

Study finds life for sexual, gender minority youths in small towns not all negative

October 24 2018, by Mike Krings



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For sexual and gender minority youths, growing up in a small town can be difficult. But new research from the University of Kansas finds that it's not all a negative experience and that communities often are

supportive in multiple ways.

Whether it's having gay-straight alliances or supportive people in schools, safe businesses, meeting spaces or simply good friends, small and rural communities can be supportive for sexual and gender minority youths. And that support can save lives.

Megan Pacey, assistant professor of social welfare, co-authored a study that conducted in-depth interviews with self-identified sexual or gender minority youths between the ages of 14 and 18 who live in small communities in Midwest counties with less than 25,000 people. The study approached small town support from the Strengths Perspective. Founded at KU, the perspective focuses on an individual's, strengths, opportunities and support rather than a problem and how to fix it when working with individuals in social work settings.

"We wanted to see what were the opportunities that communities have to be better," Pacey said.

The youths had a range of experiences, with some saying life in their small towns was very difficult. Many others, though, said they loved their homes and the communities were quite supportive. While nearly any group of small-town youths will have some longing to move to a bigger city and all it has to offer, the participants noted several factors in their small communities that made their lives better.

Chief among the factors was supportive people. Those who had family members or often people in their schools whom they could talk to felt the most supported.

"Not just supporters, but people they could talk to who were willing to have open, honest conversations and people who were willing to help," Pacey said.

Resources also ranked highly on the list of important factors. Only three of the communities had a support group or official organization, and others had a gay-straight alliance in their community where they could go to discuss the challenges they face in life. Others had to drive an hour to a larger community to do so, and many did not have such an opportunity, but all realized the value of having an LGBTQ community center or pride event, even if there were community or logistical challenges.

"The [youth](#) absolutely talked about how a supportive community has a place where they can go," Pacey said. "They also mentioned having training or education available for the community, like training for how people in school can talk with sexual and gender minority youths and be supportive allies."

Visibility and community policies were the other top supportive factors the youths reported. In the case of the former, it could be something as simple as seeing a same-sex couple holding hands in public to businesses that put a rainbow sticker in their window letting people know it was a safe, supportive space for all. In terms of policy, many said local policies that prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation would be especially helpful. That would be even in the case of communities located in states with such policies, some said, because the communities could simply not follow the state guidelines.

Being supportive of sexual and gender minority youths is important, not only to reduce harassment or prevent outright hostility, Pacey said, but because such support can make a life or death difference. Research has shown that youths in that demographic who grow up in unsupportive or hostile environments are up to 20 percent more likely to attempt suicide. While communitywide support is ideal, individual support was rated most important. People who are willing to be supportive allies can make a difference.

The study, co-authored by Margaret Thomas of Boston University, Jackie Toole of Ohio University and Elise Pavicic of KU, was published in the *Journal of Community Practice*.

Paceley, who educates future social workers, said the findings can help them recognize how important their work with sexual and gender minority youths can be and that they can help bring about communitywide changes and opportunities. However, one does not need to be a licensed social worker to make a difference. Simply listening to young people can help identify what's right in a community.

"Anybody who works with youths or is around them in the community can look at this and say, 'Where do we go from here and how can we make things better?' Can we do something small like putting a sticker in a window or making training available," Paceley said. "My whole goal is that this information is used to find what's happening in a community, what's going right and what can be improved. Letting kids be the experts on their own lives and giving communities a chance to be supportive is best. We can help people find opportunities to talk about it and learn what to do. That's a place to start."

More information: Megan S. Paceley et al. "If Rainbows Were Everywhere": Nonmetropolitan SGM Youth Identify Factors That Make Communities Supportive, *Journal of Community Practice* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/10705422.2018.1520773](https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2018.1520773)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Study finds life for sexual, gender minority youths in small towns not all negative (2018, October 24) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-10-life-sexual-gender-minority-youths.html>

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