

LGBT migrants persecuted because of sexual orientation, gender identity before immigrating, study finds

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Interviews were conducted with participants from Barbados, Belarus, Jamaica, Iran, Kenya, Kosovo, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Peru, Russia, South Korea, Trinidad, Uganda, Ukraine and Venezuela.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) migrants who obtained refuge or asylum in the U.S. or Canada on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity report extensive recollections of abuse by parents and caregivers, peers and school personnel, according to a new Rutgers

study.

This is first [empirical study](#) to explore early abuse experiences of [migrants](#) who fled persecution on the basis of sexual orientation or [gender identity](#).

The new study by Edward Alessi, assistant professor at Rutgers School of Social Work, in *Child Abuse & Neglect*, published Nov. 24, supports that what many studies of the LGBT community have found; LGBT children and youth are likely to experience abuse that contributes to a host of mental problems, including depression, anxiety and traumatic stress as well as suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts.

Findings indicate that participants experienced severe and prolonged verbal, physical and sexual abuse throughout childhood and adolescence and that abuse occurred at home, in school and in the community. Furthermore, there were few or no resources or protections available to them.

An analysis of 26 interviews with individuals who obtained refugee/asylee status in the U.S. or Canada based on [sexual orientation](#) or gender identify was conducted with participants from Barbados, Belarus, Jamaica, Iran, Kenya, Kosovo, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Peru, Russia, South Korea, Trinidad, Uganda, Ukraine and Venezuela.

"The findings suggest that compared to what we already know about LGBT youth in the U.S., children and youth in these countries have fewer support system resources, which impacts their resiliency. Also, unlike youth in the U.S. and Canada who can choose to move to a more tolerant region, movement is moving to another part of the country does not help because of laws and policies that make escaping severe homophobia and transphobia difficult," says Alessi.

The study found that from a young age, participants incurred negative reactions from parents and [family members](#) for transgressing gender norms by their manner of speaking and dressing, their choice of recreational activities, friends and sexual partners. These transgressions became a major source of conflict with caregivers. Participants recounted episodes of severe verbal and physical abuse that began in childhood, for some as early as 5 years old.

As participants entered puberty, family members devised strategies for enforcing change, especially for those whose parents discovered their same-sex attractions. It was common for family members to tell participants to pray, read the Bible or meet with clergy members in order to "cure" them, Alessi reports.

Participants also described a range of abuses by peers, teachers and school administrators. All but four participants reported abuse by peers and/or [school personnel](#) for being perceived as lesbian or gay. Victimization began in primary school and continued through high school. Some transferred schools, while others eventually dropped out because the abuse was so severe.

"When victimization occurred at the hands of peers or teachers, some participants could not rely on their parents to protect them. Many parents believed that participants had brought the abuse upon themselves because of their gender non-conformity. Additionally, they had nowhere to turn since parents and family members perpetrated the [abuse](#) as well," said Alessi.

Participants reported that they began to experience psychological distress in childhood and that it continued into adulthood. They described experiences of depression, anxiety, and traumatic stress prior to migration. Many internalized negative messages, which contributed to the belief that they were "defective, sick, or demonically possessed."

Preliminary evidence from this study suggests that repeated exposure to traumatic events in childhood and adolescence might place LGBT forced migrants at risk for developing serious mental health problems, including complex trauma syndromes. Alessi hopes that this study will help to enforce existing international policies that protect LGBT children and youth and contribute to finding appropriate mental health services for these forced migrants.

Despite the bleak picture of lives before migration, Alessi reports that [participants](#) also manifested extraordinary levels of resilience.

"To deal with their situations during childhood and adolescence, many immersed themselves in their studies and therefore excelled academically. Furthermore, seeking refuge or asylum should be considered an act of resilience in and of itself," he adds.

More information: Edward J. Alessi et al. 'The darkest times of my life': Recollections of child abuse among forced migrants persecuted because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.10.030](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.10.030)

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