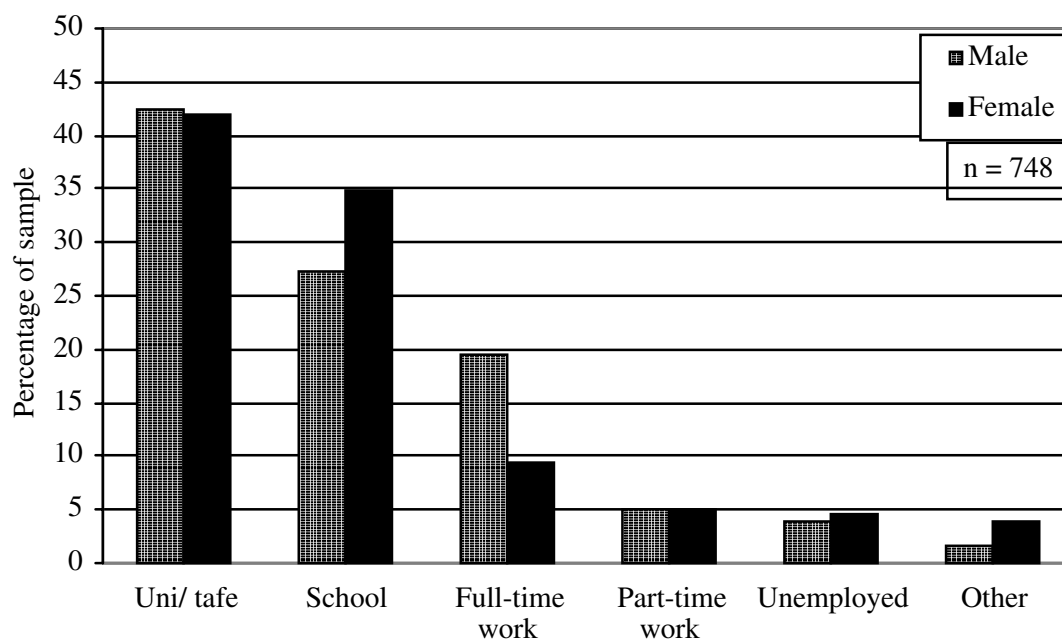
**Table 3.** State/Territory of residence of participants.

According to the national postcode ranges, 78% of participants were living in metropolitan areas and the remaining 22% of the sample were from rural areas. This indicates that young people from rural areas are over-represented in the sample population (McLennan, 1997).

### Education and work status

The question ‘What are you mainly doing at the moment?’ revealed that almost three quarters of the sample (73% or 549) were attending an educational institution. Forty-two percent were attending a University or TAFE, whilst 31% were at school. Those attending school were almost exclusively in the 14-18 age group (97% or 228), and there were more female students than male (35% or 132 females, and 27% or 101 males). The significant difference between numbers of females and males still at school can be attributed to some extent to the observed age difference between male and female respondents. Outside of schooling (secondary and tertiary), participants were most likely to be in full-time employment. One fifth (20% or 72) of all male participants work full-time, while female full-time workers represented only half of this number (10% or 36).

**Figure 3.** Participants' main school/work activity at the moment.



## Accommodation

The majority of young people were living in the family home (65%), or in a shared flat or house (17%). Less popular accommodation options included: living on own (5%); at a girlfriend/boyfriend's house (4%); at a relative's home (3%), or in a boarding house or dormitory (3%). Less than two percent of the sample were living in a refuge or on the streets. There were no gender differences with regard to living circumstances, however, as would be expected, the younger age group were more than twice as likely to be living at home (67% compared with 33% of 19-21 year olds).

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### Nina wrote...

When I was seven, my parents separated and I swapped from house to house with my brother every week. Some time after that, my mother entered into a relationship with a woman. They moved in together (the 3 of us with my mum's partner and her son), and remain together till this day. They recently celebrated their 10 year anniversary. So, you see, all but a few of my memories are of growing up in a home full of great love and devotion, of openness and self expression. This was a great gift (one that few of my friends can boast) that my mothers gave to me.

I went out with boys quite actively and didn't really consciously think a lot about it. I followed the trend at that stage in most things. I never found those 'relationships' (if one could call them that!!) as rewarding and as tangible as any platonic friendship I had with girls although I had great guy friends too. I realised at age 15 that I was successively 'falling' for more and more unattainable guys. Funny that. I was getting more involved in the gay community through social events with my mum and I was becoming closer to her friends, too, as I grew up more, and knowing more about their lives.

And my gorgeous best friend Tina and I at that age were very close. People fell for her all over the place. We spoke about everything. She knew about my mum, so the topic came up quite a bit. We began this game sort of thing of touching each other casually in public more often than necessary and teasing each other about secretly having a relationship. She loved it. I loved it, but for different reasons I later found out.

Effectively, she started a rumour. That's when I started getting shit at school for being a dyke. She got nice rumours, because she was hot, she was a model and she had a boyfriend. I got dumped, bullied and was still single. She changed schools. We drifted. I never told my mum about her, nor about the other emerging feelings that came up everywhere in my life.

I wanted to talk to my mum about all this SO much, but just couldn't. My close friends helped out, I was happy, but still it bothered me and still does that I can't tell mum. Maybe it's simply that I don't want her to ever be disappointed if I don't live up to any safe idealistic label she'll automatically want to give me despite herself. Just plain gay, like her. It's not me right now. We all want labels - me too usually. I know I'm not straight, and I guess I'm probably bi. queer. I dream of guys and girls, I check out both sexes, blah blah blah. I have the potential to love anyone. Right now, I'm happy, I'm me and I love someone who happens to be male. So label me, but right now I don't feel the need to label myself. At this time of my life, I'm not just plain anything. (Nina, aged 20)

## 2. About Your Sexual Feelings

I think that it's because we're all expected to be hetero and being gay is unusual or weird or wrong that makes it much harder to come to a decision. I want to not have feelings for girls, so that I don't become the unusual or weird or wrong one, but I know they make me feel happier to be with. I just wish the whole gay or hetero - you must be one or the other - thing didn't exist. (Jodie, aged 16)

### Key Findings

- Young women were far more likely than young men to be attracted to both sexes. Twice as many young men were only attracted to their own sex.
- Young men were more likely to identify as 'gay' than 'bisexual'.
- Young women were more likely to identify as 'bisexual' than 'lesbian'.
- Two thirds of the group who said they were 'unsure' about their sexual identity were young women.
- The older age group (19-21 year olds) were more likely to identify as 'gay' or 'lesbian' (rather than 'bisexual') than the younger age group (14-18 year olds).
- Young women in each age group were significantly more likely to identify as 'bisexual' than young men.
- When asked 'How do you feel about your sexuality?', one third of the young people who answered said they felt 'great' and did not disclose problems. However, large numbers of those who said 'pretty good' and 'ok' were experiencing a lot of difficulties. Sixteen percent of those who responded to this question were feeling very negative and despondent.

### Sexual attractions

In Section two of the questionnaire, young people were asked about sexual attractions and about how they labelled their sexuality.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between these two aspects of sexuality is particularly important given that research has confirmed a human capacity for varying degrees of same-sex attractions and sexual activity, which may or may not result in self-identity as a homosexual. (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953; Savin-Williams, 1990). Recent Australian HIV/AIDS research with populations of adult men (e.g. Bartos et al., 1993) has confirmed that homosexual behaviours do not necessarily give

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<sup>1</sup> Questions regarding sexual behaviour and safe sex were grouped together in a later section of the survey.



rise to 'gay' identity as such, in terms of the meanings which individuals attach to their attractions and behaviours.

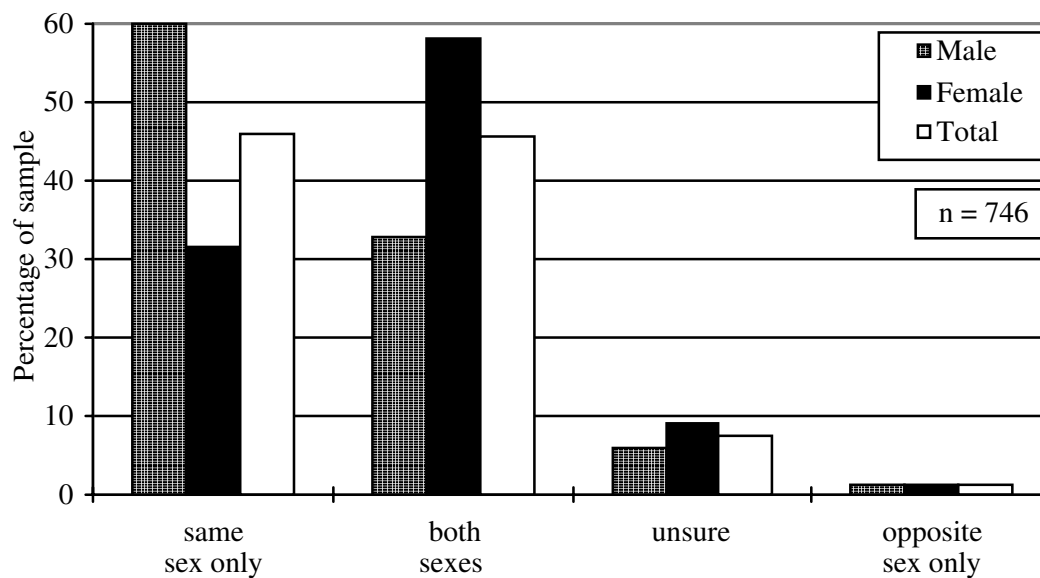
When asked to describe feelings of sexual attraction at the moment, participants largely fell into two even groups: those who were exclusively same-sex attracted (46% ) and those attracted to both sexes (46%). A minority of young people were unsure about their sexual attractions (7%), and an additional one percent were only attracted to the opposite sex <sup>2</sup> (see Figure 4).

Gender differences were highly significant with regard to this question. Sixty percent of young men yet only 32% of young women stated they were exclusively attracted to their own sex. The reverse was true of respondents attracted to both sexes. Young women were also more likely to be 'unsure' of their attractions, in that they accounted for 61% of this group. Equal and relatively small numbers of young people of both sexes claimed exclusively heterosexual attractions (1%).

There was a significant, yet weaker correlation with regard to age of participant and sexual attractions, with a trend towards a decrease in attraction to both sexes, as age increased. In other words, participants in the 14-18 age group were significantly more likely to claim attractions to both sexes than those in the 19-21 group. There were, however, significantly more young women than young men in the 14-18 group.

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<sup>2</sup> These young people indicated 'non-heterosexuality' in other questions, e.g. with regard to their behaviours or fantasies.

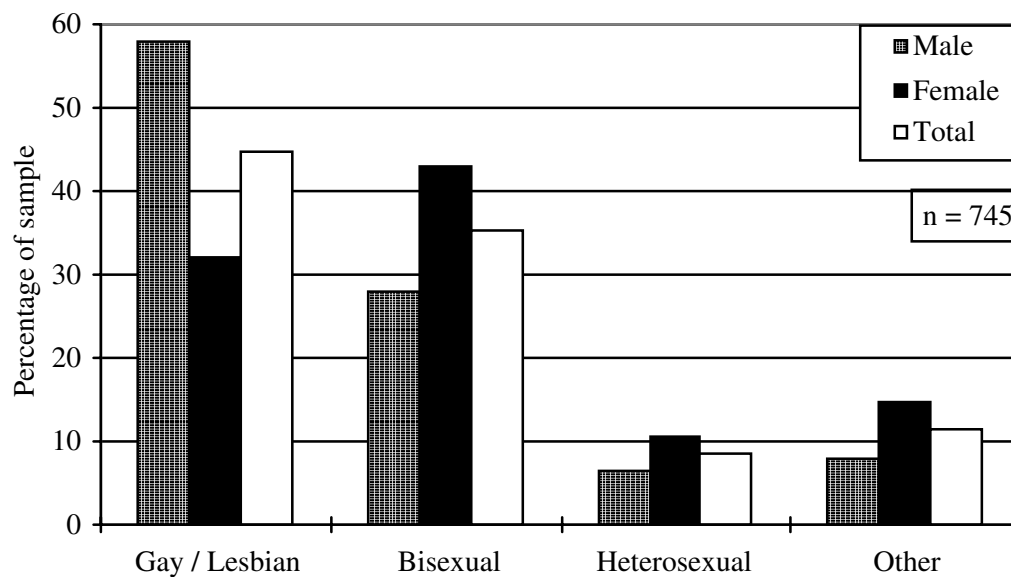
**Figure 4.** Sexual attractions.

### Sexual identity

The next question asked participants to consider how they labelled their sexual identity.

According to Savin-Williams (1989), sexual 'identity' represents a consistent, enduring self-recognition of the meanings attached to sexual orientation and sexual behaviour. The three aspects may be only somewhat or highly correlated. Troiden (1989) noted there are three components to a sexual identity: self-perceptions; perceptions of others; and presentation to others. He also believed sexual identities to be most fully realised when those three aspects coincided for the individual. However, for other writers such as Fuss (1991), the whole notion of a fixed 'sexual identity' is problematic. In this formulation, identity is perceived as more of an ever-emergent phenomenon, characterised by flux.

Most participants chose the categories 'gay/lesbian' (45%) or 'bisexual' (35%) with a sizeable minority selecting 'heterosexual' (9%). The remainder chose 'other' (8%) or 'unsure' (4%). Significant gender differences were also observed with regard to these responses. Following a similar pattern to the question on sexual attraction, young women were much more likely to identify as 'bisexual' than young men (61% vs 39%). Young women also accounted for: 63% of the heterosexual identity category (compared with 37% of young men); were more likely to state they were 'unsure' about identity; more likely to nominate the 'other' category and, more likely to prefer an alternative, self-generated identity label to those on offer (e.g. 'queer').

**Figure 5.** Labelling of sexual identity.

There was a correlation between age and sexual identity, which followed a similar pattern to the question on sexual attraction: i.e. an observed trend towards an exclusively 'gay' or 'lesbian' identity in the older age group. Participants in the younger age group were more likely to identify as 'heterosexual' or 'bisexual' than those in the older age group (see Figure 6).

These data support a trend away from bisexuality among older respondents toward a self-label as gay or lesbian. A little more than half of the 19-21 year olds identified as exclusively gay or lesbian (51%), and older respondents were more likely than the younger group to select the 'other' category. In the space provided on the questionnaire, a number of participants (of all ages) elaborated on their choice of 'other':

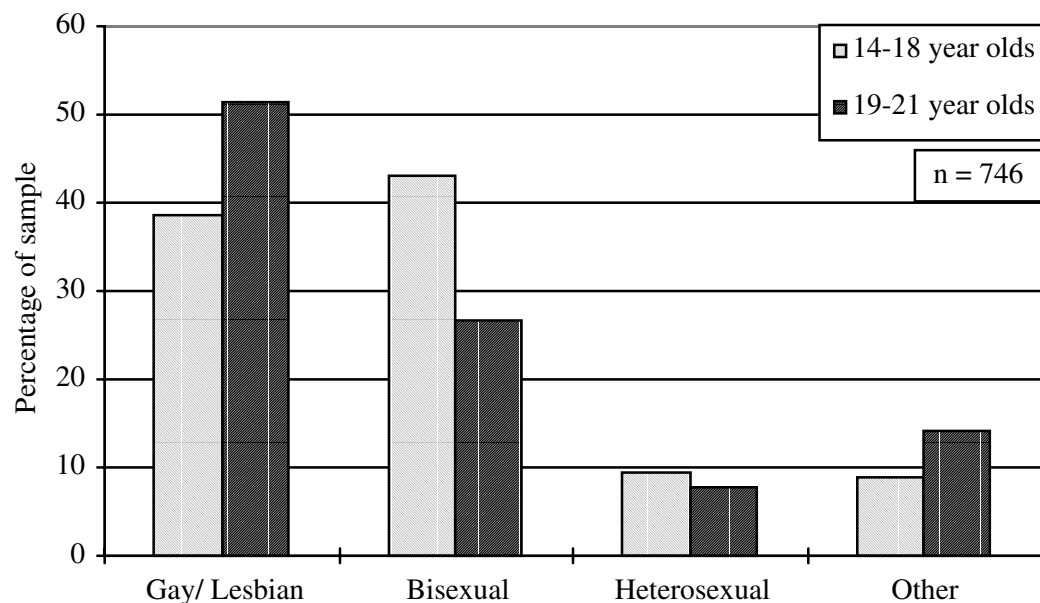
Attracted to males physically, but prefer the emotional and spiritual support of females. Despite attraction to males, would never start any relationship with them. Very hard to explain, but it's sort of a natural instinct to back away from them. (Gayle, aged 19)

Fluid (I don't like boxes). Whatever feels right at the time. (Keith, aged 21)

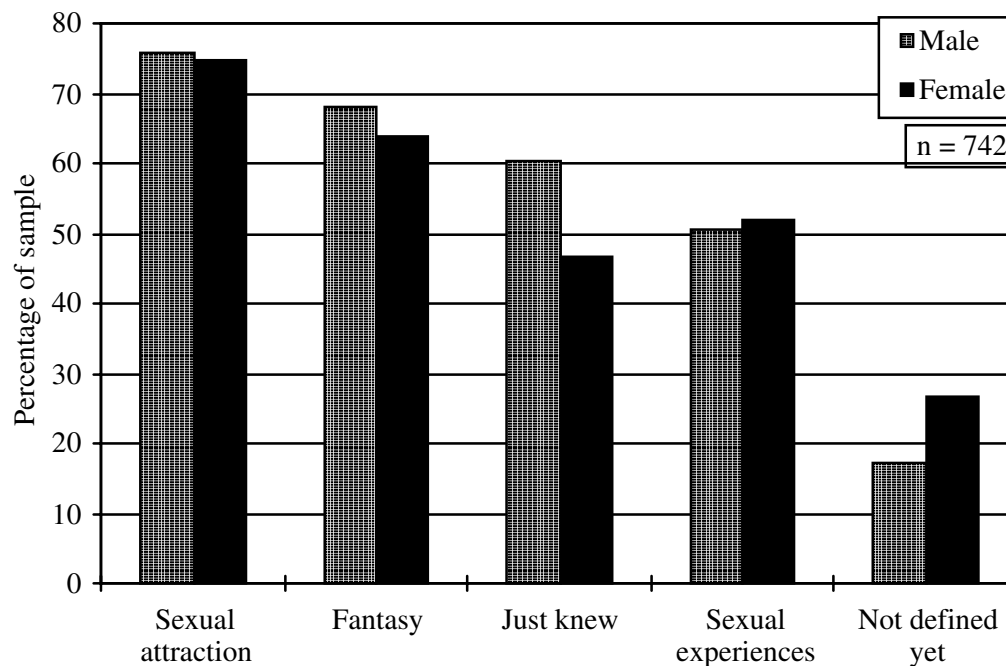
I am not attracted to people based on their gender, rather I grow attracted to people based on their personality. (Anna, aged 20)

Hobisexual. (Carlo, aged 17)

**Figure 6.** Labelling of sexual identity by age.



Participants were also asked to consider factors influencing how they labelled their sexuality (see Figure 7). This was a multiple-response question, and most young people who answered the question chose several of the possible options. Basing identity on 'sexual attraction' was the most popular response (75%), with 'fantasy' (66%) and actual 'sexual experiences' (51%) also nominated by substantial numbers of respondents. There was also a considerable number of unspecified 'other' responses (5%). There were few gender differences with regard to choice of the above categories, although young men were more likely than young women to say they 'just knew' about their sexual identity (56% vs. 44%) and young women were more likely than young men to say they hadn't defined their sexuality yet (27% vs 17%).

**Figure 7.** Factors influencing labelling of sexuality.

### *Identities in transition?*

The large numbers of young people, particularly young women, who identified as bisexual in this study deserves some consideration. The 'master narrative' (Diamond, forthcoming) or stage theory approach to homosexual identity development (Troiden, 1989, Cass, 1979) explains bisexuality quite unproblematically as a transitional or 'identity confusion' phase between heterosexuality and homosexuality, which individuals progress through on the way to a 'fully integrated' identity. This is clearly how bisexuality is experienced for some participants; as one young man noted in talking about himself at an earlier age: 'I was denying the gayness that was developing quite a bit by compromising for bisexuality'.

It is true to say we have no way of knowing how these same young women and men would label their sexuality were this survey to be conducted in several years time, and as mentioned above, there was a trend away from identifying as bisexual among the older group. However, to use the words of Jeffrey Weeks:

Identities...are less about expressing an essential truth about our sexual being; they are more about mapping our different values: the values of relationships, of belonging, of difference and diversity. They provide continuous possibilities for invention and re-invention, open processes through which change can happen. (Weeks in Parker and Gagnon eds., 1995: 44)

Indeed, there are other possible readings for these results, which depend entirely on how linear, fixed and 'essential' one considers homosexual identity to be. Paula Rust (1993), understands bisexuality as an identity which can flourish under social conditions that do not require a polarisation of oppressor and oppressed<sup>3</sup>. A number of young women and men elaborating on a bisexual identity were quite comfortably assuming this label, did not appear at all confused and described supportive and progressive family and friendship networks:

I know a lot of gay people suffer from problems due to harassment and abuse, perhaps I just grew up in a well educated home, school and general environment. When I was 10, I had my first encounter with a girl...Since then, I have had a string of male and female partners...I am now in my final year of high school and things are going well. I am glad so many people in my life have been supportive... (Amy, aged 17)

It should be noted, however, that 'bisexual' meant many things to the participants in this study, in addition to the celebratory sentiments expressed above. It meant: 'Confused because I'm in love with my best friend, but I've only had sex with boys'; 'How do I explain the fact that I just got drunk and kissed a boy/girl at a party'; 'I like girls a lot better than boys but I also want to have children'; or 'What if it's only this girl/boy and not any others?'

There was evidence too that young people claiming a bisexual identity were doubly stigmatised in that they encountered resistance within heterosexual peer networks and the wider gay and lesbian community:

I find being bisexual, I'm misunderstood by my friends. A lot of gays and lesbians that I know think that I have not decided which side of the fence I should be on. This is not true, I just genuinely enjoy both sexes. I support gays and lesbians and they should also understand more about bisexuality. (Chloe, aged 21)

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<sup>3</sup> The rise of 'queer' as a politics and critique of identity categories within progressive 'non heterosexual' culture (see Jagose, 1996 for an elaboration of the variety of uses to which this term is put.) also suggests that we are beginning to live in an era where the oppositional categories 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' are beginning to become less relevant.

Another young woman stated that bisexuality was considered 'try hard lesbianism' among the lesbians at her school.

The above examples suggest that a sense of movement toward the 'queering' of Australian society is happening on a small scale for our research participants, and predominantly for those from well-educated, socially progressive families and environments. In the absence of wide-spread public affirmation for homosexuality, confusion rather than a sense that identities and attractions are 'fluid' prevails for many, particularly the younger participants in this study, and was a far more common reaction to having attractions for or experiences with both sexes. Stage theories of sexuality, (e.g. Troiden, 1989) are still relevant, in so far as they emphasise the stigma attached to homosexuality prevalent in the community at large and the resulting fear and uncertainty potentially produced for young people exploring 'non-heterosexual' sexuality. The persistence of such social stigma was further emphasised in responses to the next question.

### **How do you feel about your sexuality?**

Seems to me once the inside battles subside, you are met with outside battles in society. You have to be really strong to be gay and out and happy.

(Eric, aged 16)

The last question in the 'About your sexual feelings' section gave participants an opportunity to say how they were coping generally with sexuality issues on a scale from 'great' to 'really bad'. There was an additional open-ended section, where the majority chose to qualify their answer. These qualitative responses were subsequently coded into the following categories:

- Personally accepting of sexuality and mentions acceptance by peers and family.
- Feels good personally about sexuality but some concern with the negative consequences at a social and interpersonal level.
- OK personally with sexuality, but feels the need for freedom from rigid categorisation.
- OK, but isolated and lacking support.
- Expresses confusion and doubts, mostly but not completely negative.
- Has great difficulty with accepting same sex attractions and feels terrible.

Nearly one-third of respondents (32%) said they felt 'great' about their sexuality. Almost as many young people selected each of the 'pretty good' (28%) and 'OK' (30%) categories. Seven percent said they felt 'pretty bad' and the remaining three percent said they felt 'really bad'.

Most respondents who chose great also made positive statements about acceptance of sexuality by self and others (63%) or chose to focus on disliking rigid categorisation of sexuality (16%) . However, many of the pretty good and OK respondents had experienced a number of difficulties. Only one-third of those who selected 'pretty good' and one-fifth of those who selected OK felt that sexuality was unproblematic in their lives. Those who qualified their answer had come to terms to some extent with their sexuality, but had experienced isolation, confusion or concern about the negative societal and interpersonal consequences of identifying with a stigmatised sexuality.

Of particular concern were the 16% of young people who wrote answers which indicated they felt mostly negative or were really not coping with sexuality issues. For the most part, being treated badly combined with a sense of overwhelming isolation had led to these feelings.



## How do you feel generally about your sexuality?

### 'Great'

Before I was out to family and friends, my greatest fear was being found out or being asked "Where's your girlfriend?", and you think "I'm the only one going through this", "Who can I tell?", "Why can't god make me normal?". And then for me personally, I just came to a day when I said enough is enough and I took the plunge and had sex with a guy (YAHOO!)...There's no more 'maybe I am, maybe I'm not', it's just "Yes, I'm gay!". I know it now. The next most important thing for me was a support group for gay youth... Once the support, education and information was layed out in front of me and I met other gay people, I realised that...I was going to "come out" of this OK..  
.Cheers! (Liam, aged 20)

### 'Pretty Good'

It's very hard to establish relationships without being chastised...in the community. Especially in a small country town. Feelings get held back, squashed, guilt rises... but I am not attracted to gender, I am attracted to a person, male or female. Just society's expectations hamper efforts to break from traditional moulds. I was a member of a gay support group and was chastised for not being a real lesbian because I liked men... I feel like I'm in limbo...floating around between the two, not finding acceptance, or the love I crave. (Sasha, aged 20)

### 'OK'

It's OK, I'm trying to deal with it, but it's hard if all your friends are straight and you don't feel you can discuss it with any of them. Loneliness is the hardest part.  
(Max, aged 16)

### 'Pretty bad'

It makes me feel uncomfortable. I have felt this way for as long as I can remember, but it still doesn't feel normal. Only my family know. They reacted so badly, I haven't told anyone else. (Lina, aged 19)

### 'Really bad'

I felt that the feelings I was having were bad. People that were my friends began to treat me badly because of my feelings. One day about a year ago, I was caught kissing another girl by my friends. The next day at school, people were staring at me, talking about me. Someone spray painted the word 'lesbian' on my locker. My friends didn't even want to talk to me. (Fiona, aged 17)

### 3. How Do People Treat You?

...the first person I told I was gay betrayed me by telling all my friends. They in turn verbally and emotionally abused me until I was feeling so low I thought I was having a nervous breakdown. I basically left school. (Ivan, aged 16)

#### Key Findings

- Nearly one-third of participants believed they had been unfairly treated or discriminated against, because of their sexuality.
- Young men were more likely to be targeted for verbal abuse, and 46% of participants overall stated they had been verbally abused.
- Thirteen percent of participants had been physically abused.
- Almost 70% of the abuse disclosed had taken place at school, which means that school is a more violent place for these young people than the streets.
- Nearly 60% of those abused stated other students were the perpetrators.
- Abusers also included family members in 10% of cases.
- Despite these high and unacceptable levels of abuse, there is evidence that many young people are creatively using limited resources, are thinking carefully about strategies to dismantle prejudice and are working for change.

During past research projects, we have observed that many young people display overtly homophobic attitudes. Anyone suspected of being same-sex attracted may be threatened, assaulted and excluded from activities by peers, particularly in the school environment. We were interested to find out about the impact of these attitudes and behaviours on our target group, including their perceptions of discrimination based on their sexuality.

#### Discrimination

Almost one third (29%) of the research participants reported that they had been unfairly treated because of their sexuality. Another third (33%) reported that discrimination was not possible because no one was aware of their sexuality and the remaining 38% felt that they had received no unfair treatment.

Responses to an open-ended item asking for more information about the unfair treatment, revealed a range of discriminatory practices at school and in the workplace, for example, one young man wrote: 'I'm not allowed to go in the male change rooms'. There were a number of young people who were forced to change schools because life became too difficult for them and one who had lost a job because of his sexuality. Others mentioned not being able to take a same-sex partner to the school formal and girls discussed not being able to wear dress suits to the school dance as one way in which they were treated unfairly.

Other young people described legal discrimination including not being able to get married and cases where their partners were prevented from accessing Austudy. A very insightful comment was made by one 15 year old girl who said: 'Not many people know, but I think that being brought up straight and taught that straight is right is a form of abuse'. In many ways these young people were well aware that the rules were different for people who had sexual partners of the same sex. There were also many examples throughout these young people's stories of discrimination or fears of discrimination by their families such as partners not being recognised.

### **Verbal and physical abuse related to sexuality**

Another related item on the questionnaire which was concerned specifically with verbal and physical abuse as a result of sexual orientation added significantly to our picture of the hostile environments that many of these young people were living in. Almost half (46%) had been verbally abused, and more of these were boys (52% vs 39%). Examples of verbal abuse fell into three categories; single word stereotypical remarks, two word insults and threats of violence. The main type of verbal abuse (80%) was in the form of single stereotypical comments, such as, 'poofter', 'dyke' and 'faggot'.

These remarks were more likely to be directed at boys, however girls were also targeted in this way. Two word insults were also a common form of verbal abuse, and 'leso trash', 'queer bitch' and 'cock sucker' were typical examples. Threats of violence were the most severe forms of verbal abuse described by the participants, and these had been directed at a smaller but sizeable number of the group, more of whom were young women (18% vs 11%).

Thirteen percent of the young people in the study reported being physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation. When asked to write about the assaults, they described a range of violent attacks. Some of these attacks were single incidents, such as, 'Got my arm broken' and others constituted systematic abuse, such as, 'I had rocks thrown at me every day on my way home from school'. Many

recalled abuse at school, for example: 'Punched discretely while teacher wasn't looking' or 'Broken bones in my fingers when a desk lid was slammed on my hand'.

In order to build a better picture of the context of the verbal abuse and physical assaults that these young people were subjected to we asked two further questions. The first concerned the place at which the abuse occurred and the second, the person who was responsible. On average, each young person described two separate locations (603 reports, 327 respondents). Their responses indicated that the place at which the abuse was most likely to occur was school (69%) with boys more likely to be abused there than girls (81% vs 53%). The streets were the second most likely place of abuse (47%) followed by social (34%) and sporting events (9%). Abuse was reported less frequently at work, church and on public transport (total of 11%). Fifty-nine percent of those who had been verbally or physically abused named other students as the perpetrators. Added to this, 10% named friends, some of whom were also likely to be school students. Forty-four percent named strangers as the perpetrators and 10% named their family members.

Given that young people are mandated by law to attend school, the finding that school is the place where most abuse occurs represents a serious violation of these young people's rights to safety and of the duty of care of school authorities. Thirty-three percent of young people said they hadn't been abused, although many qualified this by adding that this was because no one knew about their sexuality. There was plenty of evidence that this group was not safe from concerns about abuse if anyone found out about their sexuality:

I am most afraid about what will happen at school. I know that I will get verbally harassed a hell of a lot but I'm hoping physical abuse won't happen. (Mei, aged 16)

I haven't told anybody at all. Rejection and homophobia is still rampant in the playground and in ordinary families. I don't know if anyone has guessed but I know I would lose most of my friends if I were to disclose it. (Tran, aged 15)

## Resisting discrimination and abuse

One could be forgiven, given the descriptions above of discrimination and abuse directed at same-sex attracted youth, for imagining them as passive victims. Though there is clear evidence in our data that many young people were hunted out of their schools and driven to attempts at suicide, the stories they tell show that many of them did not accept the negative labels or the abuse. Many of these young people were creatively using limited resources, were thinking carefully about strategies to dismantle prejudice and were working for change. 'Chrissie's story' on page 39 was an example of the extent of this persistence.

In the first instance, a number of young people were learning self-defence in order to protect themselves in the event of physical assault. In terms of resistance also, there was extensive evidence in the stories and open-ended answers that these young people were using discourses around homophobia to deflect negative attitudes and behaviours away from themselves and back to the source. In other words, they were problematising people who couldn't deal with their sexuality rather than problematising themselves. We found that a number of young people were using quite sophisticated critiques of heterosexuality to resist the negative attitudes of people around them:

How many straight kids have to inform their family of this fact? How many parents say to their straight children "I think you should have sex with someone of the SAME sex before you decide you're straight? I'd say none but swap it around to being queer and all of a sudden you don't know your own mind and have to justify yourself - constantly. (Jo, aged 20)

As 20 year old Carlie said: I've come to realise that ALL of my friends and family are homophobic. In saying this, Carlie was able to explain the negativity of those around her, without taking on their criticisms as truths about her own sexuality. Even without the use of the term homophobia, many young people were able to separate out their own feelings about their sexuality from the negative discourses around homosexuality they were subject to within their peer culture. In this way, they could keep themselves safe. This was even true of some of the youngest participants in the study. For example, 15 year old Warwick wrote: 'Society makes it not great so I don't feel great. If society accepted it, I would feel great.' Similarly Rhyll, who was 17 explained: 'It's hard because I can accept who I am, and I like liking women, it is just those who don't understand, and don't want to, that make it hard for me to openly be who I am.'

Many of these methods of resistance were found in the explanations young people gave to the item which asked how they were feeling about their sexuality. On reading these responses it was clear that

those who felt better about their sexuality were far more likely to be recognising and struggling against what they perceived as injustice in their daily lives. Furthermore, there were far fewer examples of resistance from young people who felt bad about their sexuality. One conclusion which could be drawn from these results is that resistance offers a way for these young people to heal themselves and may also serve to increase their sense of well-being.

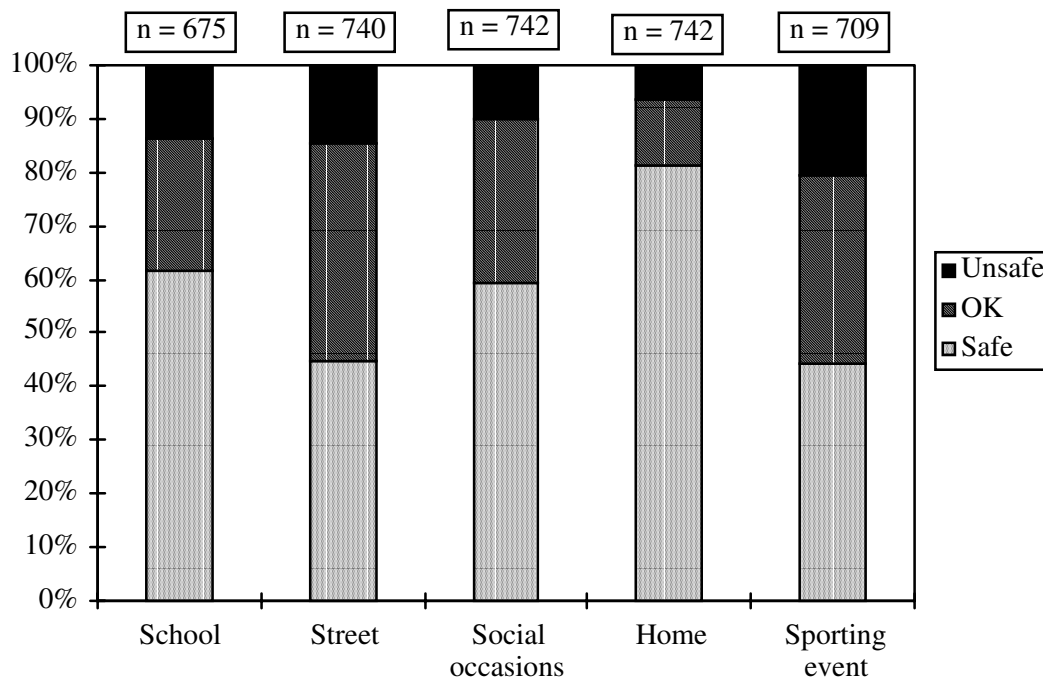
### **How safe do you feel?**

An important question in the survey concerned young people's subjective feelings of safety in different social settings. The contexts which we asked about were: the family; school; sporting events; social occasions and the streets. The family and school are generally regarded as places where young people are owed the highest duty of care and should be afforded the highest levels of protection. The introductory statement to the safety section of the questionnaire read:

Most people have times when they worry about their physical and emotional safety. To feel safe is to feel protected from harm, to feel comfortable, relaxed and happy.

With this statement in mind, young people were asked to rate their feelings of safety at various locations where they spent their time. They answered on a five point scale from 'very safe' to 'very unsafe' but for the purposes of clarity these were collapsed into 'safe', 'OK' and 'unsafe'. Looking to the qualitative data for further explanations, we found that an OK response was generally a disclaimer followed by 'but' and did not necessarily mean that all was well. For this reason OK should not necessarily be taken as a positive response.

The place where most young people felt unsafe was at sporting events (20%). This was followed by the streets (15%), school (14%), social occasions (10%) and the family home (6%). Those who had been abused were less likely to feel safe at home and at school, a further indication of the far reaching effects of abuse.

**Figure 8.** Feelings of safety at various locations.

It was alarming to find there were as many young people in the study who felt unsafe at school as there were those who felt unsafe on the streets. Part of the reason for this was the belief that there was no protection available in the ostensibly regulated school environment. There was evidence that if assault or harassment occurred, procedures and practices would not be set in motion to ensure justice or to prevent such behaviour recurring. A number of students commented on the inconsistencies between their schools' dealings with racism and sexism as opposed to heterosexism. In many cases, little was seen to be done by school authorities to address the hostility that was directed at gay, lesbian or bisexual students. One student asked: 'Why isn't gay hatred educated against like racism in schools?'. There were also examples of school authorities handling situations with poor judgement and discretion:

When I was in year 9 (13 years old) I was called to the Headmaster's office. I was accused of touching members of my own sex at school. There had been complaints from girls. I was unaware of any such behaviour and was incredibly hurt and insulted that I had been accused of being a lesbian. At the time I was unaware of my own sexuality and incredibly offended at the suggestion. Looking back, I now feel that this was incredibly insensitive of the teacher involved, and I feel that she should have been better educated on ways to deal with similar situations. (Laura, aged 21).

These young people could see the double standards in play in many of their schools and they could not understand why other students were given support and protection and they were not.

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**Chrissie wrote...**

My school was closed when I was 15. The following year I enrolled in my nearest high school and the students were extremely homophobic. Talk of homosexuality was avoided in all classes. Late in the year, my class went to see a performance that featured a close friend of mine who is a lesbian. Her appearance is very masculine and during class discussion, more was said about her appearance than her performance. Some very nasty comments were flying and I stood up and stated that her appearance had nothing to do with her ability and that she was a close friend who I loved. After that incident I was subject to many nasty comments. One day as I was walking home some younger students started shouting "leso bitch" at me. They then began to hurl rocks at me.

I made an appointment with the counsellor to file a report. After finally making a report I was asked to identify the offenders in a line up. The offenders were internally suspended for forty five minutes. I was told that it was "all they could do" so I suggested that I arrange a homophobia seminar. They refused my offer but could somehow justify the three Christian seminars that were conducted that year saying that "the Christians sing, dance and entertain". Then I approached a group of gay, lesbian and bisexual musos who agreed to do a show. My proposal was once again refused by the school. I signed out that day and never went back. I blame my incompleteness of school on the staff and on the government who closed my high school.

(Chrissie, aged 17)



**Rowan wrote...**

As a bisexual, I always had feelings for girls, but I had my first same sex feelings at age 12. I had my first hetro sex experience at 15 and my first "gay" experience at age 17. I do not have anal sex (give or receive) and found that after my first experience had a period of slutting about, going down on many people (all of whom I had feelings for, it wasn't just anonymous encounters). I do the gay scene (clubs and pubs) but have never done or desired to do a beat or sauna.

I was at an all boys private school which was horribly homophobic until year 11 but moved to a mixed school to do year 11 and 12. There, I was in a very caring and open minded environment, with a lot of other people in my situation both boys and girls (approx. 10% of students were not "Strait" ). So here it was easy to finally find myself and "Come Out" . I had no problems and all my friends were extremely supportive, as were the teachers who worked it out for themselves. The only problem that I really encountered here was that as my best friend is openly gay, people thought that we were a couple, including my mother; which irritated me a bit because if I had a fight with him in class, some teachers thought that we were having relationship problems.

I have found that by making friends through other gay friends I have built up a supportive and very important "queer family" of people aged between 17 to 40. I have found that my older friends have been able to provide invaluable information on relationships, sex and operating within the gay community...This family has also been the main reason for why I feel good about myself and empowered by my sexuality.

I hope to finish my psychology degree, and take on a role in politics, and help the gay community, because while there have been vast improvements in the way we are perceived over the last 20 years, there is still a lot of ignorance (i.e. some people still associate homosexuality with paedophilia and intolerance via the Church which I hope to clear up as a lot of it is misquoted) . However my main concern is to make improvements so that closeted people can find the strength to come out and be their "true" self.

(Rowan, aged 18)

## 4. About Your Sexual Behaviour

Since your research seems to be concerned with the health risks of being a homo, I will just add that I pretty much always have safe sex, whether it be with man, woman or lamppost. The queer crowd I hang out with are all pretty damn well informed about the risks involved with unprotected sex... (Nathan, aged 20)

### Key Findings

- 73% of participants had had sex.
- More young women had had sex with both males and females, and nearly one-third of same-sex attracted young women had had sex only with males in the past year.
- Young women were more likely than young men to be same-sex attracted, yet only heterosexually active, although a substantial number of young men were also heterosexually active.
- About 50% of young men reported 'always' using protection during sex, regardless of the gender of their sexual partner.
- Participants' reported use of condoms in heterosexual encounters was on a par with that of young people in the general population.

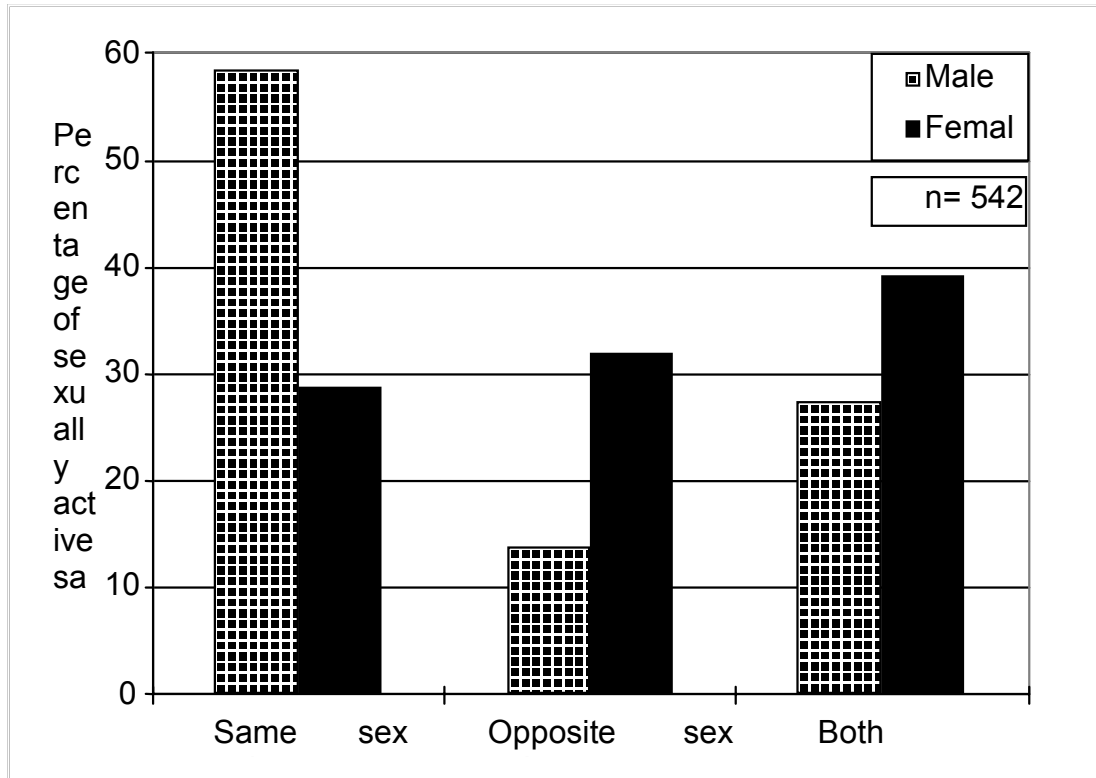
### Sexual experience

In order to find out about the sexual experiences of participants, we used the general term 'sex', to be inclusive of gay, lesbian and heterosexual sex. Specific questions about actual sexual practices were not asked. The number of participants who had had sex (73%) was split equally between males and females and just over one-quarter of participants (27%) had never had sex. One-third of the sample (33%) had had sex with both sexes, nearly half (45%) reported they had had sex with guys only and 22% reported they had had sex with girls only. Young men tended to be sexually active at an earlier age than young women. With respect to rural and urban participants, no differences were observed in terms of numbers who were sexually active.

Fifty-nine percent of the young men indicated that over the last 12 months they had had sex with males only. This compares with 29% of young women who had had sex only with other females. Twenty-eight percent of young men had had sex with both sexes, compared with 39% of young

women. Fourteen percent of young men were having sex with the opposite sex only, compared with 32% of young women. Overall, young women were far more likely than young men to have had a person of the opposite sex as a sexual partner in the last 12 months.

**Figure 9.** Who do you have sex with?



In a small minority of cases, young people's sexual activity did not match their sexual identity and attractions. Thirteen young women and eight young men who were exclusively same-sex attracted said they had only had sex with the opposite sex in the past year.

Young men were more likely than young women to be sexually active in accordance with their sexual attractions. Eighty-three percent of young men who were exclusively same-sex attracted were having sex with males only, whereas the comparable figure for young women was 62%. Nearly half of the young women (42%) who were attracted to both sexes were sexually active only with males, which contrasts with under one-third of young men in this attraction category. Three-quarters (85%) of gay identified males had engaged in male to male sex only in the past 12 months. Of the young women who identified as lesbian, only two-thirds (60%) said they had had sex exclusively with girls in the past year.

### *Gendered (s)explorations*

The results outlined above reveal distinctively gendered patterns in terms of young people's sexual behaviour, particularly with regard to young women's greater likelihood of participation in heterosexual sex. In their stories, more young women spoke of being able to hide their same-sex attractions while participating in publicly acknowledged heterosexual relationships. Several recalled having sex or relationships with guys because they could quite passively go along with it and therefore blend in with their heterosexual friends:

I still felt the need to conform to what was accepted around me, and as a result I repressed my feelings and dated guys. (Linda, aged 20)

I never chose the guys, (I figured I wasn't interested in guys because I was "sexually immature" ) the guys chose me and I just went along with it. (Jeanette, aged 21)

Judging from the stories submitted, this option was not as available to the young men in this study, many of whom spoke of being labelled 'poofsters' very early on in their lives, for example, due to playground interests not considered masculine enough and physical characteristics considered 'girly'. Such an outward presentation of being 'gay' may close off possibilities for young men in experimenting with a public heterosexuality, or as the case may be, hiding under its cloak, which goes some (but by no means all) of the way towards explaining why young men are less likely to go along with or explore heterosexual sex.

Writers such as Troiden (1989) have also observed that same-sex attracted young men have more opportunities for sexual encounters in public and highly sexualised 'gay' contexts, whereas young women's homosexual exploration is more likely to be in the context of established friendships. Broadly speaking, research results confirmed this. In the first instance, young men were more likely to discuss opportunities for sexual encounters with other males, away from the prying eyes of school, family and their immediate peers:

My first sexual experience [with a guy] was when I was 14. I had been warned never to go near the toilets at the park close to the railway station...At these toilets I'd meet an older guy, 17-18, I guess, who gave me a head job. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. (Jim, aged 18)

I joined a dating service which opened up the opportunity for meeting other guys on the line and initially, just having sex. (Joe, aged 17)

Young women (who were more likely to be at school than young men) tended to disclose relationships or tentative sexual encounters with those known to them from school or close friendship networks:

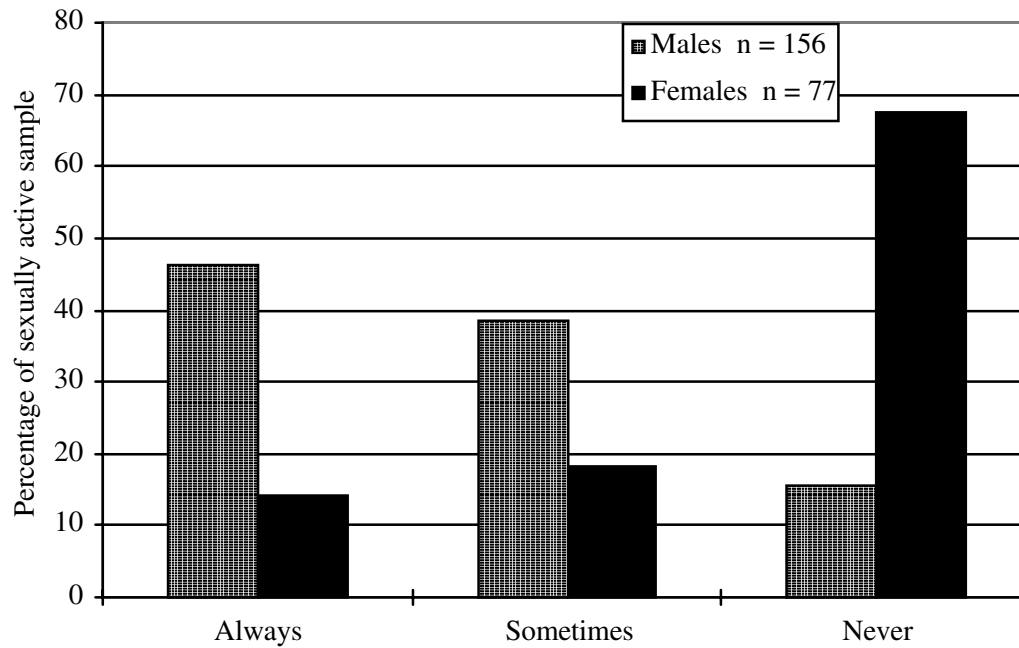
When I was 15, I started my first lesbian relationship with my best friend. I had been attracted to her for some time and one night, I slept over at her house...(Mirella, aged 17)

I first had homosexual feelings in year 8 ...[which] started to come back when I met my significant other. We were friends before anything else. I decided that I had to confront my homosexuality and I told her how I felt. We are still together and as blissed out as ever...(Mandy, aged 16)

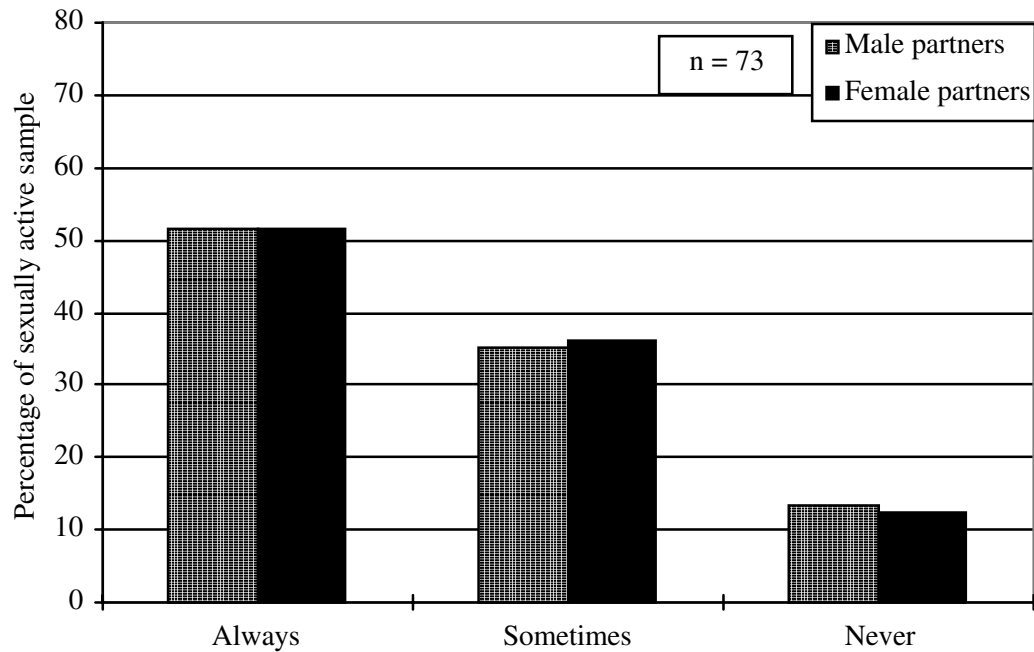
Declaring love for a best friend and wondering if she felt the same way was a recurrent theme for female participants. In one respect, therefore, it could be seen as less safe for young women to be acting on their same-sex attractions. Not only is there the risk of others in the school environment finding out, there is the added concern of potentially destroying established and valued relationships. Young women's same-sex behaviours may well be postponed until such a time as they can be explored more safely, e.g. after completion of school or at university.

### **Use of protection during sex**

In order to better examine the use of protection from STDs during sex, young men and young women were separated into groups according to the orientation of their sexual behaviour, i.e. those who had had sex with the same sex only, those who had had sex with the opposite sex only and those who had had sex with both sexes in the past twelve months.

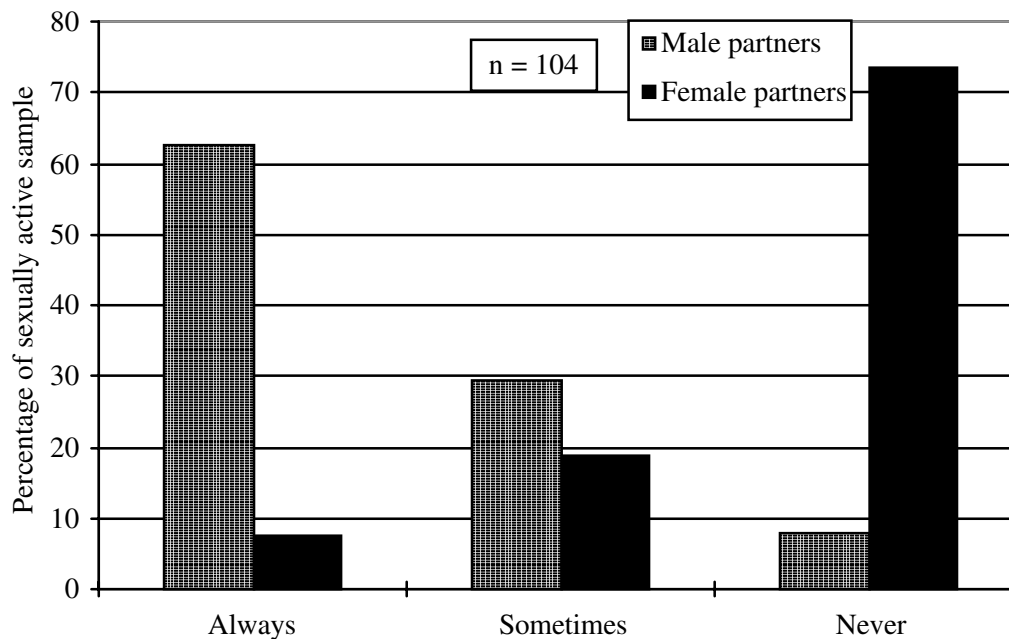
**Figure 10.** Use of protection by young people who had same-sex partners only.

Young men who had had sex only with men were far more likely to have had protected sex than young women who had had sex only with women, with the majority of young women in this group stating they 'never' had protected lesbian sex. In light of the general lack of availability of dams and the silence around lesbian safe sex in schools and community safe sex campaigns, this result is not surprising. While it is clear that young women having sex with other women have only a small risk of contracting STDs, the lack of information to assist the management of decisions about safe sex is a concern.

**Figure 11.** Bisexually active young men's use of protection with men and women.

Bisexually active young men's use of protection varied little according to the gender of their partner, with a small trend towards greater use of protection with female partners. Bisexually active young women's use of protection followed a different pattern, in that sex with other women was rarely protected. Sex with men followed a similar pattern of protection to that of other studies with heterosexual young women, in that about 50% were consistently using protection.

Sixty-three percent of the bisexually active group stated they 'always' used protection with males. The overall pattern of condom use by males and females engaging in heterosexual sex is commensurate with that reported in the National Schools Survey (Lindsay et al., 1997) which found that 54% of students in years 10 and 12 'always' used condoms, 37% used them 'sometimes', and 9% 'never' used condoms.

**Figure 12.** Bisexually active young women's use of protection with men and women.***What type of protection?***

In the last question in this section, participants were asked to nominate which type of protection they used when having sex. This question was open-ended, in order to obtain answers generated by the young people themselves. For those who were using protection, condoms were by far the most common option (90%). An additional 5% reported unprompted that they used condoms and lubricant, an encouraging finding.

As in previous studies, the younger group reported higher condom use (95%) than the older group (86%). Young people from metropolitan areas were also significantly more likely to report condom use 'always' or 'sometimes' than young people from rural areas. Of the 8% of young people who used dams, users were more likely to be older and female (12% of 19-21 year olds, 15% of females overall). Finally, in line with findings from previous research (Lindsay et al., 1997, Hillier et al., in press), the contraceptive pill was also reported as a method of protection by 18% of females and 4% of males, even though the pill does not offer protection from STDs.



**Olivia wrote...**

The first time I heard the word homosexual I didn't know what it meant. At the age of 12 I knew the meaning it all suddenly clicked into place. Like most girls, I too had crushes, however I had them for mostly girls, they were so passionate all my energies seemed to be wasting away on my unrequited love. By the time I grew older (16) I didn't fall for people as much neither as hard as before. I realised that I'm going to have to put up with being in a heterosexual environment and when I am old enough to move, that time and that time only I will be truly free.

I read everything I could on homosexuality and when we got the Net I would stay up for hours reading and visiting all the gay sites I could. If and when I tell my parents, I will have to arrange another place to sleep until things cool it at home. That is the only thing that is stopping me. Sometimes I feel really bad for lying to them, I tell them most things and the fact that I can't discuss my love life with them is kinda heart breaking. If my parents don't let me move out of home, I'll just tell them that I'm a lesbian, then I'd be free to go. :)

I am trying to start a gay youth group, trying to do anything out side of school seems to be impossible when one is doing VCE. There are all these support groups but they mainly focus on the older generations. Different generations have different things on there agenda and understand people of there own age more. More than anything else, the struggles of denial, tolerance, abuse, and the worries of puberty on top of that come in adolescents. Which is the major reason for me wanting to start this group.

I would love to become a spokesperson for the queer community but at the same time realise that it is a lot of work as one has to be on the ball with gay issues and what they say needs to be accurate. In our ever-changing society it is hard to be accurate. But this does not faze me, until we have the same rights and benefits as our straight brothers and sisters, until a gay couple can kiss on a busy street and no one looks twice, only then will I be most content. Thank you very much!!!

(Olivia, aged 17)

## 5. About Your Drug Use

All this time I was smoking heaps of cigarettes and marijuana, taking lots and lots of acid, speed, alcohol. Just so I wouldn't think about things. (Rowena, aged 20).

### Key Findings

- Participants in this study were far more likely to be using illegal drugs than young people in the general population.
- 11% of participants stated they had injected drugs. Significantly more young women than young men had injected, and young people from rural areas were more likely to have injected than young people from metropolitan areas.
- 14-18 year old injecting drug users (IDUs) reported higher levels of sharing of injecting equipment than the 19-21 year old group.
- 30% of participants had used party drugs, such as speed, ecstasy and LSD (acid).
- 62% had smoked marijuana, more of whom were young women.

Questions regarding frequency of usage of legal and illegal substances were asked in this section of the survey. Studies conducted in the USA have indicated that gay, lesbian and bisexual young people are more likely to be using and/or abusing tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and injecting drugs than other groups of young people (Sanford, 1989; Miller et al., 1994). Consistent with this research, the young people participating in this study reported high levels of drug and alcohol use.

### Alcohol

More than half of the participants reported that they drank alcohol at least once a week. Twenty-three percent specified 'weekly', 26% 'weekends only', and five percent stated they were drinking on a daily basis. Only five percent of the young people who responded to the survey stated they 'never' drank alcohol. There were no gender differences with respect to drinking patterns.

Participants in both age groups were equally likely to be drinking on a daily basis (5% of each group). However, 19-21 year olds were more likely to be drinking on a weekly basis (56%) than 14-18 year

olds (44%) and the younger group were more likely than the older group to state they were drinking infrequently, ('monthly', 'less than once a month', 'a few times yearly', or 'never'). Fourteen to 18 year olds in this study were drinking more frequently than those of comparable age in the recent National Schools Survey (Lindsay et al, 1997) .

How often?	14-18 year olds		19-21 year olds		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Daily	20	5%	19	5%	39	5%
Weekly	173	44%	193	56%	366	49%
Monthly	64	16%	61	17%	125	17%
Less than monthly	113	29%	65	18%	178	24%
Never	24	6%	15	4%	39	5%

n= 747

**Table 4.** Alcohol use by age.

## Marijuana

Thirty-seven percent of participants stated they 'never' used marijuana and an additional 30% stated they used less than once a month. The remaining third (33%) were smoking marijuana at least once a month.

Young women who smoked marijuana outnumbered young men in terms of 'daily', 'weekly', 'monthly' and more infrequent use. Twenty-three percent of young women (compared with 19% of young men) were smoking weekly or more. Forty-five percent of young men reported they 'never' used marijuana, whereas the comparable figure for young women was 30%. There were no age differences with regard to use of marijuana, however, this finding was contrary to our expectation that the younger group would be less likely to use than the older group.

Results with regard to usage of marijuana were surprising given that comparable studies undertaken with 14 to 18 year old teenagers in Victoria have found that males are twice as likely as females to be regular users of marijuana. Levels of use are also much lower in general for general population young people, for example, less than six percent of males and two percent of females in one study (Patten et al., 1995) were found to be smoking more than weekly.

How often?	Females		Males		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Daily	31	8%	24	7%	55	7%
Weekly	55	15%	45	12%	100	14%
Monthly	51	14%	36	10%	87	12%
Less than monthly	124	33%	95	26%	219	30%
Never	115	30%	166	45%	281	37%

n= 742

**Table 5.** Use of marijuana by gender.**'Party' drugs**

Almost one third of participants (30%) had used party drugs (e.g. ecstasy, speed, LSD etc.). Those who used only a 'few times yearly' accounted for 15% of users, with 10% partaking at least monthly, and 5% weekly or more.

There were no gender differences with regard to this question, however, there were different patterns of usage between the two age groups. Although 14-18 year olds were more likely to state they 'never' used party drugs (74% compared with 65% of 19-21 year olds), those who did use were doing so more regularly. The younger group were more likely than the older group to be using on a weekly basis. Nineteen to 21 year olds were also twice as likely to state they used party drugs only a 'few times yearly' (20% compared with 10% of 14-18 year olds) .

How often?	14-18 year olds		19-21 year olds		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Daily	1	.3%	-	-	1	.1%
Weekly	26	7%	11	3%	16	5%
Monthly	20	5%	20	6%	40	5%
Less than monthly	53	14%	94	27%	147	20%
Never	287	74%	227	64%	514	70%

n=739

**Table 6.** Use of party drugs by age.

## Injecting drug use

Eleven percent of participants stated they had injected drugs. The younger group were just as likely to have injected as the older group and gender differences were significant. Fifteen percent of the young women had injected drugs, compared with 7% of the young men. Young people from rural areas were also more likely to state they had injected drugs than young people from metropolitan areas. The comparable figure with regard to injecting in a recent survey of Victorian teenagers was two percent (Lindsay et al, 1997), and elsewhere, between two and five percent nationally (Reilly and Homel, 1987, cited in Lennings, 1996).

Most of those who had injected drugs at some time in the past had not done so in the past six months (44%), with the next largest group stating they used 'once a month or less' (14%). However, 12% of IDUs reported they were using 'more than 3 times weekly'.

Have you ever injected drugs?	Females		Males		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	54	15%	26	7%	80	11%
No	318	85%	338	93%	656	89%

n=736

**Table 7.** Injecting drug use by gender.

With regard to sharing of injecting equipment, two thirds of IDUs stated they 'never' shared (66%), 12% had shared 'once' or 'twice', 13% had shared more than 3 times, and the remainder stated they were 'unsure' how many times they had shared (9%). There were no gender differences with regard to sharing, however, 14-18 year olds were more likely to have shared equipment than 19-21 year olds. Eighty-six percent of the older group said they had 'never' shared, compared with 56% of the younger group. The younger group were also more likely to have shared on numerous occasions, with nearly one-third (32%) having shared at least twice or more, compared with 2% of the older group.

Sharing Equipment	14-18 year olds		19-21 year olds		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Once	1	2%	2	6%	3	4%
Twice or more	14	33%	1	3%	15	19%
Unsure	4	9%	2	5%	2	7%
Never	24	56%	31	86%	55	70%

n=79

**Table 8.** Sharing of injecting equipment by age.

Six percent of participants were heroin users, which indicates that 5% of IDUs were injecting other substances, e.g. speed. One third of heroin users were injecting 'daily' another third only 'a few times yearly', with the remaining third falling somewhere in between. Patterns of heroin use did not vary with regard to age or gender.

For some explanation of these high levels of drug use, we turned to the qualitative data. There were young people like Joel ( no injecting in the last six months) who was enjoying his first taste of the Oxford St. (heart of gay Sydney) 'scene'. For Joel, who described a supportive family and friendship network, drug taking was more likely recreational and linked to club culture.

However, further analysis of the data revealed that participants who had been physically or verbally abused were more likely to be using heroin, marijuana and party drugs than those who said they had not been abused. There were several stories such as Wayne's (p.54). Wayne wrote about years of abuse, confusion about sexuality and general feelings of marginalisation. For this young man and others like him, drugs were acknowledged as one way to alleviate much of the pain associated with coming to terms with sexuality.

Only ten of the 84 IDUs submitted longer stories along with their questionnaires, and similarly, nine out of these ten stories were negative in tone. Alison told us:

I feel very confused about my sexuality. I have thought that I am gay, but then I think about the social stigma and I get scared. I am going through some very painful psychological counselling at present, dealing with depression and social phobias as well as drug abuse...I commend this survey, because I fear for the youth of today. It is such a painful and mixed up world out there, and we need all the help we can get. (Alison, aged 21)

Although some experimentation with alcohol and drugs is a feature of adolescence for most Australian young people (Lennings, 1996), the higher than average levels of drug use reported in this study, particularly for young women and the 14-18 year old group are a considerable cause for concern.

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**Wayne wrote...**

I have known that I am gay for quite a while. From about Year 7 I realised where my feeling lay, but being the eldest child in a working class suburb, those masculine stereotypes were forced onto me. Unfortunately I didn't cope too well, and began to withdraw through high school. I tried to fit in, but by Year 8 it was no use and the comments "he's gay" were often associated with me (although no one knew that I was, it was just assumed).

The fact that I didn't enjoy sport, but would rather play an instrument, and pursue other creative interests gave them further ammunition, although as I became more involved with music I performed outside the school at various occasions, and this coupled with a high absence rate from school meant that I wasn't there very often. Looking back, I remember always feeling sick in the stomach each morning. My mum even took me to the doctors a few times for medication. Now I see how nervous I was about school.

The ultimate humiliation was in my final year of school when a few guys decided to declare my sexuality to the world by spray painting the local shopping centre with my supposed sexual habits and the fact that I am gay. An instant hit with the student body who thought it was "funny".

It has taken me two years since school finished to begin re-building my confidence. I am still quiet in most social situations and often got quite depressed to the point of contemplating suicide (a result of my high drug use which I used, and still do as a way to escape my feelings). I still question whether I am gay, even after all these years, I still can't accept it some days. I am really confused, and the isolation compounds the feelings. Having to bottle all of my emotions and deal with them by myself has left me on the brink of emotional destruction.

I say to myself that life will get better, and I'm sure it will, but puberty and adolescence, are hard at the best of times for straight people - you only have to read a magazine or watch TV - who have friends, relatives etc to talk their problems through with, but for a homosexual person - who often has no one to talk to - these years can be hell on earth.

(Wayne, aged 20)

## 6. Disclosure and Support

The main reason that I still haven't come out to anyone even though I'm 19 is because I come from such a conservative ethnic family. My parents are Chinese and I don't think Australian counsellors would really understand how difficult it is to be gay and come from an Asian background...I feel that coming out would not only hurt my parents, but because of the nature of our community, they would feel a great deal of shame as well. (Lee, aged 17)

### Key Findings

- Over 80% of the group had disclosed their sexuality to at least one other person.
- Although young people rarely sought support from professionals (doctors, youth workers, student welfare co-ordinators, teachers, counsellors), when consulted these people were found to be, on the whole, supportive.
- Young people were slightly more likely to disclose to family members than professionals. Mothers and sisters were more likely to be chosen to confide in than dads and brothers.
- Two-thirds of those who had spoken to mum found her supportive and half who had spoken to dad found him supportive. Three-quarters of the young people who had told a sister found her supportive and two-thirds who had spoken to a brother had found him supportive.
- Young people were most likely to disclose to a female or male friend. Three-quarters found their female friends supportive, and two-thirds found their male friend's supportive.
- Disclosure on its own did not lead to more positive feelings about sexuality. However, young people who disclosed and received support did feel better about their sexuality.

We asked our participants about the people they had spoken to about their sexual attraction and, out of these, who had given them support. We divided confidantes into three groups: professionals, including teachers; doctors and counsellors; friends and family. Eighty-two percent of the group had spoken to someone about their sexuality leaving almost one in five who had spoken to no one.

The decision to speak to someone about same-sex attractions was not taken lightly by participants in this research. They were well aware that making the wrong choice of confidante could destroy their equilibrium and had the potential to make their lives at home and at school very difficult. In a number of cases, the negative consequences of disclosing to the wrong person were described. Loss of trust



and a sense of shame and betrayal were common when close friends and others reacted badly. At the other extreme, support was often found where least expected.

### **Disclosure to and support from professionals**

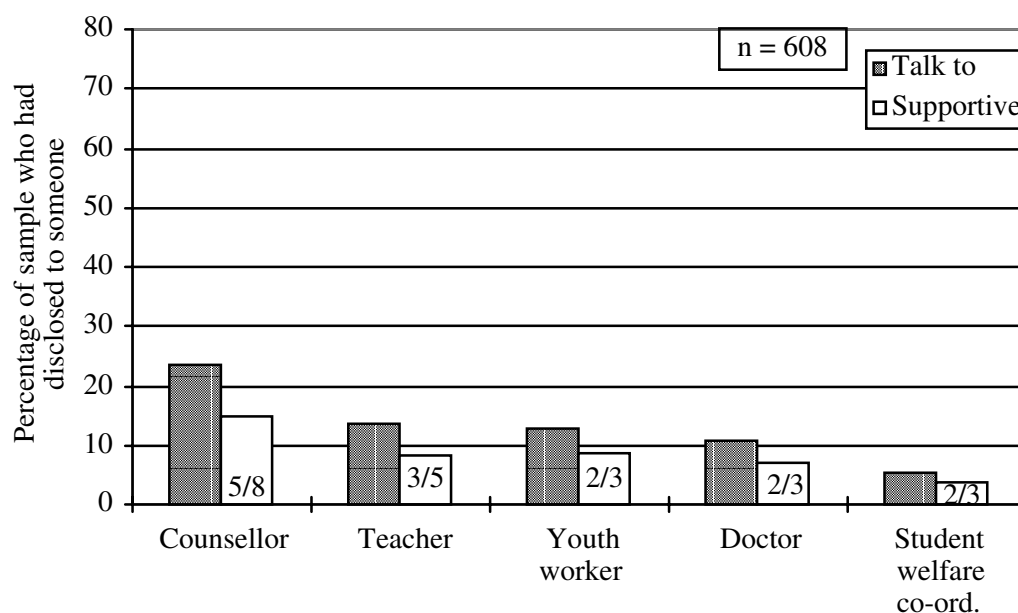
Participants had rarely spoken to professionals about their sexuality, though the majority had found this group to be supportive when approached. Only five percent had sought help from student welfare co-ordinators, 12% from youth workers, 14% from teachers, 11% from doctors and 24% from counsellors outside the school system.

School counsellors and welfare officers who are officially there for this type of support, and other adults in the school system generally had the reputation of not keeping a confidence. As one young man said:

I couldn't turn to the school counsellor [student welfare co-ordinator] because I know that she talks her "cases" over with other people. I have been told of other people's problems and once I knew that I found distrust in the school system. (Adam, aged 18)

However, there were some examples given of school personnel who were extremely supportive and instrumental in improving the quality of school life:

The most supportive person I have talked to is a teacher at school who is a lesbian. She was really great. I went to her before my student welfare officer because the welfare lady is my best friend's mum. It was rather complex. (Nadia, aged 17)

**Figure 13.** Disclosure to and support from professionals re. sexuality.

### Disclosure to and support from family

Young people were only slightly more likely to confide in someone within the family though they spent a great deal of time thinking about it, usually with fear and trepidation. Generally they were concerned about bringing shame upon their families:

I think the only reason I'm not out is I don't want to disappoint my parents. When I was little, about 6 or so, my Mum said "We'll always be proud of you, even if you are homosexual : maybe not as proud, but still proud." (Jason, aged 16)

Many also worried that they would be thrown out of home, and indeed this had become a reality for some:

A month before I was 16, I came out to my father and as a result I have moved out of home. I have been supporting myself since and am currently continuing my education. (Mark, aged 17)

Consistent with expressed fears about being thrown out, those who lived at home were less likely to have told their family than those who lived independently, and mothers were more likely to be approached than fathers. Sisters were found to be the most supportive of all family members. Fathers were the least supportive, with only half of those approached giving support to their child. In a few

extreme cases, young people had been met with remarkable hostility upon disclosure of their sexuality, such as this young woman when she told her family she was a lesbian:

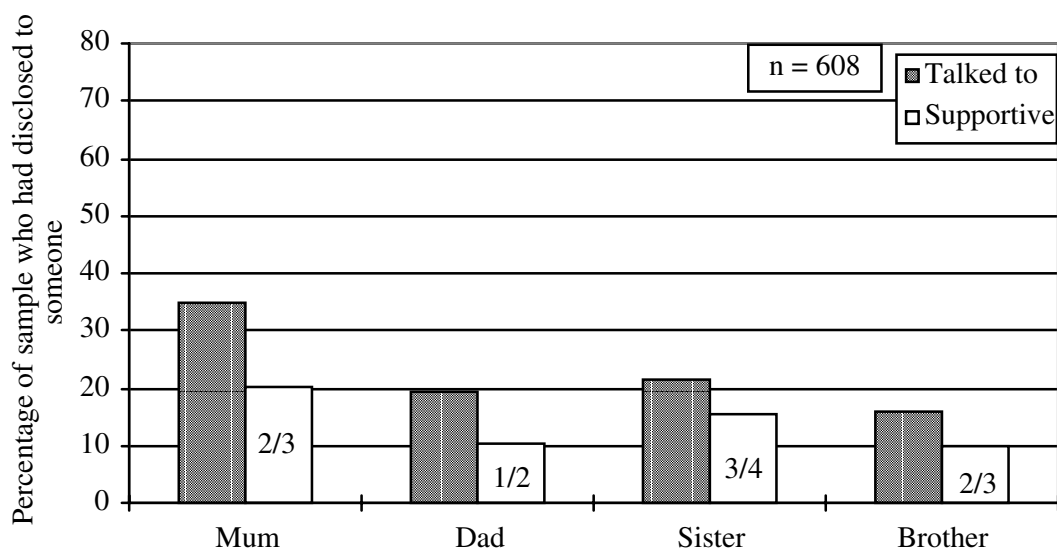
My parents totally freaked out especially my Mum who yelled and screamed that I was going to hell , told my Dad who said that I wasn't his daughter any more... and Mum threw me out of the house saying that I couldn't go back to her house till I changed my evil ways and gave my heart to Jesus. (Jane, aged 16)

However, some participants unexpectedly found great support from parents and siblings:

My parents do not have a problem with it and approve far more of [my girlfriend] than the boy I was having sex with. (Trudy, aged 16)

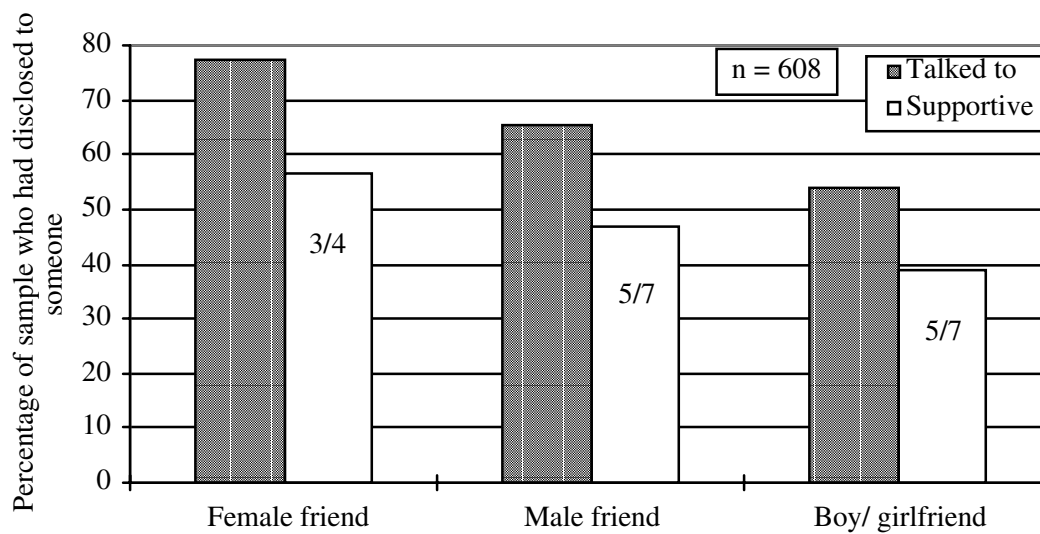
I have told only one of my sisters (I have 2 and 1 brother) and she is really supportive, she even jokes with me and insists that she be the first to meet my girlfriends. (Julie, aged 20)

**Figure 14.** Disclosure to and support from family members.



### Disclosure to friends and peers

The young people in our study were most likely to disclose to friends and on average at least three-quarters of friends were supportive when confided in about same-sex attractions. There were occasions in which the confidante was also same sex attracted.

**Figure 15.** Disclosure to and support from friends.

It is important to emphasise that young people who had disclosed their sexuality to one or more people felt no better about their sexuality or their lives and were no happier than young people who had not disclosed. However, further analysis of the data revealed that those who had disclosed their sexuality to at least one person, and had also received a supportive response were significantly more likely to feel better about their sexuality. There are clearly benefits for young people in being able to talk openly about their lives, and come out to those around them, however the data suggest that this is only the case if the confidante is supportive.

**Amy wrote...**

I guess my family was really supportive when I told them I was bisexual. Maybe they did not completely understand, but they were there to support me when I needed it nonetheless. I have found that the younger generation is more open and willing to accept things than people of say my parents age and older, but I guess that kind of goes without saying. It is pleasing to see that more and more people are coming to terms with the fact that being gay is not a 'sin' or anything to be ashamed of. I know that a lot of gay people suffer from many problems due to harassment and abuse, perhaps I just grew up in a well educated home, school and general environment. When I was about 10 I had my first encounter with a girl, nothing overly sexual, just kissing, touching. Relationships with other girls after that steadily increased physically and it was not until my first year of high school that I actually had my first boyfriend. Since then, I have had a string of both male and female partners.

Guys don't always except the fact I like girls too. My current boyfriend is very understanding and we are very honest with each other. I think this strong relationship has helped me a lot to get a grip on things, with coming out and everything. I have a really close older male friend who is bi and he has guided me towards making decisions for myself, regardless of other people's views on being gay. He was one of the first people I told. It was only a few years ago that I told my parents and midway through last year was when I decided it was time my friends knew. Sure there was some negativity and abuse from certain people but I have a pretty good bunch of friends. (I don't think I could have told them otherwise). I am now in my final year of high school and things are going well. I am glad so many people in my life have been supportive. I don't really have any hassles with talking about my sexuality.

(Amy, aged 17)

## 7. Sexuality Education

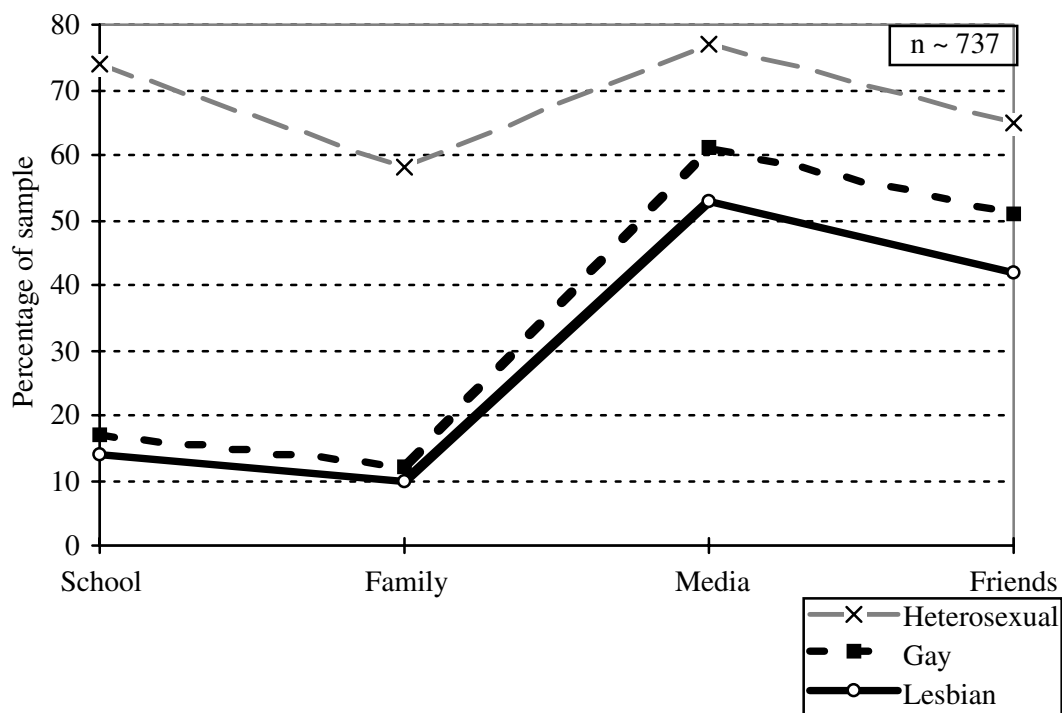
There was nothing visible at school or in my community to help. No pamphlets at school, no posters, no safe homosexual sex lessons. I felt alone. (Lisa, 17)

### Key Findings

- Information about heterosexual relationships was easily accessed and readily available with most young people learning about this topic from family, media, friends and school.
- Information about gay and lesbian relationships was far more difficult to access. Around half had received information about gay and lesbian relationships from the media and friends, one-tenth from the family and about 15% from school.
- With regard to safe sex information, four out of five young people learned about heterosexual safe sex from school and the media, and about half from family and friends.
- At school, there was little information about gay or lesbian safe sex and the situation was even worse in the context of the family.
- Rural young people had more difficulty accessing information about gay and heterosexual safe sex, than young people from metropolitan areas.

### Sources of information

An important aim of this research was to consider the accessibility of sexual health information. Past research has revealed that the family and the school are the two main providers of sexual health information for young people, who generally trust the information they gain from these sources. Friends and the media are also important sources but the level of trust that young people have in the information they gain is much lower (Rosenthal & Smith, 1995). We asked the participants in this study to nominate their sources of access to two sets of information: heterosexual, lesbian and gay relationships; and heterosexual, lesbian and gay safe sex.

**Figure 16.** Sources of information about relationships.

The results to this question (see Figure 16) show very clearly that information about heterosexual relationships was easily accessed and readily available with most young people learning about this topic from each of the four sources, including 70% from school. Information about gay and lesbian relationships was far more difficult to access. Around half had received information about gay and lesbian relationships from the media and friends, one-tenth from the family and about 15% from school. Rural youth were significantly more disadvantaged than urban young people when it came to obtaining information on gay relationships from school.

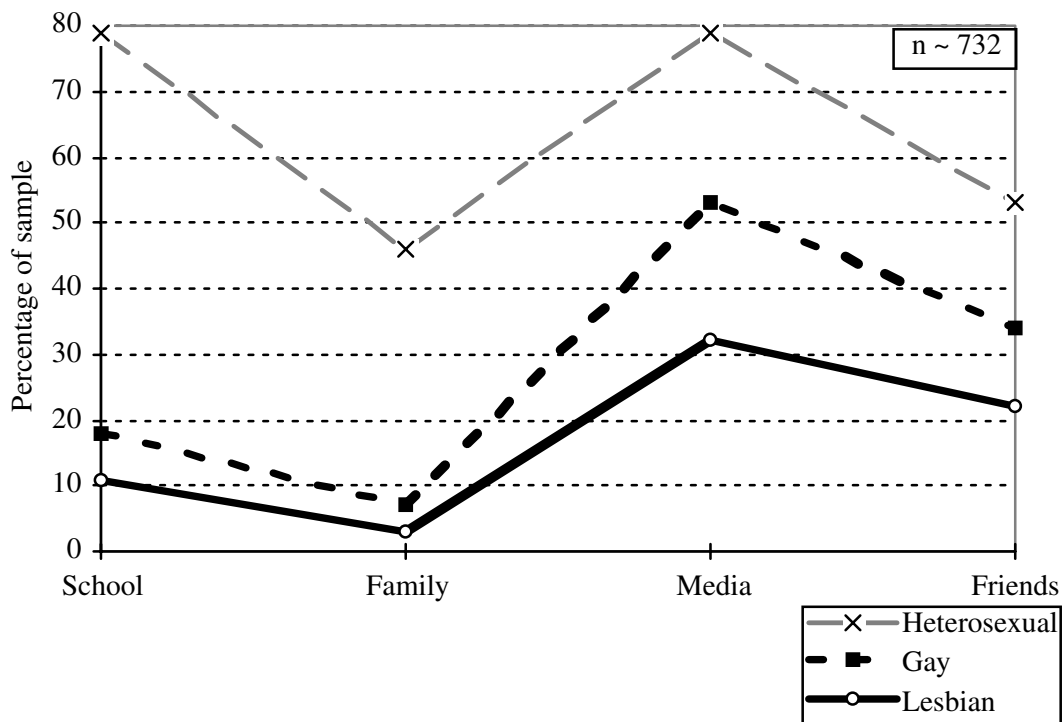
In regard to safe sex information, four out of five young people learned about heterosexual safe sex from school and the media and about half from family and friends. However, young people from metropolitan areas reported more access to heterosexual safe sex information from the media than rural young people. Access to homosexual safe sex information was rarely available from the trusted sources. At school, there was little information about gay or lesbian safe sex and this topic was neglected even more in the context of the family.

Young people from rural areas were again clearly more disadvantaged in this regard than their urban peers. Those from the country were significantly less likely to report access to information on gay safe sex from all of the available sources (school, media, family and friends) than young people from metropolitan areas.

Many participants made comments about difficulties in getting the information they needed, whether it was for themselves or for their parents. One young man said of his local library: 'The gay section is about half a shelf (no joke!!!), but it was enough for me to find four books to take home.' Many young people were aware of the double standard: 'Information on heterosexual everything is so widely promoted and so little on homosexuals'.

Given the often sensational nature of information which comes from the media, including the stereotyping of the gay and lesbian character, and the pervasiveness of negative discourses around homosexuality in youth culture, the information gained from media and friendship networks is less likely to be useful. Same-sex attracted young people are have difficulty accessing the information they need to protect and resource themselves by the two groups with the largest duty of care. They are for the most part accessing information from the two groups whose information is most likely to be incorrect or misleading.

**Figure 17.** Sources of information about safe sex.





## Questions about sex and sexuality

In order to explore knowledge regarding sexuality and safe sex, a final item posed the question: 'If you had three questions about sexuality or safe sex, what would they be?' Over half of the group asked questions (see Table 9) the content of which demonstrate a serious information deficit facing the young people participating in this study.

In all, 794 questions were asked and they ranged from concrete questions about sexual safety, to social inquiries about meeting people, to philosophical questions about the causes of sexuality. The most frequently asked question (66% of young women) was about lesbian safe sex and it was clear from some of the responses that this was the first time many young women had thought about it. Certainly lesbian sex has been almost entirely absent from safe sex literature and campaigns and when raised (as in the survey) young women began to think about it:

The only sex education I had in my whole life was a semester of health in year 10. It was far too late, and there was no mention of homosexuality. We spent several weeks on safe sex, but until I read your survey, I didn't know that two women could use protection. (Le, aged 16)

Typical questions about lesbian safe sex were:

Is it possible to get an STD or AIDS during unprotected lesbian sex. If so which STDs and are they fatal?

If you are a lesbian can you catch STDs from uncleaned sex aids?

What safe rules are there for women?

A number of young people asked questions about safe sex in general such as:

Is clingwrap safe to use as a safe sex tool?

Will swallowing semen affect my stomach?

How do you protect against hepatitis during non-penetrative sex?

Exactly how safe is oral sex without a condom?

Besides HIV what are the health dangers of anal sex?

Is performing anal sex on a guy as high risk as taking it?

Many young people asked homophobia-related questions which reflected the discrimination and abuse that they had suffered:

Why are people so unkind?

Why isn't gay hatred educated against like racism in school?

Others wanted to know how to meet other people like themselves:

How can you approach someone who you are attracted to of the same sex?

Where do I meet guys?

And yet others were interested in issues around sexual identity:

Am I gay?

Are most people inherently bisexual to some degree?

Are many people confused if they are gay?

If you haven't known it all your life does that mean you're not really gay?

Questions asked about sexuality or safe sex	Male %	Female %	Total %	Total n
Lesbian safe sex information	3%	66%	37%	157
Why homophobia?	27%	28%	27%	116
General sex information	21%	25%	23%	96
What causes sexuality?	27%	15%	21%	88
Information on where to meet others	19%	15%	17%	70
Oral sex information (m-m)	28%	2%	14%	60
Gay safe sex information	27%	3%	14%	58
Issues surrounding relationships	14%	10%	12%	51
Why no homosexual sex education in schools?	9%	11%	10%	41
Am I really gay/ lesbian/ bisexual?	5%	11%	8%	35
Telling parents; coming out.	7%	6%	7%	28
Miscellaneous	8%	5%	6%	27
How many people are homosexual/ heterosexual?	6%	6%	6%	25
Legal issues	8%	2%	5%	20
What is gay/ lesbian sex?	4%	4%	4%	17
Anal sex information	5%	1%	3%	12
Gay/ lesbian role models	3%	1%	2%	8
Government funding of gay/ lesbian services	1%	1%	1%	5

**Table 9.** What would you like to know about sex and sexuality?

**Nick wrote...**

Please feel free to copy this page to your computer or print a copy for future reference. Perhaps you could use it yourself, or maybe it could be a starting point for your own 'coming out' plans. Good luck!

<Date>

Dear Mum and Dad,

You're both probably wondering what this is all about, although you may already know. If I built up the courage to tell you what I was supposed to when I handed you these envelopes, then you'd both know that I am gay. That is something which is really hard for me to say to you. This isn't something which happened overnight, I realised I might be gay back in 1990, when I was fourteen years old.

I have never been attracted to females; don't get me wrong, females are great people, and great friends, but unfortunately I don't feel I could even begin to have a relationship with one. I am automatically attracted to my own sex. I simply didn't decide to like guys, it's something which just happened, it feels natural for me.

For you mum, when you grew up, you were automatically attracted to guys, so you met and fell in love with dad. And you dad, when you grew up, you were automatically attracted to girls, so you met and fell in love with mum. You both didn't have to decide that you liked the opposite sex, it just happened to you naturally didn't it? Well it's exactly the same for me; when I was growing up, my feelings were telling me that I liked guys, not girls. It may sound strange to you, but I don't have to even think about it, it feels so natural for me to like guys. Some straight people don't believe you can naturally love someone who is the same sex as you, but I can tell you that it does happen, because it has happened to me.

According to statistics, one tenth of the population is gay; that's a lot of gay people. It may not seem like there are many gay people around, but a lot of them are too afraid to come out in fear of being rejected by family, friends and society. I just happen to be part of that one tenth, and nobody can predict who will turn out gay.

Now that you know, I hope you will still treat me the same way as you did before; as a normal person. There is nothing wrong with me, it's just the way some people react when they hear someone is gay. Nobody is going to be able to change my mind and try to make me straight. Some gay people try to act straight and attempt a straight relationship, but most of the time it ends up as a disaster, and can sometimes cause suicide. I love life, and I love the way I am, so I'm not going to change, and become depressed about who I should be. I am who I am. Everything I do will be exactly the same as it was before you knew I was gay, only I will be sharing my life with another guy, not a woman.

I would like to thank you both for taking the time to read this letter, I know it must be hard for you to find out your son is gay, and I hope you understand that coming out and telling you was an extremely difficult thing for me to do. I hope you will both be supportive about this issue, but if you don't want to know me as your son, then I will be happy you know the truth, but sad that you don't love me for who I really am. I will understand if you no longer want me to be a part of your lives but I hope we can still be as we are now; one happy family. Thank you, and please remember, I love you both, always!

Love from your son.  
(Nick, aged 21)

## 8. Virtual Communities

The Internet was the way I found of being who I am...(Lydia, aged 17)

### Relationships, self-affirmation and safety

A number of young people in this study wrote about their experiences of friendship and self-affirmation on the Internet. For many, this was the only place where they had had the opportunity to communicate with others in similar situations to themselves:

I had met this great girl on the Net, who was 17 and gay, in the same country as me which was even better. We started writing and that really helped a lot, now we've been writing for 6 months. (Kate, aged 14)

I have been using the Internet and chat rooms to help myself accept my homosexuality, there are people in the chat sites who are in my situation and I have many friendships with these people. (Tom, aged 17)

I've also made some gay friends via IRC (if you're gay and not using IRC you don't know what you're missing!!!) ... it was just the Internet and the people using it who made me realise that I'm not alone, and gave me the chance to talk to people like myself. (Mark, aged 20)

Hugh Miller sees the Internet as a safe space for exploring presentations of self because 'you can put yourself up for interactions without being aware of a rebuff' and 'others can try you out without risking being involved further than they would wish' (1995: 3). This lack of face-to-face relations provides a safety net for young people exploring same-sex attraction that is simply not available to them in 'Real Life' (RL). Claire, one of the participants, wrote:

I've been open about my sexuality over the Internet since I was about 13, and I've mostly found this to be a good idea it's mostly a supportive environment, and people who insult you for your sexuality don't seem as threatening.

(Claire, aged 14)

In this scenario, Claire acknowledges that the Internet is not always supportive but that the lack of face-to-face relations makes any insults directed at her less threatening than they would be in RL.

### **The Internet as a rehearsal space for coming out**

A populist view of young people's interactions with new information technologies is that they will use Cyberspace as a retreat from the everyday world. Daniel Chandler, in an article which examines the presentation of self via home pages cites an on-line interview with James, a gay British Internet user, who told him that 'having a home page meant that he was 'out' in Cyberspace long before being out in daily life.' (Chandler, 1998:12). There are plenty of examples of young people 'rehearsing' coming out scenarios in our data, which indicates that they are not using it as a retreat but as a safe way to experiment with coming out, in Turkle's words 'building realities less limited than their own' (1996b). In the example on page 66, Nick created a link to his homepage where he had constructed a proforma for a coming out letter to parents.

Nick encourages others to adapt his letter to their own Real Life situations, and expresses the hope that he can one day feel safe enough to actually give it to his mum and dad.

### **The Internet and face-to-face relations**

It has been suggested that 'some people may feel "more themselves" on the Internet than they do in RL in an analogous way to that in which some people feel better able to express their thoughts, feelings and personalities in writing than in face-to-face interaction (Chandler, 1998). However, what is missing in Virtual Reality (VR) are such things as 'facial expressions, vocal cues, body language - posture, gestures and non-verbal mannerisms in general - together with style of dress and hairstyle' (Chandler, 1998: 4). Symbols such as :) and \*grin\* are often used to replace these cues but still remain poor substitutes. Young people have the ability to switch apparently seamlessly between VR and RL but the pull towards self-affirmation and acceptance by significant 'embodied' others is strong. Many of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with relations on the Internet as Daniel and Christen suggested when they wrote:

Porn on the net is just so distant and is no substitute for the warmth of a loving boyfriend.  
(Daniel, aged 15)

I've been on the Internet and talked to other gays but I don't really feel comfortable because I can't see them. (Kirsten, aged 16)

In the following examples participants used the Internet as a rehearsal for the 'real' thing:

Through the Internet I have met people in the same situation as me. About 3 weeks ago I met a girl (whom I had been communicating with via the Internet for a few months) in real life. She is the first person I have had real contact with who knows about my sexuality, and it felt really weird, maybe because she is bisexual too. (Jessica, aged 20)

After looking around I found the #gayyouth channel. Within 3 or 4 nights (I started that bad habit of logging on every night), I had made three friends. I met one of them (another Andrew! - it is said all Andrews are gay and I suspect it to be mostly true) in real life two weeks later - a truly nice guy and a really good friend. (Justin, aged 19)

In these examples young people are actually using their VR experiences to change things in RL.

This brief examination of the ways in which these young people use the Internet to explore their sexuality suggests that it provides them with one of the few safe spaces available, where they can forge relationships that affirm their sexuality.

**Rosa wrote...**

I am 20 now and have finally understood and accepted my attraction to other females. It has really been the last four months that I have started living confidently as a lesbian. (It is so much easier to write it than to tell someone!) Before that I dodged the truth for my whole life. It is funny that I can look back now and see that I was always gay and it has been destined for me for 20 years. I have books and books of ten years of diary writing (on and off again) and it is such a record of my sexuality. All the time I was unaware of this. Periods where I wrote dutifully every day were times when I had a beautifully funny teacher or a best friend I had to write about. My life is more steady now, so too is the diary writing.

I went to an all girls school but only still have one true friend out of all of them. As my life style became more obvious they seemed suddenly busy and now I am rarely in contact with them. Since school I have been travelling a lot and haven't been around the area much...I have developed a new group of friends now which is great and what I needed.

It probably took me so long to realise because I had no reason to think I could have been gay. I had never had any exposure to gay people and no information had been available to me. School personal development was entirely directed at heterosexuals and I wasn't questioning this. My attractions have always been towards other girls and socially I felt things weren't right but then if you didn't know anything else it is unlikely you can just develop. I began developing my sexual being much later when I had met a dyke. This gave me something new, it opened up for me what I had never been.

I love being a lesbian; the friendships having been built in an honest and trusting way and strong and supportive. I finally feel that I know what I want, this I tell you is a huge relief. Suddenly everything became so clear for me. Before dealing with anyone else I have found I have needed time to feel comfortable and confident. Once you have the confidence you can deal with it all. The harassment and prejudice comes from small minded people we wouldn't want anything to do with anyway. It can be scary at times and there are times when I feel vulnerable but I would never wish to be any different. Gay and proud.

(Rosa, aged 20)

## **Conclusion**

Sexual diversity has been a key theme of this research, given the range of attractions, behaviours and identities revealed by participants. Many young people were experimenting with and exploring same-sex sexuality, while others have told stories (some for the first time) of clearly identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual, sometimes in the absence of actual sexual experience. In the context of supportive and affirming environments, which included some schools and families, and importantly, the Internet, young people were able to share stories which celebrate and affirm sexual diversity. It was encouraging to find that one-third felt unreservedly good about their sexuality, despite evidence of the extent to which all sexualities other than heterosexual remain stigmatised in Australian society.

However, overall, this research points to the absence of wide-spread public affirmation for homosexuality, as a practice or an identity, and many of the young people who contributed to this study were experiencing loneliness and isolation. Fear of being 'outed' and of 'coming out' to parents or friends were common themes and a considerable number of participants were experiencing overt abuse and discrimination in their daily lives. The decision to speak to someone about same-sex attractions was not taken lightly. Young people were well aware that making the wrong choice of confidante could destroy their equilibrium and had the potential to make their lives at home and at school very difficult. In a number of cases, the negative consequences of disclosing to the wrong person, particularly in the context of the family and school were described. Loss of trust and a sense of shame and betrayal were also common when close friends reacted badly. At the other extreme, support was often found where least expected.

The school environment needs to come under particular scrutiny given that school was the site of 70% of the homophobic abuse disclosed, making the school as unsafe as the streets for a number of participants (see Recommendations). It was disturbing to learn that in some cases, this abuse appeared to be occurring with the knowledge of those with a responsibility for duty of care to all students, namely teachers and other school authorities. Given this situation, the extent to which some participants had picked up on other discourses of resistance, for example, those against racism and sexism, is testimony to their resilience in the face of adversity. The young person who wrote: 'Why isn't gay hatred educated against like racism in school?' had clearly appropriated arguments against racism to use as arguments against heterosexism. Other young people also questioned a range of discriminatory practices which existed in schools such as the failure to honour basic human rights and the selective granting of privileges based on gender and sexuality.



Despite the fact that use of alcohol, marijuana and other illegal drugs is increasingly a feature of all young people's recreational lives, the high levels of usage of these substances reported by our participants needs to be emphasised. Stories young people told specifically linked drug use in part to alleviating painful feelings or experiences associated with their sexuality, and in some cases, to attempts at suicide. The levels of injecting drug use revealed by this group were up to four times higher than results obtained from other Australian studies. This points to the need for more specific research, particularly with young women and rural young people, whose levels of injecting were significantly high.

Finally, another key theme of the research was information deprivation. The range and sheer number of questions young people had about their homosexual feelings and behaviours emphasised the extent to which sexual exploration was occurring without much knowledge from trusted sources (school and family) as opposed to less trusted sources (media and peers). Information regarding lesbian sexuality and safe sex was a particular absence, and young people from rural areas were disadvantaged generally compared with their urban peers when it came to gay or 'straight' sexuality information from any source. Particularly in light of the evidence this research provides of extensive 'bisexual' activity, it is very important that SSAY are resourced to make informed decisions about their safe sex practices. It is also crucial that all young people are provided with a supportive environment as they try to make sense of diverse sexual feelings and behaviours.

## Recommendations

### Implications of this research for schools

#### *Policy*

- It is important to take a 'whole school' approach to the issues raised by this research. Sexuality is a structuring force in the lives of all young people, and a framework is needed which supports sexual diversity in all aspects of school life, rather than relegating such issues solely to the Health or Welfare curricula. In particular, there needs to be an emphasis on providing a safe school culture, rather than a focus on trying to identify queer students. Everyone in the school environment, teachers and students, need to be part of this process.
- Most schools already have anti-racism and anti-violence policies, in accordance with a duty of care to all students. Consideration needs to be given to policy development in the related area of homophobia, in terms of ensuring the unacceptably high levels of sexuality related abuse and harassment endemic in school environments are no longer tolerated.
- Schools should embark on policy development with an awareness that the Equal Opportunity Act (1995) exists in order to support those discriminated against for being 'different'. Young people who are maltreated within the school system have access to a supportive legal framework, should such support be denied them in the school environment.

#### *Curriculum*

- Clearly, there is a dearth of information available in schools with regard to sexual diversity, including an absence of basic knowledge about STD prevention for all but heterosexual sex. However, care needs to be taken that discussions of homosexuality are not exclusively (and misleadingly) linked to disease prevention, i.e. discussion of HIV and STDs.

- Schools need to take initiative in providing a sex education curriculum which acknowledges sound research evidence of high levels of sexual experimentation and sexual diversity among young people. A responsible curriculum needs to be inclusive of *all* sexualities, in order to ensure young people are not forced to seek information and support from the two sources they trust least, the media and their friends.
- This research has demonstrated that SSAY are heavily reliant on the media for information about queer sexuality. Media representations of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people often draw on a very limited range of negative and misleading stereotypes. There is much scope to interrogate these media representations, in the context of sexually diverse curricula.

### **Implications of this research for all practitioners working with SSAY.**

#### ***Sexual and cultural diversity***

Same-sex attracted young people are not an homogenous group. This research has revealed that some young people exploring their sexuality will do so relatively unproblematically, whereas others will require intensive support. Some young people will clearly identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, whereas others will experience homosexual behaviours and attractions as having little meaning for future identity. A number of SSAY will be labelled as gay or lesbian by their peers, while others will remain invisible.

Further to the above, living a queer lifestyle is not a concept which translates easily across a number of non-Western cultural boundaries. SSAY from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds (CALDB) may need specific support related to this issue. It is important for practitioners to take a non-judgemental approach to sexuality, and to be wary of making assumptions.

#### ***Young people from rural areas***

This research also indicated that SSAY from rural areas were experiencing a greater sense of isolation and lack of access to information than their urban peers. It should also be noted that rural young people were more likely than those from metropolitan areas to have injected drugs and also more likely to state that they 'never' used condoms in gay or heterosexual sex. The support needs of this group should be considered carefully, both at the local level and in the context of State and Nation-wide information campaigns.

***The importance of options***

Encouraging SSAY to 'come out' is not necessarily the solution. This research has demonstrated that disclosure of sexuality only increases young people's well-being if the people they choose to come out to are supportive. Sixty-five percent of the young people participating in this research were living in the family home, many with a fear of violence or of becoming homeless should their sexuality be disclosed. Young people's fears need to be taken seriously, indeed for some participants, the fear of homelessness had become a reality.

For this reason, encouraging young people to disclose their sexuality to family members, particularly while they are in a position of financial dependence is to be viewed with caution. What is important is providing a range a options: e.g. access to gay, lesbian, bisexual adult role models; linkages to youth peer support groups and the opportunity to discuss sexuality in private and in confidence with a sympathetic and informed adult.



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## Appendix One

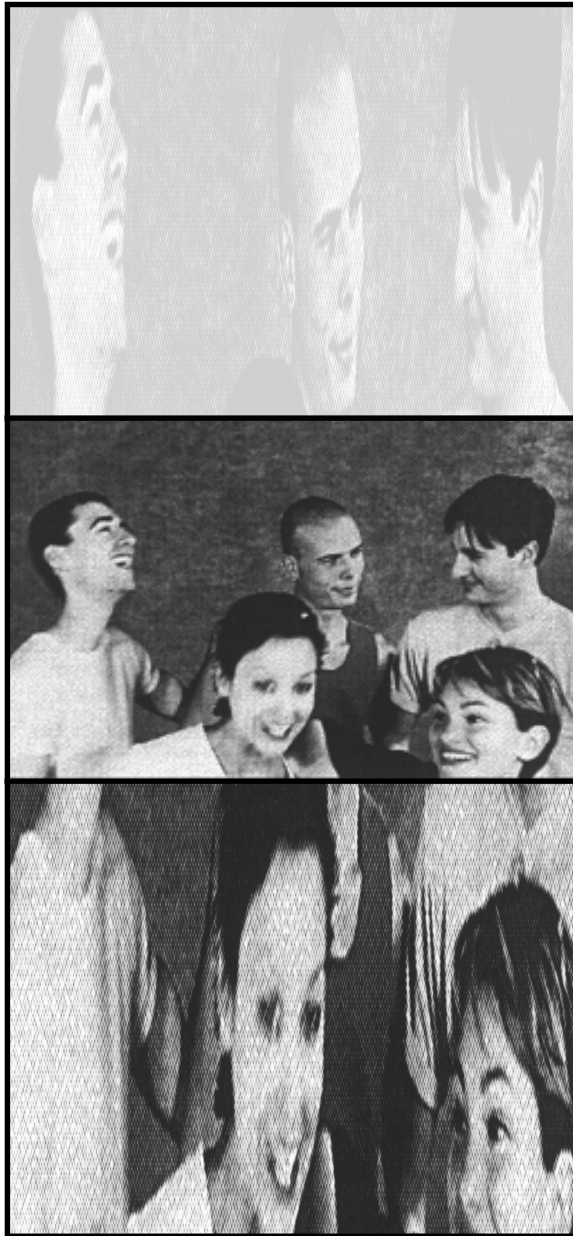
The following organisations supported the SSAY survey in providing hyperlinks from their respective sites:

Organisation	URL
Australian Queer Resources Directory	<a href="http://ausqrd.queer.org.au/qrd/">http://ausqrd.queer.org.au/qrd/</a>
Rainbow community centre	<a href="http://glwa.queer.org.au/html/rainbow_centre.htm">http://glwa.queer.org.au/html/rainbow_centre.htm</a>
Queer Perth	<a href="http://www.iinet.net.au">http://www.iinet.net.au</a>
Cyberqueer Australia	<a href="http://cyberqueer.rainbow.net.au">http://cyberqueer.rainbow.net.au</a>
Pinkboard	<a href="http://www.pinkboard.com.au">http://www.pinkboard.com.au</a>
Geekgirl E zine	<a href="http://206.251.6.116/geekgirl/">http://206.251.6.116/geekgirl/</a>
Lemonzine	<a href="http://lemon.rainbow.net.au">http://lemon.rainbow.net.au</a>
ANU Sexuality page	<a href="http://student.anu.edu.au/sexuality">http://student.anu.edu.au/sexuality</a>
Rainbow net	<a href="http://home.rainbow.net.au">http://home.rainbow.net.au</a>
ALSO foundation	<a href="http://www.also.org.au">http://www.also.org.au</a>
Yahoo Search Engine	<a href="http://www.yahoo.com.au">http://www.yahoo.com.au</a>
Triple J	<a href="http://www.abc.net.au/triple_j.htm">http://www.abc.net.au/triple_j.htm</a>
'Pillow talk' with Dr Feelgood	<a href="http://www.village.com.au/airwaves/austereo/pillow/drfeelgd.htm">http://www.village.com.au/airwaves/austereo/pillow/drfeelgd.htm</a>

**Table A1.** Organisations providing hyperlinks to the survey.

The survey was also publicised via a number of electronic mailing lists:

<i>Gay youth</i>	list for queer young people
<i>GALNET</i>	queer academics
<i>Aus GLBF</i>	general mailing list for issues affecting the Australian gay, lesbian and bisexual and transgender communities
<i>Oz Chat</i>	light chat list for Australian gay, lesbian and bisexual communities
<i>Vic Queer</i>	list for queers in Victoria
<i>ACT Queer</i>	list for queers in the ACT
<i>Oz Bi</i>	list for Australian bisexuals
<i>QLD Queer</i>	list for queers who live in Queensland



National Centre in HIV Social Research  
Youth and General Population Program

La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia