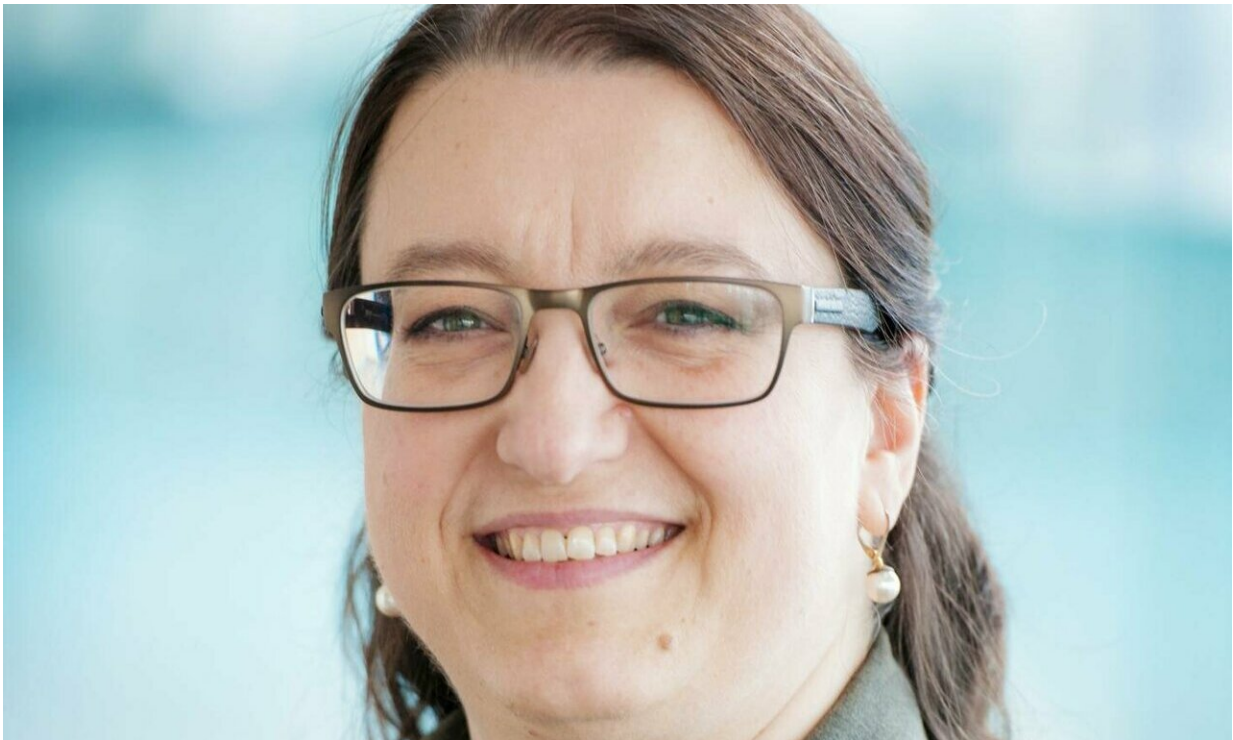


Gay-straight alliances contribute to a safer school climate long-term

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UBC professor Elizabeth Saewyc is pictured. Credit: UBC

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) help make schools safer for students the longer they are in place, even among straight students, finds new research from the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre at the University of British Columbia.

"We found that students' feelings of safety at [school](#) kept increasing over at least 14 years, the longest time a GSA had been in a B.C. school so far," said Elizabeth Saewyc, a professor of nursing at UBC and senior author of the study. "Schools that never had a GSA did not show the same patterns of improving school safety."

The study, published in *Social Science & Medicine-Population Health*, uses data from 135 schools participating in the province-wide B.C. Adolescent Health Surveys going back to 2003, and used a new analytical approach to analyze the effects of GSAs.

Participants included 1,625 students who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and 37,597 of their straight classmates. They reported how often they felt safe in six school settings: classrooms, washrooms, hallway, cafeteria, library and outside on school property during school hours.

Previous studies have shown a link between GSAs and lower levels of bullying, and better mental health for LGBTQ students and straight students alike. However, as Saewyc explained, most of these studies were based on a single point in time, and so cannot determine cause and effect.

"Randomized trials are the gold standard for testing interventions, but how do you persuade dozens of schools to be randomly chosen to start a GSA or not?" said Saewyc. "And it would be incredibly expensive to follow those schools for 10 or more years to track the effects on each new group of students. In contrast, our study draws from multiple years of existing data and uses new analysis to account for the same things that a random experiment does, with schools that had never had GSAs standing in for control groups."

The B.C. Adolescent Health Surveys have been conducted every five

years to track the health of adolescents in grades seven through 12. By identifying which schools started GSAs and when, Saewyc noted, the researchers were able to connect that information to students' responses in each survey year.

They used a statistical technique, multiple group multilevel modelling, with large-scale surveys that have been repeated over time. This enabled the researchers to analyze data collected from different individuals from the same sites in different years.

"We know that it's hard to do well in school when students don't feel safe in school," Saewyc explained. "GSAs can contribute to a safer school climate long-term, and that could improve both students' achievement and their [health](#)."

More information: Gu Li et al, Investigating site-level longitudinal effects of population health interventions: Gay-Straight Alliances and school safety, *SSM - Population Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100350](#)

Provided by University of British Columbia

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