

Stress of being outed to parents and caregivers: What are the mental health consequences?

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In 2023, lawmakers across the U.S. introduced a record number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills. Although the 2024 legislative session has just begun, the

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is already tracking 429 bills, a figure on pace to surpass 2023 numbers.

The rise in anti-LGBTQ+ policy rhetoric has coincided with an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ violence. According to data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) [2022 annual crime report](#), anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes increased 13.8% from 2021.

As more [policy proposals](#) are directed at LGBTQ+ youth, advocates are concerned about how children's mental and physical well-being will be affected.

"In recent years, we've seen an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation targeting kids, and even though not all of these bills will become law, even the introduction of the bills may have an immediate and real impact on kids' lives and their mental health," says Ryan Watson, associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences (HDFS).

A total of 32 such proposals have advanced in the legislatures of Arizona, Hawaii, Missouri, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Washington, West Virginia, and other states. At least six states have laws on the books to forcibly out students.

"It's critical that as researchers we stay engaged in understanding and speaking out against legislative policies that have the potential to do real harm to LGBTQ+ youth, equally important is supporting policies that protect youth. These policies have the potential to greatly and quickly impact the lives of LGBTQ+ youth," says Lisa Eaton, professor of Human Development and Family Sciences.

Despite [social progress](#), SGDY experience higher levels of discrimination, bullying, and stress, depression, and anxiety compared to

their cisgender and heterosexual peers, and these health disparities continue to grow. SGDY report experiencing bullying, violence, discrimination, and rejection based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. When youth choose to disclose their identity, they often consider the support they may receive.

To investigate the mental health consequences of sexual and gender-diverse youth (SGDY) whose sexual or gender identity is forcibly disclosed to their parents without their permission, a team of researchers at UConn's Sexuality, Health, and Intersectional Experiences (SHINE) Lab conducted a [study](#) that was recently published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

Watson and Eaton, both are [principal investigators](#) at UConn's Institute for Collaboration on Health, Intervention, and Policy (InCHIP), co-direct the SHINE Lab. The SHINE Lab conducts research to improve understanding of how [sexual orientation](#) and gender identity, family experiences, school contexts, and ethnoracial identity affect health outcomes among sexually and gender-diverse youth and adults.

"Unique stressors, like bullying based on sexual and gender identities, are experienced at a time when youth are meeting important developmental milestones; at this same time, SGDY are typically financially and legally dependent upon their caregivers. There is a critical gap of knowledge on how the manner of disclosure may be related to the well-being of sexual and gender diverse youth.

"Our study aimed to understand how experiences of being outed to parents were related to [mental health](#)," says the study's lead author Peter McCauley, a second-year HDFS Ph.D. student and research assistant at the SHINE Lab.

McCauley and his collaborators used data from the LGBTQ National

Teen Survey collected in partnership with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) between April and December 2017. Respondents were between the ages of 13 and 17, identified as LGBTQ+, spoke English, and were U.S. residents.

The team found that respondents who were outed (about 30%) to their parents were more likely to experience elevated depressive symptoms and lower LGBTQ family support compared to those who were not. Parents who affirmed and supported their child's identity could potentially mitigate [depressive symptoms](#) from the stress of being outed.

The study demonstrates that a lack of agency in disclosing a sexual and/or [gender identity](#) to parents can greatly undermine the well-being of SGDY and indicate lower levels of family support. It also underscores the importance of enabling SGDY [youth](#) to have greater control over when they disclose their identities.

"A staggering number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been proposed that mandate school officials to out students' identities to parents and caregivers. Policymakers should be aware of the harms these bills have on the well-being of students and strongly argue for their right to disclose their identities on their own terms," says McCauley.

More information: Peter S. McCauley et al, Stress of being outed to parents, LGBTQ family support, and depressive symptoms among sexual and gender diverse youth, *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/jora.12912](https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12912)

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