

## **New Study Indicates Gays and Lesbians Prone To Psychological Symptoms and Substance Abuse**

*But school bullying rates found to be similar for gay and straight participants*

By Roy Waller

The findings of a study just published in *the British Journal of Psychiatry* (December 2003) suggest higher incidences of illegal drug usage, alcoholism, psychological problems, and violence in the gay community than in the general population.

"Gay men and lesbians reported more psychological distress than heterosexual women, despite similar levels of social support and quality of physical health," the researchers reported (p. 556).

The controlled, cross-sectional study was conducted in both England and Wales. No European study in mental health, according to the researchers, has ever before recruited over a thousand gay and lesbian participants.

Surveying a total of 1,161 men (656 self-identified gay, 505 self-identified heterosexual) and 1,018 women (430 self-identified as lesbian, 588 self-identified as straight), the researchers said their main goal was "to compare psychological status, quality of life and use of mental health by lesbians and gay men with heterosexual people."

The researchers found that homosexual males and females both tended to score higher on scales of psychological distress than did their heterosexual counterparts. Further, they were found to be more likely to have used recreational drugs and to have inflicted deliberate harm upon themselves. Gays of both genders were also found to have consulted mental health professionals more frequently than the straight participants.

Additionally, the researchers found that the lesbian participants were the most frequent victims of physical intimidation and violence. Lesbians were also found to be "more likely than heterosexual women to drink excessively."

### **School Bullying Rates the Same**

But bullying at school, the study noted, was reported no more often by gay men than by heterosexual men. Reports that gay men and lesbians are disproportionately vulnerable to school harassment "are often taken

at face value," the researchers noted, with researchers failing to draw a comparison to heterosexual students, who—at least in this study—were found to suffer similar high rates of school bullying and harassment.

Termed the "Sexuality and Well Being Study," the research was conducted by a team headed by Michael King, M.D., Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Royal Free Campus, London; Eammon McKeown, Ph.D, of the Royal Free and University Medical School, London, and James Warner, M.D., Department of Psychiatry, Imperial College, London.

Among the very detailed findings reported, the doctors and their associates present the following statistical data:

- Gay men were almost ten percentage points more apt to suffer mental disorder (44% to 35%) than heterosexuals, with almost the same relative rate for lesbians compared to straight women (44% to 34%).
- Homosexual men are less likely than heterosexual to be involved in a steady relationship with one partner (48.4% to 38.9%), with the divergence in the statistic for women being considerably smaller (37.5% for lesbians, 35.7% for heterosexual women). Both gay men and women were found to live alone more often than the straight respondents.
- Concerning drug use, 52% of homosexual men and 44% of lesbian women reported such activity within a 30-day period preceding their interview, as contrasted with 45% and 33% of the straight men and women, respectively.
- 38% of gay men and 31% of the lesbians admitted having been physically attacked during the preceding five years, with the rates for heterosexual men and women once again being proportionately lower, despite their much larger representation in the population. Lesbians were the group reporting the highest rates of

actual physical harm and/or bullying behavior at the hands of another.

- 54% of the homosexuals and 56% of lesbians had inflicted harm upon themselves, as opposed to 41% of straight men and 50% of straight women.

The research team found that 63 of the gay men and 14 of the lesbians had considered therapy to change their sexual orientation, although only 15 of the men and 2 women said they had actually undergone some reorientation treatment.

In speculating about the reasons for the higher level of psychological problems, the researchers offered the commonly proposed theory that social discrimination could be a source of the problems. But they added that they were not suggesting—as did Bailey (1999) in a prominent prior study—that the higher level of mental disorders could be because homosexuality might constitute a "developmental error."

However, the researchers did note that "gay men and lesbians may have lifestyles that make them vulnerable to psychological disorder. Such lifestyles may include increased use of drugs and alcohol."

The study, which was conducted between September 2000 and July 2002, was the largest ever attempted in Europe.

#### References:

- Bailey, J.M., "Commentary: Homosexuality and Mental Illness," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, October 1999, vol. 56, no. 10, 876-880.
- King, M., E. McKeown, J. Warner, A. Ramsay, K. Johnson, C. Cort, L. Wright, R. Blizard, and O. Davidson, "Mental Health and Quality of Life of Gay Men and Lesbians in England and Wales," *British J. of Psychiatry* (2003), 183, 552-558.

### Love and Fidelity Incompatible?

Actor Richard Chamberlain recently came out as a gay man in his autobiography *Shattered Love*. In the book, Chamberlain spoke often of his almost 30-year relationship with his partner. In a recent interview published by the gay magazine *The Advocate*, he revealed what had kept the pair together over the years:

"We tried to split again and again. We'd get so mad at each other...I still sort of take it on faith that Martin likes being around me..."

"...that's when love is possible. When you are free. When you don't insist that your lover be anything any more---faithful, anything. It all goes out the window, all the expectations, all the demands. That's when you can love a person, I think, when your well-being detaches from all that."

---From "Richard's Redemption," by Judy Wieder, *The Advocate*, Jan. 20, 2004, p. 75.