Writing Themselves in 3

The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people

Lynne Hillier
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Marisa Monagle
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Luke Gahan
Jennifer Blackman
Anne Mitchell

If I could choose it, in the beginning I would have never chosen this life. But I love my life now. No-one is purely straight, they have no idea what they're missing out on

I love my life! There was a time a year or two ago when I was not very happy or healthy, but I overcame that with support of my friends and family. Now, I am proud to be who I am, and I believe that sexuality has no boundaries. There is no right or wrong way to love someone, so I am just enjoying getting out there and meeting awesome LGBT people and having a good time. I would like other people to know that homosexuality is not a bad thing or a curse, as I'm sure many close-minded people believe. If anything , I prefer having fluid sexuality, and if I could choose to be straight, gay, bisexual, whatever, I would chose to be a lesbian, over and over.

I'm currently working my way towards a Law degree, so I can eventually one day become a prosecutor, for gay rights, and one day become a High Court Judge, just like Michael Kirby. I Want to help make Australia a better place for gay people and I know I will. I hope this survey helps make things better for gay youth. I was happy to do it.

My life as a gay man is mostly fine. I love being gay, I love my life. I have a very supportive family and very supportive friends. I'm lucky in that way because not everyone has that, and I wish they did. So many kids get disowned and mistreated by their families and friends for being gay, and that's unforgiveable.

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LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society

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Contents

Acknowledgements v

Figures vi

Glossary vii

Executive summary ix

1. Introduction 1
- The survey 2

2. Design of the study 5
- Questionnaire design and development 5
- Terminology regarding sexuality 5
- Ethical considerations 6
- Sampling 6
- Design of recruitment campaign concept 6
- Recruitment and promotion 7
- Data analysis 8

3. The young people 11
- Key findings 11
- Where did you first hear about the survey? 12
- Gender 12
- Age 13
- Country of birth 13
- Remoteness of young people's residence 13
- State or territory of residence 14
- Accommodation 14
- Education and work status 15
- Type of secondary school attended 15
- Religion 15

4. Sexual feelings 17
- Key findings 17
- Sexual attraction 17
- How do you feel about being attracted to the same sex? 18
- First realisations 20

5. Sexual identity 27
- Key findings 27
- Other identifications 28
- Further understanding identity and attraction 29

6. Sexual behaviours 33
- Key findings 33
- Sexual Experience 33
- Sexually transmitted infections 35
- Pregnancy 35
- Relationship between sexual behaviour and attraction 37

7. How do people treat you? 39
- Key findings 39
- Verbal abuse 40
- Physical abuse 41

Other types of homophobic abuse 43
Where the verbal and/or physical abuse occurred 44

8. Links between abuse and negative health indicators 49
Key findings 49
Abuse and feeling safe 49
Abuse and self harm 50
Drug Use 53
Homophobic abuse and drug use 55
Homophobic abuse and schooling 55

9. Internet use 59
Key findings 59
Internet access at home 59
Feelings about internet sites 59
Which Internet sites were most helpful 61
Using the internet to explore sexual identity 61
Uses of the internet for sexuality related issues 63

10. Disclosure and support 67
Key findings 67
Disclosure to family 68
Disclosure to friends and peers 70
Disclosure to professionals 70

11. Support as a buffer against negative health consequences of homophobia 73
Key findings 73
School policies and climate 77

12. Sexuality education and school experience 79
Key findings 79
Sources of information about homophobia and discrimination 80
Sources of information about relationships 81
Sources of information about safe sex 82
Policy-based Protections in Schools 82
Sexuality Education classes and lessons 83
Usefulness of Sexuality Education 84
Support Features of Schools 87
The School Culture in General 87
What young people want from school 88

13. Multiple layers of influence 91
Religion 91
Rurality 96
Gender questioning young people 98

Conclusion 101

Recommendations 107

References 110

Appendix 114

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Our greatest vote of thanks is, as always, reserved for the three and a half thousand young people who took the time to fill in the survey. Your willingness to share your lives with us, the hard and dark times, the good and rewarding times, the hopes for the future and the wisdom that comes with survival is genuinely appreciated. Your generosity, resilience and commitment continues to inspire us and we could not do this work without all of you.

Figures

Figure 1.	*How did you first hear about the survey?*	*12*
Figure 2.	*State/territory of residence: general youth population and survey sample*	*14*
Figure 3.	*Comparison of gender and sexual attraction in 2010*	*17*
Figure 4.	*How do you feel about being attracted to the same sex; 1998, 2004, 2010*	*18*
Figure 5.	*Age at first realisation by gender*	*20*
Figure 6.	*Identity choice by gender*	*28*
Figure 7.	*Identity choice by attraction*	*29*
Figure 8.	*Comparison of sexual activity between 15-18 year old SSAGQ students and their peers in the 2008 SSASH survey*	*34*
Figure 9.	*Sexual attraction by gender of sexual partner; 1998, 2004, 2010*	*37*
Figure 10.	*Other types of homophobia by gender*	*42*
Figure 11.	*Comparison of place of abuse; 1998, 2004, 2010*	*45*
Figure 12.	*Place of abuse by gender*	*47*
Figure 13.	*Relationship between abuse and feeling safe*	*50*
Figure 14.	*Relationship between homophobic abuse, self harm and suicide*	*51*
Figure 15.	*Relationship between abuse and excessive levels of drug use*	*55*
Figure 16.	*How young people felt about the internet*	*60*
Figure 17.	*Disclosure to family; 1998, 2004, 2010*	*69*
Figure 18.	*Disclosure to friends and on internet; 1998, 2004 and 2010*	*70*
Figure 19.	*Disclosure to professionals; 1998, 2004 and 2010.*	*71*
Figure 20.	*Rates of self harm in young people when supported or rejected by family*	*74*
Figure 21.	*Rates of attempted suicide in young people when supported or rejected by family*	*75*
Figure 22.	*Rates of self harm in young people who had been assaulted when supported or rejected*	*76*
Figure 23.	*Rates of suicide attempts in young people who had been assaulted when supported or rejected*	*76*
Figure 24.	*Sources of information on homophobia and discrimination*	*80*
Figure 25.	*Sources of information about relationships*	*81*
Figure 26.	*Sources of information about safe sex*	*82*
Figure 27.	*Content of Sexuality Education*	*83*
Figure 28.	*Support features in school*	*87*

Glossary

Bisexual

A person who is sexually and emotionally attracted to people of both sexes.

CALD

Culturally and linguistically diverse.

Coming out

The process through which individuals come to recognise and acknowledge, both privately and publicly, their sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status.

Gay

A person whose primary emotional and sexual attraction is toward people of the same sex. The term is most commonly applied to men, although some women use this term.

Gender identity

A person's deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, in between, or something other. Everyone has a gender identity.

Gender questioning

Refers to the process whereby an individual comes to question the usefulness or validity of their current biological sex and/or assigned gender. This includes people who see the binary categories of male and female/masculine and feminine as meaningless or unduly restrictive, and those who feel that their gender does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Heterosexism

The belief that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual and that other types of sexualities or gender identities are unhealthy, unnatural and a threat to society. Heterosexism includes both homophobia and transphobia (see below) and a fear of intersex people who challenge the heterosexist assumption that there are only two sexes.

Homophobia

The fear and hatred of lesbians and gay men and of their sexual desires and practices that often leads to discriminatory behaviour or abuse.

Lesbian

A woman whose primary emotional and sexual attraction is towards other women.

Pansexual

"Pan" is a prefix refering to "all" or "whole" so encompassing all kinds of sexuality and expressing the full spectrum of desire.

Queer

An umbrella term to include a range of alternative sexual and gender identities including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender or gender questioning.

Same sex attracted

An umbrella term applied to young people to describe individuals who experience feelings of sexual attraction to others of their own sex. This includes young people who are exclusively homosexual in their orientation, bisexual, undecided young people, and heterosexual young people who have these feelings at some time.

STIs

Sexually Transmitted Infections.

SSAGQ

Same sex attracted and gender questioning. An umbrella term for the group of young people who responded to this survey.

Transgender

An umbrella term and, for some people, an identity term used to describe all kinds of people who sit outside the gender binary or whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender people may or may not feel the need to access hormone therapy and/or surgery.

Transphobia

A fear and hatred of people who are transgender that often leads to discriminatory behaviour or abuse.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This is the third of the *Writing Themselves In* national reports which have been conducted six years apart since 1998. In 2010, a total of 3134 same sex attracted and gender questioning (SSAGQ) young people participated in *Writing Themselves In 3* ***(WTi3),*** almost double the number in 2004 and more than four times that of 1998. The participants, who were aged between 14 and 21 years, came from all states and territories of Australia, from remote (2%), rural (18%) and urban (67%) areas and from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. There were more young women (57%) than young men (41%) and a smaller group (3%) who were gender questioning (GQ).

Sexual feelings

In 2010, the complex interaction of sexual attraction, identity and behaviour was even more evident than in previous studies. Most young men were exclusively same sex attracted but half of the young women were attracted to both sexes and less than one third exclusively to the same sex. More than a third of young people realized their sexual difference before puberty and there were few gender differences in age of first realization.

More young people felt positive about their same sex attraction than in 2004. As in 2004, young people who felt bad about their sexuality used homophobic beliefs to describe their reasons whereas those who felt good used resistant, affirming explanations.

Sexual identity

Most young men identified as gay/homosexual. Young women were more likely to identify as bisexual. Young women chose a greater range of identity terms to describe their sexuality.

Sexual behaviours

As in 2004, the evidence from this survey indicates that SSAGQ young people are less likely to use a condom, twice as likely to become pregnant and more likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI) compared to their heterosexual peers. However, 28% of participants had never had sex, more than the 23% in 2004. Young women were more likely to have had sex than the young men and young men were more likely to have had exclusive same sex sexual encounters than young women. One fifth of young women, despite their same sex attractions, continued to have sex exclusively with the opposite sex. These young people were more likely to be sexually active at an earlier age than other young people raising the importance of teaching inclusive and relevant sex education and the need for inclusive sexual health service provision.

How do people treat you?

We learned from the previous two national reports that SSAGQ young people suffer high levels of verbal and physical homophobic abuse in the community and particularly at school. In 2010 61% of young people reported verbal abuse because of homophobia, 18% physical abuse and 26% 'other' forms of homophobia. Young men and GQ young people reported more abuse than young women.

The most common place of abuse remained school with 80% of those who were abused naming school. This continues the trend of increased levels of reported homophobic violence in schools (69% in 1998; 74% in 2004) and may, in part, be the result of more SSAGQ young people being out and visible. Sport was the place of least abuse but young men and GQ young people were over represented in this percentage.

Links between abuse and negative health indicators

There were strong links between homophobic abuse and feeling unsafe, excessive drug use, self harm and suicide attempts. Young people who had been physically abused had worse mental health indicators than those who reported verbal abuse or no abuse. Drug use, which we surmise from their stories is often about self medication, was higher in these young people than young people in general and young women were more likely to use drugs than young men. For more than half of the participants, homophobic abuse impacted negatively on aspects of their schooling, however, for 42%, homophobia had no impact at all.

Internet use

The internet was readily available to the young people in this study with 97% having access at home. Young people used the internet to seek opportunities not available offline, that is, to connect with others in a similar situation and to learn about being same sex attracted. Those who reported using the internet to explore sexual identity were more likely to be male and attracted exclusively to the same sex. Belonging to an internet site was generally a positive experience for these young people with 75% of them feeling accepted there for who they were and feeling pride in their sexuality. Activism was also an important part of internet use with around a third feeling it was a place where they could work for change around homophobia. ***Facebook*** was overwhelmingly the most popular site used by participants.

Disclosure and support

In 2010, 97.5% of young people had disclosed their same sex attractions to at least one person, a continuing trend to openness from 1998 (82%) and 2004 (95%). This was largely successful with support from family, friends, internet and professionals being higher than in previous studies. In general, young men were more likely to disclose, and more likely to be supported compared to young women, particularly by parents.

As in previous reports, friends, more than anyone, were the first confidantes for SSAGQ young people. Friends and peers on the internet were also an important avenue of disclosure and for many young people the only avenue for at least a time. While young people with a religious background were almost as likely to be out to parents compared to the rest, they were less likely to be supported. Young people from CALD backgrounds were less likely to tell their parents and, if they did, less likely to get family support.

Support as a buffer against negative health outcomes of homophobia

Support of family, friends and, to a lesser extent, professionals was shown to lessen the destructive impacts of homophobia. A significant contribution to the mental health of SSAGQ young people was made by schools which had policies against homophobic abuse, with students at these schools being generally less likely to self harm. More significant was the finding that young people who reported their school as having a supportive environment, were less likely to harm themselves or attempt suicide demonstrating the importance of putting policy into practice.

Sexuality Education and school experience

While a quarter of young people attended a school where they knew there was policy-based protection from homophobia and discrimination, almost a half of participants attended a school with no social or structural support features for sexual diversity. One in five attended a school that they felt was, in the

main, supportive or very supportive of their sexuality. As many as 37% of young people described their school as homophobic or very homophobic overall.

Sexuality Education was not provided at all to 10% of participants, and when it was, only 15% found it useful. It was clear that quite conservative messages emphasizing heterosexual sex and danger are the norm in most Australian schools with a far smaller number providing messages inclusive of SSAGQ youth. This meant that the internet, generally less trusted by young people, was the most important source of information. Young people were asked what they wanted from their school and the strongest theme (appearing in 40% of responses) was that they wanted the Sexuality Education delivered by their school to be changed so that it was more inclusive of same sex attraction and gender diversity.

Multiple layers of influence

Religion

A number of young people in the study mentioned religion in their answers. These young people were more likely than others to feel bad about their same sex attraction and less likely to feel good. They were also more likely to have experienced social exclusion or had to tolerate homophobic language from friends and family and to feel less safe at home. These young people received less support from parents, siblings and teachers when they disclosed their sexuality and they were more likely to report self harm and suicidal thoughts. However, it is also important to note that they reported more positive and affirming religious experiences than young people in previous reports. Some young people in 2010 were able to comfortably be gay and Christian without the usual tensions between these two ways of being.

Rurality

Through their stories, many young people expressed concern about living in rural and remote towns due to the isolation, discrimination and lack of appropriate services and support. The rates of self harm for urban young people were far lower than those in rural and remote areas. Young people living in rural and remote areas were less likely to feel safe at school, at social occasions and on the internet than their urban peers. Many young people aspired to leave their rural and regional homes to become the person they wanted to be in an urban environment.

Gender questioning (GQ) young people

In this survey 3% of young people described their gender identity as other than male or female. These young people had quite complex understandings of their attractions, sophisticated ideas on sexuality and different views on what various identities mean. Generally this group was more likely to have always known their sexual identity and, while they were more likely to have disclosed their difference to others, they were less likely to be supported. Gender Questioning (GQ) young people were also at greater risk of homelessness, physical abuse, self harm and suicide. They were more likely to have moved schools or dropped out of school as a result of homophobia and to have had problems at school such as difficulty concentrating, reduced academic performance and hiding at recess and lunchtime.

Many of these young people aspired to make a difference in the world despite the extra difficulties they face, and feel pride in their diversity. This group was twice as likely to get involved in activism in response to the discrimination they face.

Conclusion

It has been a privilege doing research with same sex attracted young people over the last twelve years, and in that time we have seen many changes, most of which are positive ones, occurring in the worlds of these young people. One of the largest changes is in their visibility and in the expanding numbers we have been able to access each time.

The most encouraging of all our findings is the degree to which, over the twelve years, supports for young people have improved, despite increases in homophobic abuse. This is largely due to the efforts of the young people themselves in coming out and working for change, but also to the many advocates for their cause creating change, and to a progressive shift in social attitudes towards a more relaxed and appreciative view of sexual and gender diversity.

Recommendations

The report concludes with a series of recommendations arising out of the research and directed at government, education authorities, schools and health services.

1. Introduction

Ok :) Well this survey was like totally rad dude. (I dont really talk like that, Im just really into Bill and Teds Excellent Adventure lately) lol. And uh, I dunno, my life has been ok, I guess it could have been a lot worse. Its still just as boring and meaningless and insignificant as everyone elses. But maybe one day, perhaps this year when I start uni, I'll like make friends and like feel like I belong or some crap like that and yeah maybe like oh no is he going to say it! yeah... find a boyfriend. Those are my main hopes for the future regarding any types of relationships with other people. I hope it works out. Thank you survey for being my cybernetic friend for the evening lol :) You probably think im a total weirdo. thanks anyway :) (Luke, 17 years)

It is with great pleasure that we present *Writing Themselves In 3* (WTi3), the third national study of the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people (SSAGQ)[1]. Over the last twelve years, as part of the Commonwealth funded program at the Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society (ARCSHS) (and Vic Health funded for WTi3), three *Writing Themselves In* national studies have been conducted six years apart, the first in 1998, the second in 2004 and now WTi3 in 2010. The research was originally part of a national program of research with marginalised young people, including rural and homeless youth. It aimed to document the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted young people because, in 1997, we knew little about how these young people were faring, despite having strong anecdotal evidence of discrimination and homophobia in schools and the community and negative health impacts. The national study in 1998 appears to have been a world first. The Netherlands has just completed its first national study of same sex attracted young people this year (Keuzenkamp et al., 2010).

The 1998 report was used to inform a range of initiatives, including funding applications, curriculum materials, health promotion resources and social support groups and much was done nationally to train service providers, including teachers. The 2004 report aimed to document changes over the previous six years, especially given the work that had been done in schools and the community to counteract homophobia. It also aimed to provide reliable information for workers with young people and policy makers to use as a guide to practice. It recommended that government needed to show leadership in combating homophobia, especially in schools. There was much Government interest in this report. In Victoria, for example, three pre-launch briefings were requested by government departments and a whole of government round table was convened to plan a response to the problems highlighted by the research.

The *Writing Themselves In* reports serve several functions beyond being a strong indicator of the sexual health and wellbeing of SSAGQ young people. They are an indicator of levels of homophobia in Australian schools and other places where young people congregate, and they reveal the effectiveness of the many interventions that aim to make Australia a safer and more inclusive place for these young people. The *Writing Themselves In* reports also serve as a guide for government, other sectors and workers who have responsibility for, and work, with young people. The research has been widely accepted. It has been used Australia-wide to inform government policy, and is evident in a number of government documents relating to social policy, school safety and curriculum development. The research

1 We have extended the SSA acronym to include gender questioning (GQ). This includes young people who identify as transgender, gender queer and 'other' than male and female. We feel that gender questioning is similar to same sex attracted in that it speaks for the present and not the future but honours young people's feelings and beliefs at the current time.

has also been used to produce resources in which the participant's wisdom can be passed on to other young people, for example, the POSH booklets[2].

In 2010, much has changed since the first *Writing Themselves In* report in 1998. The shifts have been in the direction of equity, visibility and support for sexual difference. The increased development of a human rights agenda relating to sexual health (Gruskin, 2006; WHO, 2006) has meant that same sex attracted young people are now regarded as having the right to good health and wellbeing, including up to date sexual health information and the right to an education free from discrimination and abuse. While various relationships bills were sporadically introduced in most Australian states by 2004, the *Same sex Relationships Equal Treatment General Law Reform Bill* passed through the Australian Senate in 2008, reforming 58 federal laws to promote equity for same sex couples. Visibility in the media now normalises same sex attraction and no longer do we have the tragic lesbian or gay male character inevitably dying at the end of a movie. There has been an increase in positive media visibility of alternate sexualities (for example, *The L Word, True Blood, Glee, The Block, Modern Family* and *Ellen*), and also in Australian television shows specifically (for example, openly gay contestants on *Australian Master Chef*, same sex kisses on *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* and Aurora's Australian *Queer TV* program on Foxtel). However, at the time of print, the same sex marriage debate continues and there have been various protests around Australia on the issue.

Community development projects have also highlighted SSAGQ youth issues and built capacity to support these young people within the community. Furthermore, many social support groups have given young people a safe space to find information and meet others like themselves. This is increasingly true for gender diverse young people, for whom more information and online groups are becoming available. Most political parties now support antidiscrimination policies relevant to sexual orientation. It might then be assumed that SSAGQ young people now live in safe, inclusive environments at school, at home and in the community. This research with 3134 young people clearly demonstrates that this is not the case, and understandably so. Homophobia is an edifice that has taken many centuries to construct. It has been the brainchild of the most powerful institutions - the law, medicine, psychiatry and psychology and organised religion. While most of these institutions have recanted, including many parts of the Christian church, we should never assume that we can remove lingering homophobic beliefs entirely in a decade. However, in this report we can see that there are positive changes for these young people and we are slowly moving forward despite having a long way to go.

The survey

Though we have maintained core questions in all of the *Writing Themselves In* surveys, there are always changes and additions that relate to the changing context of SSAGQ young people's lives. For example we decided that though we could not ask about self harm and suicide in 1998, this time there are now enough supports around for us to do that. The questions about drug use have changed as drug cultures change, and we have included more items about the increasingly important areas of the internet and school policies in this report. This time the research team has been expanded to include a number of young researchers who bring a unique perspective to the work and may carry it on in the future. They have been involved in planning, executing and writing this report.

2 The POSH booklet is about the ways young people have reframed negative beliefs about same sex attraction as positive ones. 16000 copies, in 5 reprints have been distributed Australia wide. It can be downloaded from www.latrobe/edu.au/ssay

We have introduced a new term, 'gender questioning' (GQ) into this report to describe young people who do not identify themselves as being male or female, rather they identify as transgender, gender queer or other. We have labelled this group of around 90 young people 'gender questioning' because they have questioned or are questioning their gender or in some cases they question traditional gender structures. The term is in keeping with the recent policy blueprint *Beyond Homophobia: Meeting the needs of SSAGQ young people in Victoria* (Leonard et al., 2010) which used the term for the first time. We have discovered in this third national report that findings about these young people often vary considerably from those who identify as male and female. Because they are small in numbers, we have created a special section for them in the report (see Chapter 13) where all the findings can be seen together for a clearer picture of what is happening in their lives.

Numbers of participants in *The Writing Themselves In* surveys have grown dramatically from 749 in 1998, to 1749 in 2004 to 3134 in 2010. We surmise that this increase in numbers is in part because these young people are more likely to be 'out' in 2010, encouraged by greater visibility of gay people and because there are more supports. As well, networks of those working with these young people have grown dramatically and the internet and social networking sites have made it easier to recruit participants. Finally, same sex attraction is no longer a taboo topic, it is discussed widely and in many schools and communities it is regarded as a legitimate component of the vast tapestry of human sexuality.

This report, as the others before it, acts as a report card for governments, communities, families and in particular, schools. We learn who chooses to include or neglect, who chooses to abuse or support and what this means for the mental health and wellbeing of these young people. We have the numbers in this study to provide strong statistical evidence and we have young people's stories which provide vivid explanations for any findings that emerge. Our hope is that those working with SSAGQ youth will take the research report and use it to champion change as they did in 1998 and 2004.

2. Design of the study

… just doing this survey made me cry so many times throughout it. Its nice to know that something is finally being done so future people dont have to go through the fear and abuse that I had to go through… (Mike, 20 years)

…thanks hey this has made me think a lot, i didnt expect to become aware of these feelings and cry in a survey (my job is to do surveys) i think this shows perhaps how few avenues, just socially exist for this kind of discussion, i feel like i lost something along the way where i used to when i was young think on these things and i know it is something i still need to think about. thanks hey. (Becky, 18 years)

The world in which today's same sex attracted and gender questioning (SSAGQ) young Australians are living is in many ways different from the one in which the survey was first conducted in 1998. Differences include how young people communicate through new media technologies, changing attitudes to homosexuality and changes in the law to protect same sex relationships. To ensure that these differences were reflected in the survey and that the project was sensitive to contemporary youth issues, we formed a small informal reference group of researchers from the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) as well as representatives from workers with youth and same sex attracted young people.

Questionnaire design and development

As in the previous two national surveys, an online questionnaire was used to collect the data. This questionnaire contained both forced-choice (quantitative) and open-ended qualitative questions.

The WTi3 survey used the format and design of the 1998 and 2004 questionnaires as templates with subtitled themed sections and an optional open-ended Final Request - where the participants could relay their personal stories. WTi3 also provided the option as in 1998 and 2004 of completing the survey in hard copy or online, although no young person requested a hard copy. For the first time, the new survey was hosted by the collaborative online organisation *Demographix* which allowed us to construct the survey and data collection system through a hosted interface, have a URL that was separate from our usual university-based SSAY page (the survey's web address was www.wti3.org.au), and use additional structural features. Typical completion time was 20 minutes, although many took longer to write extensive stories.

Terminology regarding sexuality

The content of the 1998 survey was used as the basis for the new version (see Appendix 1). Changes had been made to this template in 2004, when questions were added on such topics as self harm, pregnancy and the impact of homophobia and discrimination. In 2004, we were also particularly interested in whether young people were accessing the extra supports and services that have been made available since the 1998 survey, and wanted to allow participants to talk about the activism they were involved in. However, for WTi3 we had some new and expanded areas of interest.

The first addition was a section on internet use, exploring its impact on the experiences of same sex attraction, identity, community, communication, youth activism and support. The second addition is an expanded section on schools and Sexuality Education. Here we allowed the young people to reflect on how useful schooling was and what else they wanted from it in the future. The *Writing Themselves In* reports have successfully called for education policy documents - such as Victoria's *Supporting Sexual Diversity in School* (DEECD, 2008) - schooling materials and teacher training programmes. Part of this

new section specifically explores what impact such policy developments are having, and where more attention is needed.

The third important set of changes is best described as an opening up of gender structures to include more categories for gender and using the term parents rather than mother and father in the section about country of birth. The fourth change affected drug use. Here, we expanded the range of drugs listed that young people may have used, and offered a variety of synonyms and street terms for the drugs mentioned. The fifth and last notable change to the survey's content affected the section on disclosure About Your Family and Friends. Where previously this question only asked if the participants had told a particular type of family or friend, this time we included an additional component to the question regarding how the person reacted to this disclosure.

The WTi3 questionnaire was divided into ten subject categories which contained closed and open-ended items (see Appendix 1) and a final request for young people to tell more of the story of their experiences. The questionnaire was piloted with young people and youth workers in urban and rural areas during November 2009 and was officially live on December 14th, 2009 at 5pm.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained for this project from the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee. Of particular importance was that these young people were not required to obtain their parents' approval to take part in the study.

A combination of literature reviews, reference group meetings and piloting processes were utilised to ensure that the WTi3 questionnaire was appropriate for participants aged 14-21. Its design considers the participants' vulnerability and capacity to consent to participation, and ensures they are given information about the research and its effects at their level of comprehension on the consent page. Competence to give consent was in part determined by the young person's selection of the age option. Where an age option below the accepted range of 14-21 was selected, the person was denied access to the online survey by the provider. However, where an otherwise unsuitable or incompetent person participated in the survey as detected in analysis of the data, their responses were not included in the final data set.

Sampling

The target group – same sex attracted young men and women in Australia between the ages of 14 and 21 – was the same as for the original studies. Young people needed to self select to be part of the research. We endeavoured to include young people from all states and territories of Australia, from rural and urban areas and a range of CALD backgrounds.

Design of recruitment campaign concept

The *Who pushes your buttons?* concept slogan was chosen as most suitable by young people and the reference group from a range of options. It offered a variety of relevant meanings for a survey questioning youth about sexual attraction as well as what annoys them in terms of experiences of discrimination, who supports them and who does not. It also connected to and modernised previous slogans – the 1998 report campaign's *Who turns you on?* and the 2004 report campaign's *Who stops you in your tracks?* A logo was also produced in the form of a heart shaped rainbow button signifying same sex attraction and sexual diversity themes. The heart shape was playful and apt for a survey dealing with attraction and young love.

WTi3 Rainbow Heart Button Logo

Recruitment and promotion

Active recruitment commenced in December 2009, and continued until the end of May 2010. We used numerous media formats: business cards, print media, social networking sites and group websites, radio etc.

- Business Cards

Business cards were designed for distribution by volunteers and community group organisers at events and workshops related to GLBTIQ community gatherings such as Sydney's Mardi Gras and Fair Day, Melbourne's Midsumma and Pride March. The enthusiasm of a number of contacts and networks greatly helped the project along, with a number of service and youth workers in all states and territories distributing the cards to young people.

Business Card Design

- Print Media

Press releases were sent out to key print media around Australia, including the gay press. This resulted in a number of articles and interviews which further enhanced the reach of the survey.

- Internet

Since previous surveys, the internet and online social networking has continued to develop and become integrated into the daily practices of most young people (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Not only are same sex attracted young people continuing to go online but many SSAY services/support groups now have their own stand alone Internet site and/or *Facebook* or *MySpace* groups (for example see www.opendoors.net.au). It was therefore important that recruitment targeted online established contacts and developed new online contacts to increase the potential reach of the survey. The researchers created two one page documents suitable for email dissemination and sent them to email contacts. These documents were then widely disseminated throughout Australia and resulted in a number of links on web pages used by young people.

Screen Shot of Wti3 Feature Article on Open Doors Website

- Social Networking Sites

Due to the recent proliferation of youth memberships and activity on social networking sites, we paid special attention to *Facebook*, *MySpace* and *Twitter*. The largest of these during the recruitment period was *Facebook*, and this guided our decision to run a paid advertisement campaign on the site intermittently throughout our recruitment period. *Facebook* allowed us to advertise only to our target group. We also created a *Twitter* page and a *MySpace* page to promote the survey through unpaid social networking avenues.

- Radio

All community radio stations were sent out an information sheet offering interviews pre and post research. While there was not a huge response to this from participants we are committed to using community radio to inform the community more broadly about the research.

Data analysis

Data were downloaded from *Demographix* and then transposed into quantitative (SPSS v10) and qualitative (Excel) computer programs. Descriptive and comparative statistical analyses were undertaken. All significant differences in the report are calculated at .05, however, to ensure the accessibility of the report, specific statistical results are not presented here. Qualitative data were read and analysed in the light of the quantitative results as well as in their own right with themes produced, interrogated and understandings presented. Young people's stories have been presented throughout the report.

Comparisons have been made with three studies: the 1998 and 2004 *Writing Themselves In* studies (Hillier et al., 1998; Hillier et al., 2005) and the 2008 secondary students and sexual health survey (SSASH) (Smith et al., 2009). Within the study we focussed on differences according to gender, age, cultural and linguistic background and location. We also focussed on differences in health outcomes according to abuse status.

Im actually really glad i did this survey, because it feels nice to be able to let some of this out :) (Amanda, 17 years)

… thanks for letting me get this off my chest, i havent been able to find many people i can just be open with yet, and its almost sad that i have to resort to an online anonymous survey. thanks again (Jacob, 18 years)

3. The young people

i love my life i have great relationships with friends and my family i have had a couple of relationships in the past years but at the moment… im more focusing on school and being a teen maybe later in life. when i have the time for one but at the moment im happy without one im an average teen dealing with most average teen problems i dont believe in labels so i dont call myself anything really i think guys are really hot and wouldnt mind dating them but im fine with being more of a teen XT (Travis, 17 years)

I hope in future, I'll find a beautiful woman to share the rest of my life with,
and when the time comes, we can marry with ALL my family there
and start a family of our own and our family can live in safety and in happiness.
If my child is straight, okay, if my child is homosexual, okay! If my child is gender queer, okay! I love my life right now, it's just a matter of ignoring the dreadful things said.
That's about it. Thanks for the opportunity! (Billy, 16 years)

Key Findings

- 3134 SSAGQ young people participated in *Writing Themselves In 3,* almost double that of 2004 and more than four times 1998.
- There were more young women (57%) than young men (41%) and a smaller group (3%), who were gender questioning (GQ).
- The average age of participants was 17 years.
- Almost one in five young people came from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.
- One fifth of young people came from rural and remote areas.
- The internet was the most successful recruitment strategy, with three quarters of young people hearing about the survey through this medium.

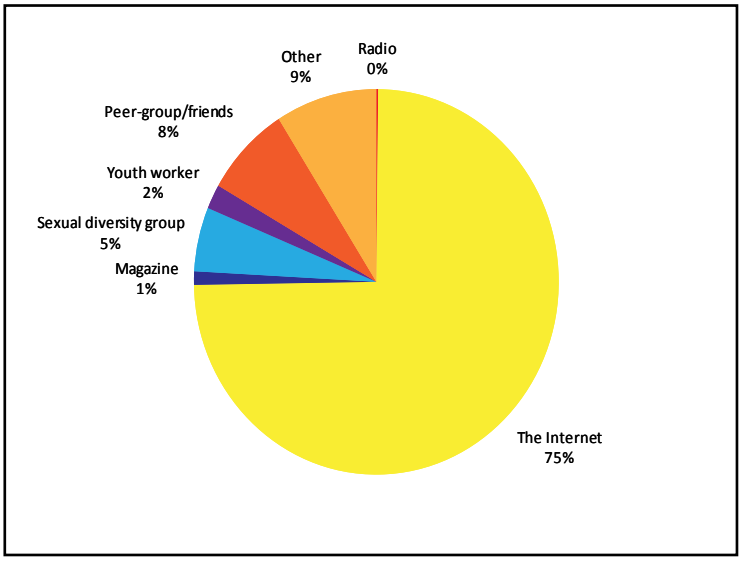
Over 3400 people responded to this third national survey (WTi3) of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people (SSAGQ) through the website URL www.wti3.org.au. Hard copies were available, however, no young person requested one. Those who did not fit the criteria of age (14-21), location (reside in Australia) and sexuality/gender (same sex attracted or gender questioning), were removed from the study. This left us with 3134 valid participants, almost double that of the 2004 study and four times the original number in the 1998 study. This gratifying increase in numbers can be explained in part by increased networks, increased visibility in Australian culture and the internet, particularly social networking sites.

Where did you first hear about the survey?

I hope my contribution is helpful. I had heard of this survey before, however this is the first time I've actually done it. I'll be sure to let my friends know of its existence xx (Mark, 16 years).

This core question has been used as a guide to recruitment in this and previous surveys. It may also be useful for others carrying out research with this population. In order to ascertain the success of the various advertising strategies (mentioned previously in the methods chapter) we asked the young people *Where did you first hear about this survey?* From Figure 1 below, we can see that the internet was the most successful recruitment strategy with 75% of young people (61% in the 2004 study) hearing about the study online. SSAGQ youth related contacts alerted 8% of young people to the survey and this included youth workers and SSAGQ youth specific groups. Peers and friends (8%) were also important in informing young people about the survey.

Figure 1. *How did you first hear about the survey?*



In terms of differences between groups, GQ young people were more likely to hear about the survey through SSAGQ youth groups and youth workers (24%) compared with 7% of other young people in the research. Despite the internet's growing success in advertising this survey, we continue to use other community avenues such as networks, radio and magazines because they are vital dissemination points for alerting other members of the community to the research.

Gender

This question was revised from previous studies in line with changing cultures in young people. As well as asking about male, female and transgender male to female and female to male (m-f and f-m) we also included gender queer and other. Because of smaller numbers and the similarities in findings, young people who were transgender, gender queer and other were included under the category gender questioning (GQ). This is in acknowledgement that all of these young people have questioned their

gender in the past or continue to question it now. As well, many question the very structures by which the notion of gender is upheld.

In terms of gender, more young women (57%, n=1766) filled out the questionnaire than young men (41%, n=1265). This is in contrast to the 2004 study in which there were more young men. This may be due to the rise of social networking and the closing down of *Mogenic* in 2005, a website used mainly by young men, however we cannot be sure. In the gender category, GQ, there were 0.6% (n=18) trans m-f, 0.7% (n=21) trans f-m, 1.4% (n=43) gender queer and 0.3% (n=9) other. The importance of the other category is encapsulated in Ashley's comments:

Not really sure yet, physically female but not sure mentally. I feel most comfortable in guys' clothes and when I am treated like a guy but I still wouldn't define myself as transgender, not yet anyway (Ashley, 17 years).

We will report some of the findings for the GQ group in the body of this report, however, because the numbers are relatively small and the findings quite different from the rest of the study sample, a special section in Chapter 13 will provide an important summary of the findings for this group.

Age

Young people ranged in age from 14-21 years with an average age of 17 years, a year younger than previous studies. This may be a reflection of the trend towards young people coming out earlier than before. There were no gender or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) differences in average age.

Country of birth

Ninety per cent of the young people in the survey were born in Australia with another 4% born in NZ, UK, USA and Canada. Two percent were born in Southern and Eastern Europe, 2% in South-East Asia with the remaining born in North and Southern Africa, Middle East, Central Asia and the Americas.

Twenty-three countries were mentioned as being the birth country of the young person or either of his/her parents. Of these, 14 were classified as CALD, mainly because English was not the first language. On this basis 18% (n=557) were classified as having a CALD background. As well 3% (n=97) of the young people were of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent. This number is representative of the numbers of ATSI young people in the general youth population (Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing, 2007).

Remoteness of young people's residence

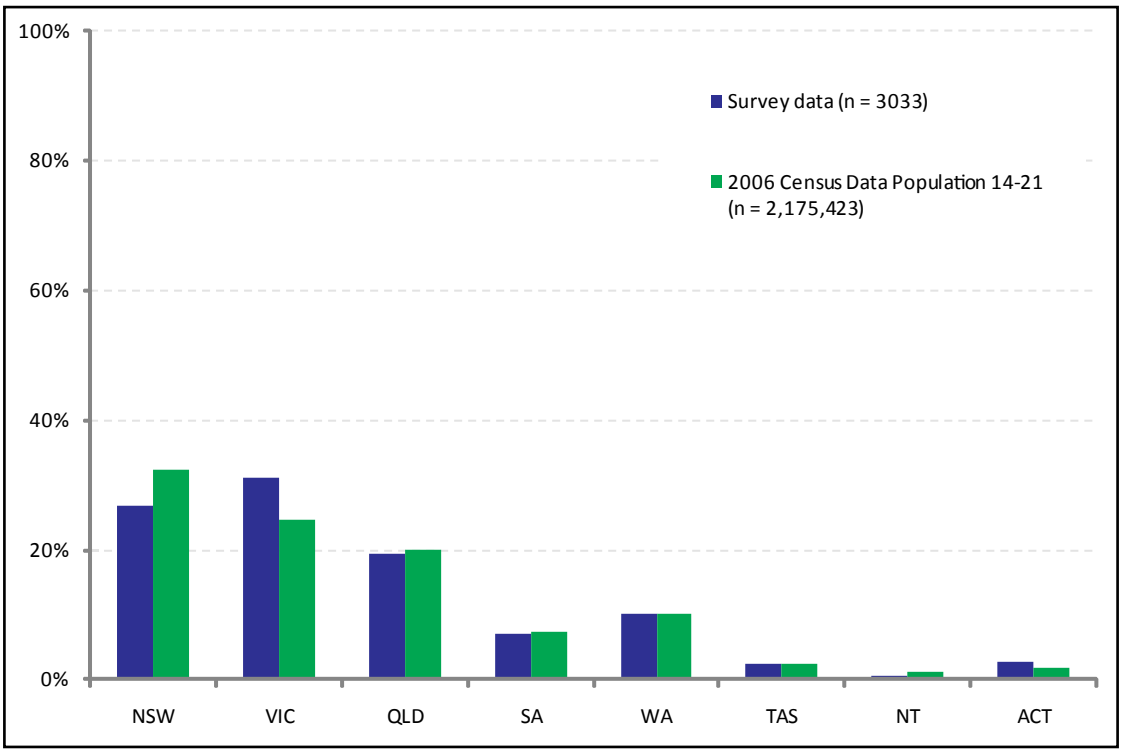
Once again it was pleasing to see that this survey attracted a sample of rural and remote young people. The Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification (RRMA) was used to divide young people into categories of remoteness. This classification divides Australian states and territories into metropolitan (1&2), rural (1, 2 & 3) and remote (1&2) zones. M1 covers capital cities, M2 metropolitan centres, R3 large rural centres, R4 small rural centres, R5 other rural centres, Rem6 centres >5000 and Rem7 other remote centres (AIHW, 2009).

According to the RRMA index, 67% (n=1975) of young people lived in metropolitan zones (including major cities), 18% (n=662) lived in rural zones and 2% (n=49) were from remote zones. This represents a slight increase in the number of participants from rural zones compared to the 2004 survey.

State or territory of residence

Every effort was made to recruit young people from each state and territory in proportion to young people within the general population of each state and territory of Australia. Most young people came from Victoria (31%, n=946), New South Wales (27%, n=809), and Queensland (19%, n=586), with lower numbers coming from Western Australia (10)%, n=305), SA (7%, n=215), Tasmania (3%, n=77), Australian Capital Territory (3%, n=80) and Northern Territory (0.5%, n=15).

Figure 2. *State/territory of residence: general youth population and survey sample*



Accommodation

Young people were asked about their living arrangements and most young people (71%) were living in the family home. A small proportion (4%) lived with relatives and the remainder were living in a shared house or flat (12%), on their own (4%), in a boyfriend/girlfriend's house (4%), in a boarding house (2%), with a small number living in squats, refuges, streets or caravans (2%). GQ young people were less likely to be living at home (51% v 71%) and more likely to be living with relatives (9% v 4%) or in a shared house (19% v 11%). There were no differences in accommodation arrangements on the basis of religion and ethnicity.

Education and work status

Young people were asked what they were doing now and they could tick as many boxes as applied from a list including school, uni/TAFE, working full or part time and unemployed. Forty one percent of young people attended school, and 40% were enrolled in university or TAFE. The number of young people working full time (11%) and part time (30%) was similar to the last survey, as was the number of young people who were unemployed (5%).

Type of secondary school attended

We added a new item in regards to school as a prelude to *your secondary school experience* which asked young people to indicate the type of school they attended. Most young people attended Government schools (65%), Catholic (18%) and other Christian (12%) schools. A smaller number of participants attended Islamic (0.2%), Jewish (0.5%), Steiner (0.4%), and other private education systems (4%). There were SSAGQ young people at ballet schools, Scientology-run schools and distance education programs.

Religion

As in 2004, there were no questions in the survey in 2010 about religion, however, many young people mentioned religious discourse and how it was used against them in abusive ways. We used the qualitative data in the survey to find mention of religious discourse and we compared those who mentioned religion to those who didn't. Four percent of young people mentioned religion. Throughout the report these young people will be referred to as the religious group, however, this does not mean that they were religious or that they came from a religious background although many did. It also is not meant to imply that those who did not mention religion are not religious. Differences between these groups will be noted in the report where they exist with a summary section on Religion at the end of the report in Chapter 13.

Ronan's story, 20 years

It's not easy. Not at all. No one wants to be different. Sometimes they just are. I guess I have pretty much always been a bit queer. I liked wearing all the women's clothes in dress ups at preschool and kindergarten and in role playing games I was always female. I don't know why. I was different: I didn't like sport, I liked to read and was good academically. I've never had many male friends; the ones that mattered were always female. I think I've always been a bit effeminate. Not that all gay people are like that but I was and always felt different.

High school was different. I had a few purely plutonic crushes on girls and would go home and masturbate over other guys. I didn't think there was anything wrong with that until about grade eight when I had my first crush on a boy. He was one of my few male friends. I had seen him with his shirt off during swimming and was attracted immediately. Gradually I realised other guys didn't feel this way and that I was different even more so than I thought.

I told some friends of my crush and they were shocked but supportive. I was kind of a novelty for a while. But mothers started talking as my friends had told their mums so speculation between them and parents of people I hadn't told started flying around. I got scared and told my mum I had shared my secret. She was angry and embarrassed. I had come out to mum in grade eight and nine. I tried to like girls in between and to find them interesting sexually. It didn't work but I did end up telling people I liked a girl and the rumours ceased till I left town. My senior years were spent in a school I barely knew with people I generally didn't like, except for a few close friends. I didn't tell anyone at this school until we were finished year 12 and on to uni. As I got older I became more comfortable with my sexuality and in 2009 I came out to most of my closest friends. My mum doesn't like it but she doesn't argue about it like she used to.

I've never had a boyfriend, never been kissed by either sex, never been touched or held hands with anyone. Completely a virgin. I now feel ready to change that and have become more and more comfortable with telling strangers, buying gay books, movies, CDs, magazines and other stuff in public, and most of my current friends are completely comfortable with me, though they are still mostly female. I don't know what the future holds. I'm still a second class citizen, a vehemently hated minority, and don't know whether any of it will really change.

I worry sometimes that I won't ever find someone to share life with, because the gay community, particularly the men, are mostly only interested in sex and drugs. I want something more, but sometimes, when I look at gay media, I wonder if it even exists.
I think that if gay people want respect, they need to start acting like they deserve it. No one respects promiscuity, drug use and public sex. The community needs to clean up its act if it wants any chance if achieving equality.

4. Sexual feelings

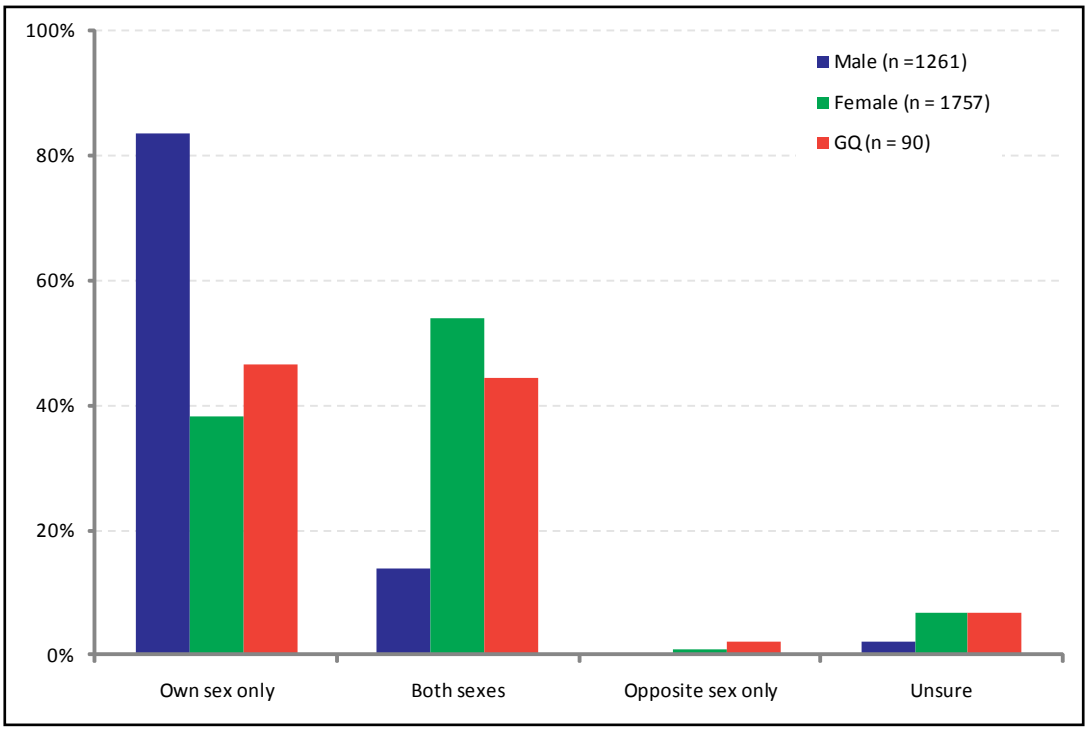
I would like to experience both lesbian and male interactions, sexually and emotionally. I always liked girls as well as guys but never really thought much of it, until about a year ago, I realised I liked girls a lot, more than my friends did, and wanted to kiss them. Yet i still want to be in a relationship with a guy. If I was to be involved with a girl, sexually, I would have to like her as a friend, the same as a guy, before i had intercourse with her. (Caroline, 16 years)

Key findings

- More than four out of five young men were exclusively attracted to the same sex whereas more than half of the young women were attracted to both sexes.
- Young people felt better about their sexual feelings than in 2004 or 1998.
- Young people continue to find new and affirming ways to understand their sexual difference.
- More than a third of young people realized their sexual difference before puberty.

Sexual attraction

Figure 3. *Comparison of gender and sexual attraction in 2010*



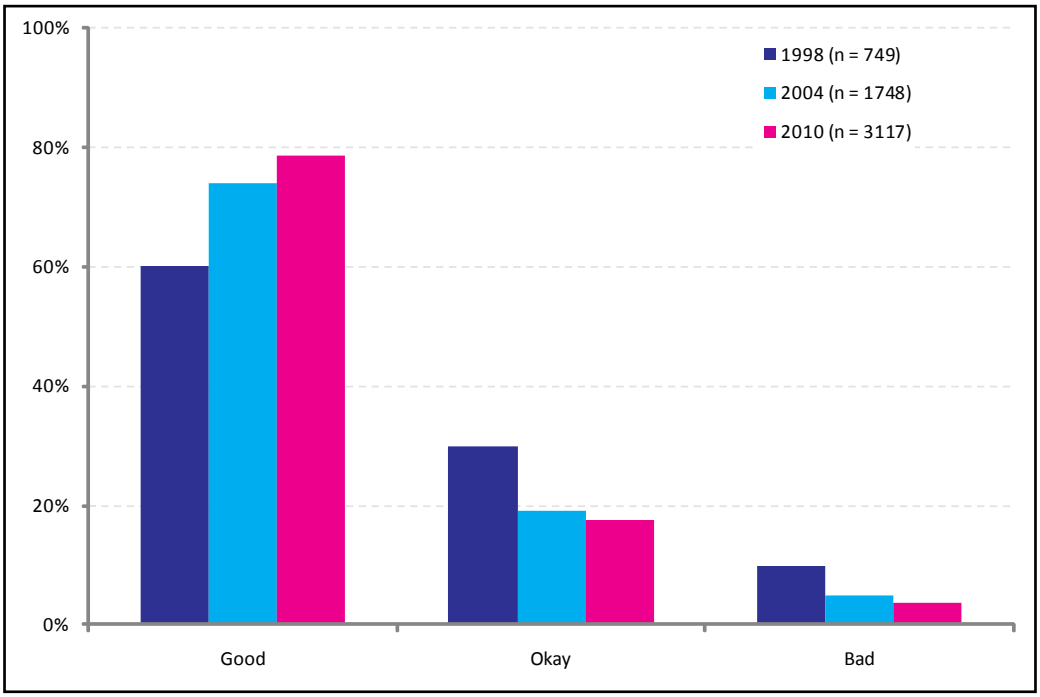
As in previous studies, we asked young people whether they were attracted to people of the same sex only, both sexes, the opposite sex only or if they were unsure. From Figure 3 below it can be seen that 84% of young men were attracted only to men while 54% of young women were attracted to both sexes. These differences in attraction between young men and young women continue from previous reports. The GQ group had a more complex understanding of sexual attraction which is examined in the separate section at the end of the report.

How do you feel about being attracted to the same sex?

In the previous studies and this one, we asked young people how they felt about being attracted to people of their own sex. The 2010 data reveal that young people felt more positive about their sexual feelings (see Figure 4) than in 2004, with 79% of young people feeling good about their same sex attraction. In addition, fewer young people reported feeling bad (4% in 2010, 5% in 2004, 10% in 1998). These trends reflect the more positive visibility of same sex attraction in Australian culture generally over time in the media, legislation and community. There was little differentiation across gender or age, however the religious group as a whole felt worse about their sexual feelings than their non-religious peers.

A core item, was to ask young people to explain how they felt because these explanations give us insight into the discourses that are being used to produce their positive and negative feelings. We learned from the 2004 study that how young people feel about their sexuality is significantly related to self harm and this remained the case in 2010. Some reported always feeling great about their sexuality, particularly those who had a supportive family or positive relationships with friends. Those young people who wrote about feeling good often included anecdotes of gaining increased support over time, questioning the intellectual and general calibre of those delivering negative comments towards them, locating the problem of homophobia within society rather than in homosexuality itself, becoming more clear about their sexuality through experiences of sexual discovery, feeling increased confidence and having positive hopes for their future.

Figure 4. *How do you feel about being attracted to the same sex: 1998, 2004, 2010*



Examining the two extremes in feeling good and bad revealed that if young people in this research felt good, it was usually because they had been able to reframe ways of thinking about their sexuality. Those who felt bad seemed not to have access to affirmative discourses. For example, Matthew felt really bad about his sexual feelings in response to social discourses and being bullied at school:

I feel pathetic, and wrong, based entirely around society. If gay people weren't so victimised by modern day society, I'd feel a lot better. I'm not saying that acceptance of different sexualities hasn't improved over the past century, because it obviously has, but the most stressful time for bullying to occur would be during a child's schooling, and at the present this is where most of it seems to occur (Matthew, 17 years).

At the other end of the scale, David felt good about his sexual feelings after hearing people's different perspectives on same sex attraction:

Although I first felt attracted to people of my own sex when going through puberty, I didn't accept these feelings until much later at age 17 (9 months ago). Previously I had thought that one day I would become straight like my 4 older siblings and parents who are all straight. I had been brought up to believe that sexuality is not an orientation but an action or behaviour. Having heard other people's stories about coming to terms with their sexuality, I now believe the opposite. I am very accepting of who I am (David, 18 years).

In both of these cases, young people show that social and school cultures, and exposure to other people's ways of thinking, can affect how young people perceive and feel about their sexuality. However, we learn from David, that there is always room for change. Young people often described a shift in their thinking from first realisations and feeling bad to later feeling good or great about their sexuality. This is important because it shows us that changes in a young person's thinking and changes in community attitudes can make all the difference to a young person's health and wellbeing. Education and exposure to new positive discourses are important for young people and their communities.

I spent a large portion of my teenage years denying and attempting to change my sexuality. The shameful pinnacle of this is probably a tie between praying to God every night for I'm not even sure how long, and trying to use operant conditioning on myself to try to get excited over women and stop getting excited over men. Of course, these attempts didn't work as planned; though I did feel a swelling of pride in my heart the one time I managed to get an erection from a woman. But I have grown to understand and accept my sexuality more, especially after revealing myself to my friends and family. I feel less anxious now, though there is still a sense of isolation; and I sometimes feel very naked, as if I wasn't really being "me" until my friends and family all knew I was gay (it was almost as if I was playing a game in which I was a spy with a secret nobody could know, and I had to act in very particular ways so they wouldn't find out). I could keep my distance from them, but now it can seem a little too real and it is frightening....I don't really hate being homosexual, it's just sort of like... having a bad haircut, or wearing clothes that everyone points out for some reason. You have to deal with it, and how you deal with it is what matters. (Tristan, 18 years)

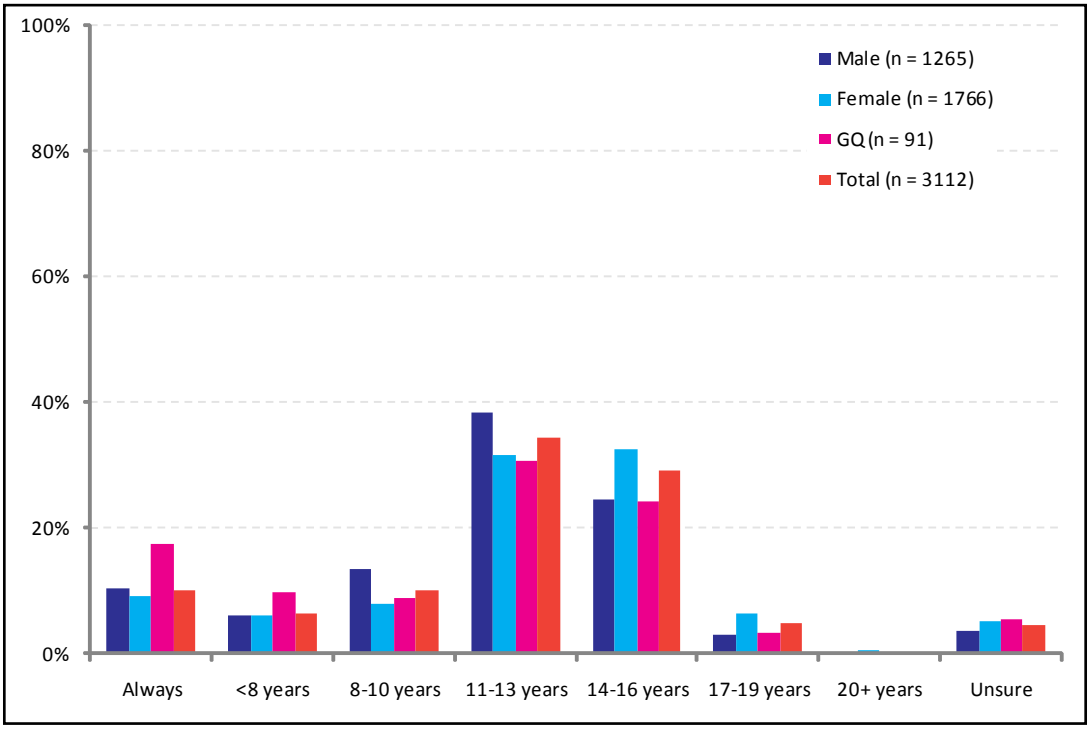
First realisations

are you kidding? I think most gay kids always know. I was a creative, slightly strange kid. When everyone in grade 3 started to 'date'... I thought it was strange that they liked girls. I thought I'd bloom later. Year 5 onwards, my physical attractions began to develop towards boys. There was no defining moment, but many moments that made me realise... it took me until yr 10 to accept I was gay despite the obvious feelings. Yr 11 and 12 I knew I'd have to come out one day... (Liam, 21 years).

In previous studies we sought information about when young people first realised they were same sex attracted through their final response. In this study a specific question was asked about when they first knew and what happened. Young people could select options of always knew, unsure, or a specific age. As in 2004 we learned that 10% always knew, 26% knew by age 10, 60% knew by age 13 and 85% by age 15. Five percent were unsure when they first realised their sexual difference (see Figure 5 below).

This finding has many ramifications for Sexuality Education and fair representation at school, particularly in the early years. It is important for education policy makers and sex educators to consider that more than half of these young people will know they are same sex attracted at primary school, and may make up around 6% of the primary school population. In the past in Australia, there have been prohibitions on talking about this subject with young children at school. Even the visibility of families with two mothers or two fathers in the media or in story books is likely to raise concerns about talking about sex with young children. It could be argued, however, that talking about family and giving fair representation is talking about family, not about sex, regardless of whether the parents are heterosexual or homosexual.

Figure 5. *Age at first realisation by gender*



The realisation processes mainly fell into themes of always knew, unsure, sexual attraction, crushes or love, sexual exploration, inspired by out people, sudden dawnings, dreams, pornography and reflection. A number of young men also mentioned realising when they didn't enjoy being with the opposite sex. Young women often mentioned an obsession with breasts as important in their realisation in some way. Examples of the many contexts of these many young people's realisations of sexual difference are included below.

Young people who reported being unsure when their sexual feelings came to light tended to have had different revelations or hold various positions over time:

I am f-m GQ, when I was younger attraction to women seemed natural and normal. I was older when I realised I was attracted to men too, and older still before I figured out that its queerness I'm attracted to (Casey, 20 years).

I am actually not sure when or how I realised I was pansexual exactly. I had suspected I was bisexual since I was 12, however I felt that it wasn't just males or females I was attracted to - I felt there must be a third gender, or even no gender, and that I would be attracted to these people too. It was when I read about pansexuality that I realised that this is who I am (Rae, 17 years).

The one in ten who reported always knowing seemed to have less conflict about who they were – it was just a part of them:

I always knew. Since I was little it was just always something about myself that was as basic and unchangeable as the colour of my eyes (Melissa, 21 years)

They based their always knowing on a range of things including same sex attraction and gender difference:

Looked at girls differently to boys, was never a feminine girl, had crushes on female friends that kinda thing (Isabella, 21 years).

Since I can remember I have always been different from other boys. At the age of 3 when they were playing with Hotwheels, I wanted to play with Barbie. When watching Disney movies I always thought 'when is my prince coming?' (Brock, 14 years)

A large portion of the young people directly or indirectly attributed their realisations to experiencing general desire for people of a certain gender:

Since childhood i felt attraction for both boys and girls, but gradually the feelings for girls went away. One day a new guy to my school walked in to class and i felt such an attraction that i simply knew. (Jordan, 17 years)

I just started noticing girls just as much as boys. It didn't freak me out. I just accepted it. I think my mates made more of a fuss than i did. (Emma, 17 years)

For others the object of desire was more specific:

i had a crush on a couple guys at my old school. (Dylan, 15 years)

I basically just got a crush on a girl in the year above me at school. Nothing ever happened but I remember being really scared and feeling disgusted with myself. (Hannah, 18 years)

At this age I find myself falling in love with people for who they are, with their gender not really having any sort of influence on the situation. (Grace, 16 years)

Others came to their sexuality through sexual exploration:

I had been sexually active since eleven years old with other boys I knew. It was only at thirteen that I realised this probably had some correlation with my sexual orientation. (Benjamin, 16 years)

To be honest I'm not sure if I fully understood it at the time. Maybe it's more realistic to date it from age 12 when I entered into my first homosexual relationship. However, at 9 a female friend and I used to play a game, which involved playing the parts of each other's boyfriends. We kissed and fooled around, however for me it didn't seem so much like childish experimentation, as a comfort and an attraction and a closeness and an intimacy that I hadn't experienced before. (Holly, 20 years)

Some young people said that when someone else was out or disclosed their sexuality it prompted their own realisations:

Talking to some random from another country, she told me she was bisexual, and well I sort of realised the more we talked about it. (Connor, 16 years)

I used to go to a catholic school. Then met a new student in yr 9 and she was gay. Until then I never really knew or thought about 'that' lifestyle. Since then my world was more opened up, I spose. However, looking back, my first toy (that I remember, excluding soft toys such as teddy bears) were those action man figures. Never barbie shiz. First clothes were blue. Never wore dresses. I have played womens AFL and cricket since I was much younger. I'm not saying it's the stereotypical things that point towards me realising- I just point out some things that may have influenced my ways of thinking. The boy 'crushes' I've had as a young teen....don't compare with the feelings I have for women. With boys it was more 'you're good looking, that's it' kinda thing. With women it's more 'I want to sleep or be in a relationship with you', that kinda thing. :) (Hayley, 18 years)

There were some who described a pivotal moment in their lives when realisation dawned on them:

After knowing her for a few years, I caught myself looking at her in a particular moment, thinking how utterly beautiful her humanity was, and I got that funny feeling in my stomach. (Zoe, 20 years)

Someone actually asking me. (Nicholas, 15 years).

Dreams were a catalyst to realisation for other young people:

Dreams, read a comic that really helped me understand what was going on in my head. (Amber, 18 years)

I was having sexual dreams about the same sex, and i dont mind. (Ruby, 21 years)

I think I had a dream about a friend of mine. Then I started thinking about it, and things started clicking into place. It's sounds odd, but I was thinking about this obsession I had with Julia Roberts as a little girl. I loved all her movies, and would watch them again. When I was first thinking of possibly being unstraight, that was one of the first things that came into my mind. It was just like "huh, that's why". (Jasmine, 16 years)

Looking at pornography prompted a realisation for some:

When we got the internet I started looking at gay porn and realised then. (Harrison, 20 years)

To be frank, my preference in pornographic material. (Jayden, 21 years)

There were also discussions of how the realisation spanned a series of reflections:

Lots of gay youth, myself include, realise they had same sex attracted sexual feelings retrospectively. In grade 5 I could say that my behaviour was certainly reflective of my sexuality, but wouldn't have been able to realise it at the time. Attribution of my own sexuality for me was an ongoing, fluid process. While I could say now that I always 'knew', certainly as a 5 year old, I didn't understand what my behaviour/thoughts meant. (Mitchell, 21 years)

I can't really remember. The process was gradual. I remember that I started to experience erections and couldn't figure out why. It was only after a long time that I began to associate that with people of the same gender. For a while I thought it must be a phase and that I couldn't really be gay. And then sometime I just admitted it. I can't remember when or how; it was just a realisation that came to me over time. (Cooper, 21 years)

Some young people clarified their views after feeling a connection with characters and people from GLBTIQ media (including television, theatre, literature and music).

Around puberty i always remember being attracted to the same sex but being attracted to males as well, i think that i didnt think too much of it until i actually made friends with a gay and considered that it really

wasn't that normal to be attracted to the same sex. i had a few months at a time, periods where i was very confused and frustrated because i couldn't talk about my mixed up emotions. but this year has really given me the chance to learn and understand myself better. i think i realised after watching tv shows like 'the l word' and listening to ani difranco or tegan and sara and feeling a connection with them. (Alyssa, 20 years)

i was on the computer and my fav song at that time was all the things she said by tatu and i saw them kissing and i really liked it and i didnt no what it was doing to me i had feelings that i have never felt b4 and i really likdt that feeling and i guess thats what happened. (Tahlia, 16 years)

The following comments support the finding, particularly amongst young men, of an aversion to the heterosexual interactions with young women they were expected to enjoy:

i left my girlfriend because i really wasn't that into her being all over me. (Cameron, 16 years)

At the time i was in a relationship with a person of the opposite sex and it just wasn't satisfying for me. I knew i was gay because i cared for my male friends more than i should. (Ryan, 17 years)

when friends continuously talked about girls and sex, and I could never see the interest. (Jake, 18 years)

Young women often mentioned their attraction to breasts. This speaks to a discourse of physical desire that is often missing in heterosexual young women's talk around sex (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002; Hillier et al., 1999). It is evidence of young women being desiring subjects as well the objects of desire and has importance for Sexuality Education in which desire is rarely allowed to be part of the agenda.

BOOBIES -_- lol (Caitlin, 15 years).

I found myself paying more attention to how women looked eg. eyes, mouth, breasts, etc. (Amelia, 20 years)

I used to always have pictures of girls on my wall. I love big breasts too. (Lauren, 19 years)

I was in my brothers shed, the TV was on, and there were naked girls, i couldnt help myself but stare at their breasts. (Paige, 21 years)

Traditional theories of sexual orientation offer at least two key explanations for same sex attraction: one from psychology describes a primarily stable trait (Cass, 1983/4; Troiden, 1984), the other from sociology (Fuss, 1991) describes sexuality as socially constructed. While some young people's descriptions of first realisation suggest that their attraction was thought of as an essential trait, there are also indications that the social environment does impact on young people's realisations by providing a supportive space and words (or not) to explore these feelings. From these data there is more support for an in between explanation that sexuality stems from a complex interaction of the body and the environment.

Josh's story, 15 years

i've found being gay hard but im happy with it, but if i had a choice it would be my last one. sometimes im jealous of how straight people are so easily accepted in society, yet homosexuals can barely hold hands without people staring. things like mardi gras make me feel good about myself and give me hope for the future. i have a gay uncle to i knew that coming out to my family would be pretty easy and they would be pretty understanding, and i was right, which really helped grow as a person knowing i had my families support. people at school were generally supportive, but homosexuality is something everyone talks about, so when i came out to a few friends, it wasn't long before the whole school knew. the worst time in my life was when some kids at my school got my phone number and started leaving voice messages on my phone saying abusive things… i have also found that people talk, and kids from other schools know who i am, so sometimes at the local shopping centre kids from other schools give me threatening looks as i walk by. my good times have been with my boyfriends. my first kiss was my happiest moment. i felt like nothing could hurt me, and this made me sure of my sexuality. my hopes for the future are to become an actor/dancer and perform in britain and america. i want to meet a man, get married and have children, by adoption and surrogacy.

5. Sexual identity

Heaps of people, straight people, don't really seem to understand gayness and queerness and bisexuality. Thats why I think that labels are still important, even if some people don't like them. If straight people can't understand, or are not educated, then LGBT people become like a small club that makes up its own rules and removes itself from social realities. I am a lesbian, thats why I call myself one. However when I came out I knew I wanted to be sure that I was ready to speak about who I was to all the people who had questions. And trust me, there were a lot of questions. I am happy being a lesbian. And I am happy to use that fact to create positive discussion. The word bisexual became really important to me at about the age 13. I had always had a fascination with anything gay, it seemed only normal I would think about experimenting. However it soon became obvious to me that what I was feeling went way past experimenting. The older, and more sexual/romantic I got, the more I realised that I wanted to be with another girl, and another girl only. Lesbian is such a scary word, or at least thats what it felt like. Girls used it as a put down, and guys used it in lust. Irs a good thing I'm educated about bias against gays, and gay pride, because that gave me the strength to be who I knew I was and be proud of it. (Audrey, 15 years)

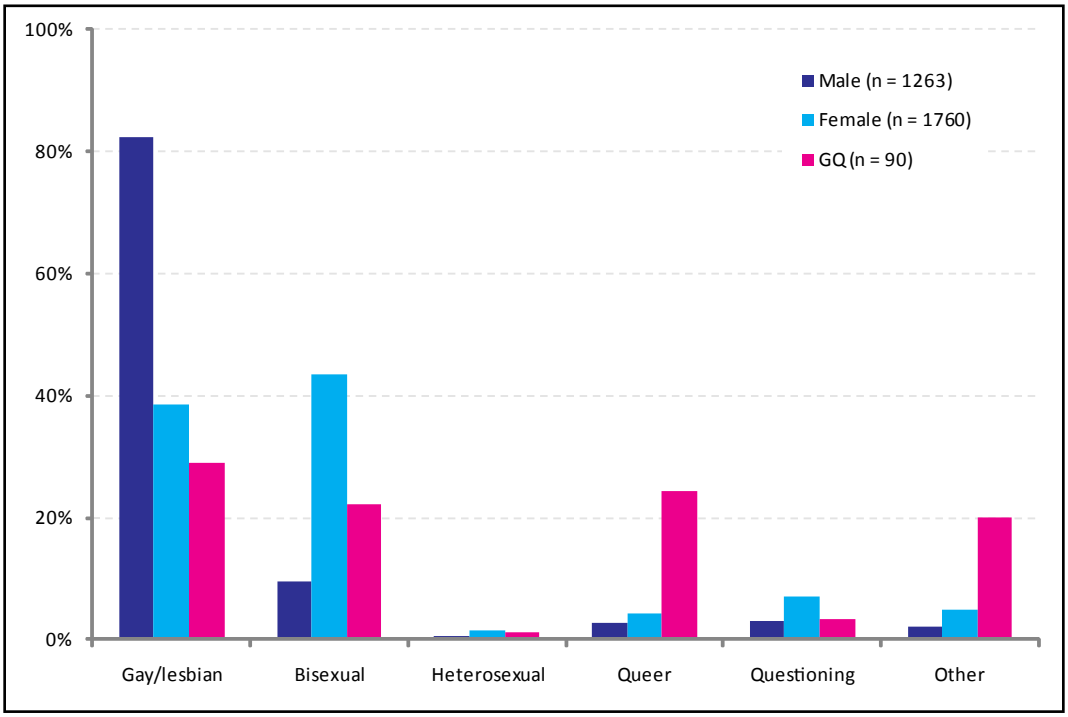
Key findings

- In keeping with their attractions, 82% of young men identified as gay.
- Young women were more likely to identify as bisexual (42%) than lesbian (39%).
- Young people chose a sexual identity for a range of reasons, not all related to their sexual attractions.

As in 1998 and 2004, and in keeping with Laumann's three components of sexuality, - attraction, identity and behaviour (Laumann, 1994) - we asked young people what identity label they attributed to themselves, if any. We expanded the categories from 2004 to include Queer and Questioning. The inclusion of the term, Questioning, reflected acknowledgement of the possibility that these young people may still be coming to terms with, or deciding upon, their identity and the inclusion of the term Queer reflected our acknowledgement of social and cultural change.

Most young men chose to label themselves as gay (82%) whereas young women were divided between a lesbian (39%) and a bisexual (42%) identity (see Figure 6 below). In addition, 5% identified as Questioning, 4% as Queer and 4% as Other.

Figure 6. *Identity choice by gender*

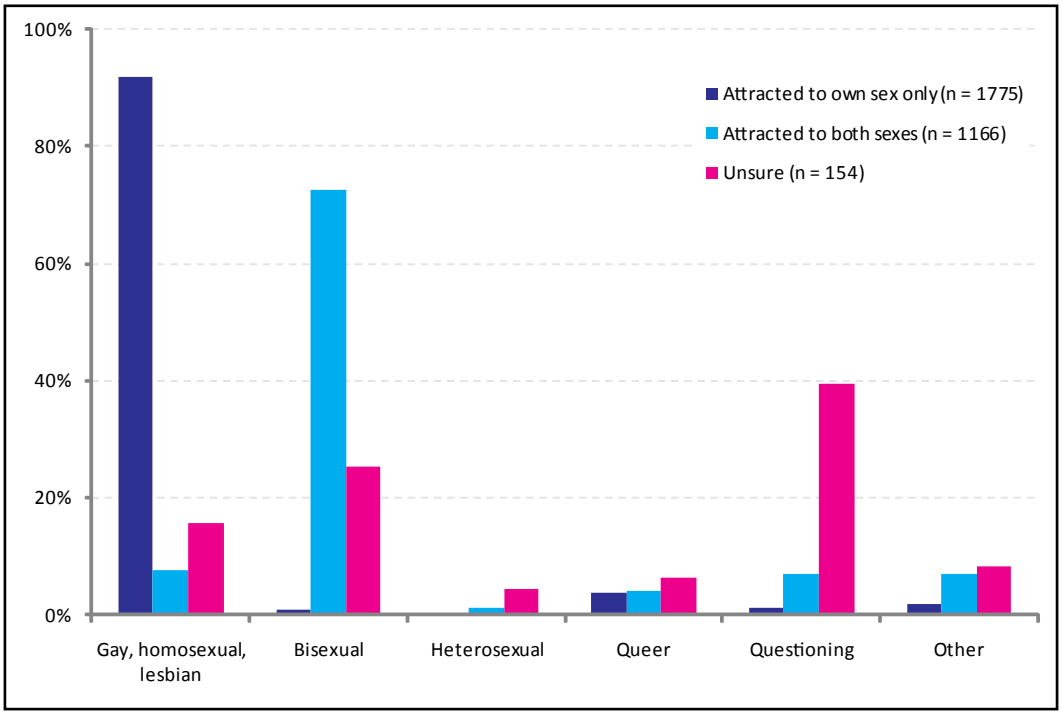


There were also differences in the ways the under 18s and the older group identified their sexuality. A similar age difference to that uncovered in the 2004 survey showed that the older group was more likely to identify as gay/homosexual/lesbian (62%) than the younger group (50%). The term Queer was more popular with the older group (6%), but did make some appearance within the younger group (2%).

Other identifications

In total, 144 participants did not choose one of the labels offered but instead selected the 'other' category. These young people were asked to specify their alternative choices in labels, and particular trends emerged. Of the 144, 37% identified as pansexual, 11% disliked labels and the rest used responses such as myself, me or bi romantic. The pansexual identification — the prefix referring to all or whole — encompasses all kinds of sexuality (Drobac, 1999) and could be understood as expressing the full spectrum of desire. Of those young people who referred to their sexuality as pansexual, most were young women.

Figure 7. *Identity choice by attraction*



From Figure 7 we can see that most young people who were exclusively same sex attracted, identified as gay/lesbian/homosexual (92%), 4% identified as queer, 2% other and 1% questioning. Of those who were attracted to both sexes, 73% identified as bisexual, 7% as questioning, 7% as gay/lesbian and 4% as queer. In most cases the identity fitted neatly with attraction, and in a smaller group not so, for example the 7% of both sex attracted young people and the 16% of unsure who identified as gay/lesbian. However, we know that identity, more than attraction and behaviour, is socially constructed and influenced by many other factors besides attraction, including especially, social approval.

Further understanding identity and attraction

Young people were asked for explanations for their choice of identity. The 95% of young people who explained their choice of identity in this survey talked about attraction, gender, social understandings and reactions to the terms, social beliefs about certain identities and the ways in which terms did and didn't fit them. There were some differences in the reasons terms were mainly selected. For some, there was uncertainty and feeling outside of identity categories.

For young people identifying as gay/lesbian/homosexual, the range in certainty was striking. Those who were same sex attracted only, felt that their selection of this term self-evident: for example, Mary (20, years) *There is nothing more to it. I am who I am...* and Patrick (21, years) *it's simple; i'm only attracted to members of my own sex, so it's easiest to label myself as 'gay'.*

There were also those who used gay/lesbian/homosexual while being both sex attracted. In some cases, it was simply seen as easier or more socially acceptable to make use of a homosexual identity. Lindsay explained:

I call myself a lesbian, because it is the simplest definition for most people. I am attracted to men sometimes, and I won't rule out falling in love with a man, but more often than not, I'm attracted to women. This is something most people just don't get, so I just say I'm gay. (Lindsay, 18 years)

Some of the young people using the gay/homosexual/lesbian label had been initially hesitant, feeling concerned about the accompanying stereotypes that may be ascribed to them if they used it. For example, Malcom (20, years) made what was a notable distinction between his sexual identity and his way of acting, when he said *I'm a gay male. I'm not overtly gay - physically or socially - I'm a homosexual who is attracted to the same sex.* Helen, who at the time of the survey used a lesbian identity but originally claimed a bisexual identity explained:

I think this apprehension was to do with the perceived stereotyping of each orientation. I am typically 'femme', and I didn't feel I could relate to the other gender ambiguous Lesbians in my year. I did tell a few friends that I wasn't straight, and I felt that by telling them I was Bisexual, I would be less likely to me marginalised and ostracized like the other Lesbians in my year. I also felt that a Bisexual labelling would make me appear less foreign to 13 year olds and keep my femininity intact. (Helen, 19 years)

Jim was typical of a small portion of young people who rejected this category even though it did in some sense apply. Like many who also chose the other category for social or political reasons, he said he didn't like labels:

I know I'm gay it's a fact but I don't believe in labelling as all it does is give society excuse to segregate and isolate us from what they consider the normal way. (Jim, 19 years)

Under the bisexual category, there was also a range of certainty. There were those who were both sex attracted, such as, Tina (14 years), who felt quite clear on this identity choice: *Bi. what else do you need?.* There were also many who qualified their response by explaining that gender was not their primary concern in terms of their attraction or their feelings: *I think that personality and charisma and looks are more attractive than gender* (Fiona, 18 years). However, this was not always the case; there were also those in the bisexual category who expressed a preference towards one or the other sex (whilst still being somewhat attracted to either). For example, Alan (14 years) said his sexuality was *Simple: Bisexual, Male preference.*

Again, there was evidence that sometimes bisexuality could be used as a transition point. Some young people, such as Amanda (18 years), were unsure who they were attracted to and equally uncertain about their use of this label while they sorted out their sexual identity:

I probably wouldn't really call myself bisexual, because i know that I'm still not sure, and don't think that I should really slap a label on it just to satisfy others curiosity. probably though, I would be leaning towards lesbian more so than anything else. (Amanda, 18 years)

For those who were questioning, uncertainty was quite common. However, the location of this uncertainty differed. For some this was about their own identity and attraction; Jeff (17 years) was attracted to both

sexes, and wrote: *I am still not 100% sure where I lie in the spectrum of things.* For others it was more focussed on what their attractions would mean for them socially and how taking a particular label might limit their lives. For example, Nelson (17 years) was only attracted to males, but wrote: *I don't want to be gay because I want to have a family and get married etc, but I can't stop being attracted to guys.* Others were uncertain about whether their current attractions could change in the future:

I'm not sure enough about myself to say that I'm bisexual, even though I am attracted to both females and males at the present. I could see these feelings changing in the future and I would prefer not to lock myself into anything while I'm still not 100% sure. (Leah, 18 years)

For people identifying as Queer, rejection of traditional gender binaries came through strongly:

I just... am. I've never found a label that fits quite right. I don't believe in the Male/Female binary, so bisexual doesn't quite fit. I settle with queer because anything else is too complicated. (Rose, 20 years)

For Kylie and others, broad, inconsistent or variable attraction played an important part, more so than gender, as they were attracted to many people:

I don't see myself as only being attracted to 'males' or 'females', if I like someone their gender doesn't come into the picture. I feel I don't conform to heteronormative standards. (Kylie, 18 years)

However, there was also a theme of disliking or rejecting other terms that seemed to foreclose on sexual identities, and the negative connotations that have been socially associated with them. For example, Carly (21 years) wrote: *I hate the word lesbian and i like the word queer it doesnt sound as demeaning to me, w*hile for Alice:

I don't like to pigeonhole myself as one thing or another, so queer works well for me. Bisexual has a very negative connotation that I'd like to avoid, and I consider myself more pansexual than bisexual. (Alice, 21 years)

In some cases, Queer was not used to indicate attractions (some people were only attracted to one sex) but more a state of mind which was not limited by one's own sexed body, as Nikki explained:

i think queer also includes just generally not considering my actions and personality to be controlled by gender, although i do consider myself female, as well as sexuality. (Nikki, 21 years)

For pansexuals a reframing of gender was also usually important in their selection of the term, and there was some overlap of use of both the words queer and pansexual for those identifying as either. For example, Tony, (19 years), described pansexuality as *basically bisexual, but without the gender binary thing. gender is more complicated then that.* Reagan found his own experience of sex identity was the key to taking a broader view:

I simply believe that, especially as a transperson, limiting attraction to people who are strictly male or female (therefore excluding those who are pre-operative transsexual or have an intersex condition, as well as those who identify as a gender other than these) would be an extremely black and white view of things. (Reagan, 17 years)

There were not many young people identifying as heterosexual in this study. But those who did had a mixture of certainty and uncertainty about this identity also. For example, Lisa (18 years) expressed some confusion about being heterosexual and attracted to both sexes, particularly when she added *but still like women.....i think.....I DONT KNOW.* It is important to mention also the young people who, like Warren, used the heterosexual label as a way of keeping their lives private:

I would always answer to anyone that I was straight and keep secret any sexual thoughts towards other guys. I also keep my fathers sexuality a secret to anyone. (Warren, 20 years)

Health professionals, sex educators and others should note that sexuality labels do not predict sexual attractions or behaviours in a simplistic fashion, particularly for SSAGQ young people. Health professionals are particularly encouraged to take sexual histories and also talk about future sexual possibilities in a non-judgemental manner with young people, when determining the information, referrals and reproductive advice they may need.

Maddison's story, 17 years

I could not accept my sexuality at first, it took awhile. For most of high school i claimed myself to be bisexual and pretended to like guys and hook up with them. I'd always feel so terrible after it, and i was mystified, even though deep down i think i knew it was because i really was gay. Just recently, i've started accepting myself and my sexuality, although it's taken some time. Most people know now, although my family don't mention it, even if i say i'm going to see my girlfriend or the girl i'm dating. At first, this hurt me so much because when i broke up with my boyfriend, my mum questioned it and told me to sort it out because she thought he was a nice guy. I never told her then it was because i couldn't be with a guy and be unhappy 'cause they're not what i want. It hurt so much when i was having trouble with a girl, and she didn't say anything, just listened because i knew she didn't want to know. The friends i have been hanging out for the past few years are amazing, i have never met more accepting people ever who are crazy, funny and are in all the same interests as me (music, games, etc), and one of the girls i'm most closest to is even gay. She actually came out the same time as me, as we both used to say we were bisexual, not les. I understand why people hide it, and i don't blame them. Noone wants to get hurt and rejected. Especially to others who have it harder then most because of religion, culture or family. In time, i know i'll be even more open then i am now, and i will 100% stop trying to be straight, or wishing it. I love the ladies, what else can i say?

6. Sexual behaviours

I currently have a friend with benefits kind of relationship with two friends, one male and one female and we get together and have semi-regular threesomes. It's a lot of fun and sometimes I wish I had a proper relationship with one of them but other times I'm really happy with and grateful for the ways things are and think a relationship would over complicate things. (Sarah, 19 years)

Key findings

- 28% of young people had never had sex.
- Young men (56%) were more likely to have had exclusive same sex sexual encounters than young women (28%).
- Young people were sexually active earlier than their heterosexual peers.
- 10% of the 15-18 year old young women had been pregnant (twice the rate of their heterosexual peers).
- 51% used a condom at their last penetrative sex.
- Young women (74%) were more likely to have had sex than young men (69%).
- 21% of young women had sex exclusively with men.

Sexual Experience

When she first kissed me, I thought I was going to die.
My heart was in overdrive, I could barely breathe.
She was beautiful.
She was my first love.
My only love.I was thirteen and she was eighteen.
It didn't make a difference to us.
That was the first and only time I saw her. (Tara, 16 years)

Young people were asked if and when they first engaged in a range of sexual practices including deep kissing, genital fondling, oral and penetrative sex. This is the same question as was in the SSASH study (Smith et al., 2009). They were also asked the gender of their sexual partners. The term sex was used for sexual encounters in general (to be inclusive of lesbian sex) and penetrative sex for vaginal and anal intercourse with a penis. The questionnaire also included items about condom use, STIs, pregnancy and for the first time, pregnancy outcomes.

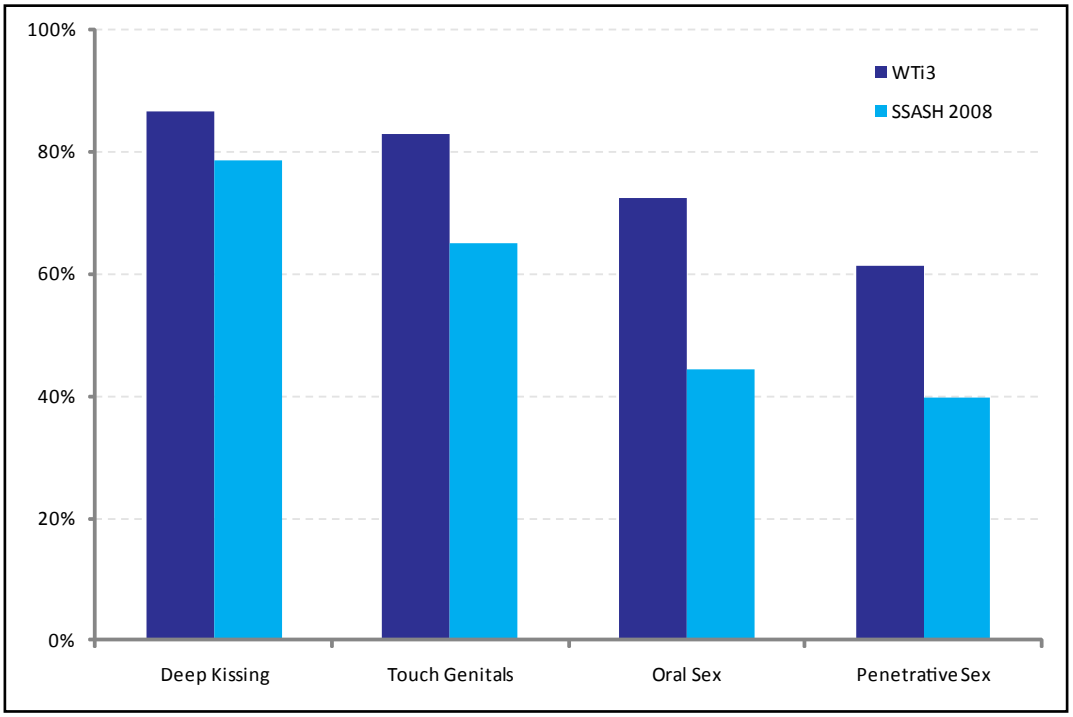
Seventy-two per cent of young people (n=2213) reported that they had had sex in the past two years. Young women (74%) were more likely to have had sex compared to young men (69%) and GQ young people (69%). Young men (56%) were more likely to have had sex with men and young women were almost as likely to have sex with both sexes (30%) and their own sex exclusively (28%), and 21% had sex

exclusively with the opposite sex. This is an example of the lack of congruence between attraction and behaviour, particularly evident in young women.

Young people who mentioned religious discourse were less likely to have had sex (35%) as were young people from a CALD background (35%).

In terms of specific sexual practices, 88% of young people had experienced deep kissing, 84% had touched partner's genitals, 84% had had their genitals touched, 74% had given oral sex, 74% had received oral sex and 68% had experienced penetrative sex. A comparison of the 15-18 year olds with the SSASH survey (Smith et al., 2009) showed that SSAGQ young people were more likely to have experienced all types of sexual activity.

Figure 8. *Comparison of sexual activity between 15-18 year old SSAGQ students and their peers in the 2008 SSASH survey*



From young people's stories it is evident that they test out and try to resist feelings that are taboo. The following quotes were typical; young women who experimented with people of both sexes and young men who mainly experimented with their own:

I had always had a fascination with anything gay, it seemed only normal I would think about experimenting. However it soon became obvious to me that what I was feeling went way past experimenting. The older, and more sexual/romantic I got, the more I realised that I wanted to be with another girl, and another girl only. (Clara, 15 years)

From 16 - 21 i have experienced many different types of relations with both men and women, from 16 - 19 years of age i was in unhealthy relationships with men, one night stands,"seeing" guys that treated me unfairly and bfs who i lusted over but never felt comfortable with. (Melanie, 21 years)

growing up i came across many other young boys willing to experiment with their sexuality/bodies. (Charlie, 19 years)

In terms of safe sex practices young people were asked: *the last time you had penetrative sex – if it was penis/vagina or penis/anus – was a condom used?* Fifty one percent reported using a condom during last penetrative sex, a figure that is lower than that in 2004 where 65% used a condom at last penetrative sex. Young men were more likely to use a condom (58%) compared with young women (46%) and GQ (34%).

Only 45% of 15-18 year olds used a condom at last penetrative sex compared with 65% of students in the national SSASH survey (Smith et al., 2009). There were no differences in condom use according to religion, ethnicity or age.

Sexually transmitted infections

Previous reports have indicated that SSAGQ young people are at higher risk of sexually transmitted infections (STI). Given that these young people were sexually active earlier, and that they were less likely to use a condom than their heterosexual peers, this is not surprising. Young people were asked if they had ever been diagnosed with an STI. Five percent reported that they had, (6% young men, 4% young women, 9% GQ). This number is lower than the 10% in the 2004 study. Young people from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (11%) and GQ young people (9%) reported higher rates than the rest of the young people in the study.

Pregnancy

This was before i actually realized I was lesbian, I had sex with my boyfriend and we were both drunk and we didn't use a condom. I fell pregnant but I didn't tell him… (Samantha, 17 years)

In the 1998 survey, we were conscious of the lack of social and emotional support that was available for these young people and hence we were restricted in asking personal questions that could be upsetting. Since then, there has been an increase in support services and so an item was included about pregnancy and the outcome of the pregnancy.

Still going through the pregnancy. I am currently in an open relationship with the father [one guy I've been attracted to].

In 2010, 15% of young women reported being pregnant at some time. Of those young women who reported a pregnancy 37% were exclusively attracted to women. It may also be that these young women are becoming pregnant through non sexual methods such as artificial insemination (AI) but there was little evidence of this from these young people's stories. Megan and Trish had children through heterosexual intercourse: *I've had two children to a guy I was with for 5 years, whom I am now separated from because of another girl, that we were both involved with. (Megan, 21 years) And Trish: I had a beautiful baby girl that I love with all my heart. The father disappeared.* (Trish, 17 years)

Young women from CALD backgrounds were less likely to have been pregnant.

When we compared the pregnancy rate of the 15-18 year olds with the SSASH study (Smith et al, 2009) we found that double the percentage of SSAGQ young women had been pregnant (10%) compared with 5% of their heterosexual peers.

A follow on item asked *if you answered yes to having been pregnant what happened with the pregnancy?* One third of those who had been pregnant reported live births, one third reported a miscarriage, 31% reported having terminations and 3% were pregnant at the time of filling out survey.

As mentioned previously, given that condom usage was lower in this group compared with those in the 2004 survey, and that these young people were sexually active earlier than their heterosexual peers, it is no surprise that pregnancy rates were higher amongst these young people. A very small percentage of the young women planned their pregnancies but the majority did not. This further highlights the need for improved Sexuality Education and sexual health service provision.

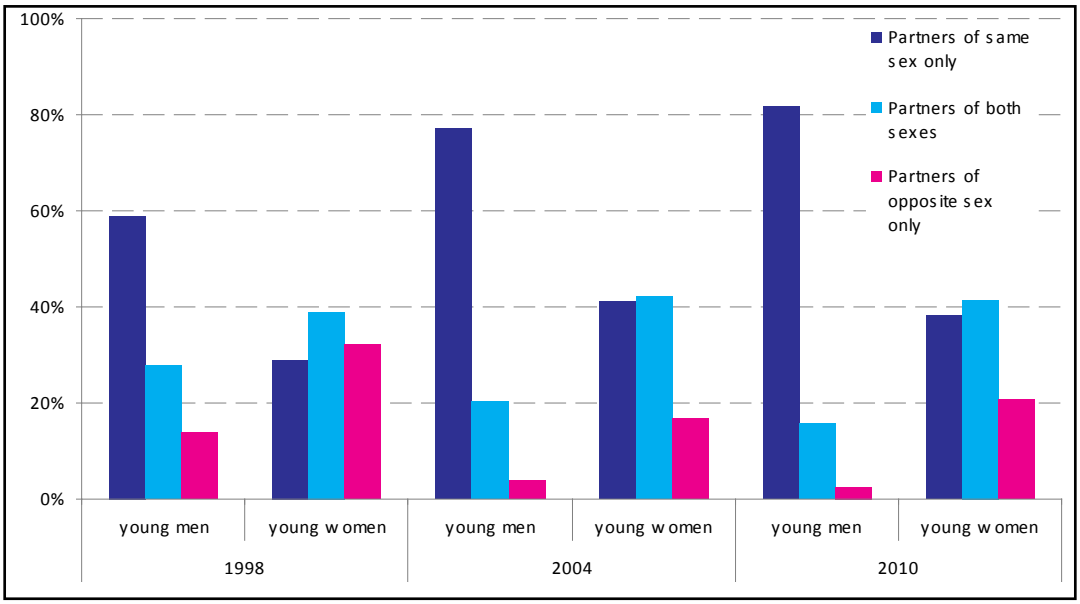
My hopes for the future are to become a journalist and make a difference in the world! I want to write about controversial subjects, such as homophobia, religion (my view is that if "religion" is a system of beliefs which tell us what is right and wrong, then society itself is a religion. I can make a very good comparison between society and Christianity), politics, society and other big factors which we are all faced with everyday.

I'm raising my son in a single parent family and have considered surrogate mothering for my sister and her girlfriend to have a baby. I'm still indecisive about this and haven't spoken to her about it as yet until I know for sure its what I want to do. (Teah, 17 years)

Relationship between sexual behaviour and attraction

From Figure 9 below and previous data on young men's sexual attraction and identity, most young men had congruence between the three aspects of their sexuality. However, one in five young women, despite their sexual attractions, continued to have sex exclusively with the opposite sex (21%). This and the lack of appropriate and relevant Sexuality Education for these young people women, explains our findings that SSA young women are more likely to be diagnosed with an STI and to have been pregnant than their opposite sex attracted peers (Smith et al., 2009). It also is evidence of what can happen when certain sexualities are regarded as transgressive and young women try to prove to themselves that they are 'normal'.

Figure 9. *Sexual attraction by gender of sexual partner; 1998, 2004, 2010*



7. How do people treat you?

My mum called me a lesbian when I was about 15, in a derogatory way.
My sister told me I will burn in hell and I am an abomination.
A guy from some so called Christian place said it was evil.
I know they are wrong. I know I am loved and lovable,
and God doesn't discriminate against me if I am gay.
I have learnt to hold my head high and not take their bullshit,
it's not my problem and they ought to work on and overcome their homophobia.
The government needs to show an example to them by allowing full equality for all Australians.
(Tracey, 20 years)

Key findings

- 61% of young people reported verbal abuse because of homophobia.
- 18% of young people reported physical abuse because of homophobia.
- School was the most likely place of abuse – 80% of those who were abused.
- 69% reported other forms of homophobia including exclusion and rumours.
- Young men and GQ young people reported more abuse than young women.

We learned from the previous two national reports that same sex attracted young people suffer high levels of verbal and physical homophobic abuse in the community and particularly at school. A smaller number suffer homophobic abuse in their homes. These findings replicate international research and represent a world-wide problem which is, to varying degrees, being addressed. (Cochran et al., 2002; Elia, 2005; Miceli, 2002)

Much has been done to counteract homophobic abuse in Australia in the intervening twelve years between the first *Writing Themselves In* report in 1998 and WTi3 in 2010 including the training of teachers, the introduction in some states of inclusive policies in education, funding for community development projects, social support groups and alliances and the production of anti-homophobia resources. In 2004 we found there were no reductions in homophobic abuse from 1998, however, there were other improvements in the supports available to this group, including those at school.

In this section we report first on levels of abuse, where the abuse occurred and who was responsible and then we report on differences in abuse according to gender, age, ethnicity, religion and rurality.

Verbal abuse

[I've been told]
that im going to hell because im gay.
that a good hard cock will change my mind.
that being gay is evolutions way of killing me off.
that i dont know myself enough to know im gay.
that i should be shot at or killed.
that i'm fucked in the head because i am gay. (Christy, 19 years)

In response to the question: Has anyone been abusive to you because of your sexuality? 34% reported no verbal abuse, 61% reported verbal abuse and 18% physical (and often verbal) abuse. In terms of gender, young men (70%) and GQ youth (66%) reported more verbal abuse than young women (53%).

Despite the work that has been done in schools and the community to address homophobia, percentages of young people who reported verbal abuse (61%) were higher than in previous studies (46% in 1998; 44% in 2004). However we observed no new discursive forms of homophobia emerging and this is encouraging. As in the previous two national studies, the abuse in 2010 was based on negative positioning of same sex sexuality including that it is evil, a mental illness, abnormal, a phase and the path to a miserable life. That there are no new forms emerging can be seen as a positive thing, indicating that homophobia is not changing and current ways of addressing it are likely to be effective in the longer term. We do, however, see many new creative resistant beliefs emerging as young people reach out to other young people like themselves and tap into gay culture through the internet and media.

Though we hesitate to repeat in this report the tirade of abuse that these young people endured, we have included a small number of the thousands of descriptions of verbal abuse reported by young people in 2010. They include crude and profoundly distressing insults:

You name it. Faggot, butt pirate, ass licker, fag, gay, homo; are just some of the examples..... Growing in a boys school did not make life easy because everythings "so gay". "That's pretty gay". (Mike, 21 years)

oh, all the typical insults such as: "you're sick." "this isn't normal." "eww." "you're sinning." "god hates homosexuals." "you're going to burn in hell." "you'll get what's coming to you." etc. (Ruth, 20 years)

your a fucking disgusting faggot" "your a dirty cock sucker" "god hates you" "your gay because your daddy raped you arnt ya? (Ray, 17 years)

Young girls at school used to say things along the lines of;
"oh here she comes, cross your legs ladies"
"Before you even ask, no you can't fuck me you fag"
*"Maybe if you took the stick from your a** and replaced it with a c**** you'll be normal"* (Molly, 17 years)

They also included threats of physical harm:

People frequently yell at me as I walk down the street, most likely because I'm relatively effeminate, for a boy (It's kind of hard not to be when you're not technically male). I suffered a lot of transphobic abuse at my high school.… A group of boys in my year used to regularly threaten me with physical violence ("If you're a boy, we can hit you") and sexual assault ("We should prove to you that you're a girl", often accompanied by being pushed into walls.) They would also often show me pornography in class, often of a lesbian or transsexual nature, by shoving phones and iPods into my face. (Reagan, 17 years)

Death threats were sent to me via mobile phone. (Brock, 14 years)

I was texted only once randomly by an unknown number, although it was evidently some people from school. the message was simply "we are going to follow you home and stab you". Needless to say I was not exactly terrified; I have done many years of boxing and if someone is going to stab you I doubt they'd warn you like that. I think I actually laughed. (Robbie, 18 years)

These threats are an escalated form of verbal violence and have increased potential to cause psychological harm to young people. Anonymous threats, and indeed all threats can be damaging, especially given that homophobic assault is a reality in these young people's lives.

Physical abuse

I have been assaulted on one occasion, they assumed cause I was gay that I couldn't defend myself. Don't worry... They learnt very quickly. I also have a large group of friends that are very protective of me, all I have to do is send a text and a convoy of cars arrive at my aid (Rupert, 17 years)

had fag cut into my back in three places then fuck here with a arrow pointing to arsehole across my but then held and repeatedly abused with sticks (Stuart, 21 years)

I personally haven't been physically abused, however, one particular case of homophobic abuse has hit rather close to home and left me emotionally bruised. My brother was bashed up at a local club by two guys who assumed he was gay (He actually isnt, but thats beside the point) so the thought that my big brother could get so hurt for something he ISNT really worried me as to what could happen to me for something I AM. I havent gone out to a club or pub or anywhere where people are drinking since then because of that fear, and given that happened a couple years ago, I'm the one 20 year old I know that isnt going out to clubs, or has ever been out to a club for that matter. (Becky, 20 years)

As mentioned previously, 18% of young people reported being physically assaulted because of their sexuality, an increase from 2004 (15%) and 1998 (13%). These assaults were more likely to be perpetrated against young men (23%) and particularly GQ young people (31%), though assaults against young women (14%) were at least as high as physical assaults in the 1998 study.

Young people described being assaulted by a range of people in their lives including family, strangers and peers. In some cases the assaults sustained little physical damage and in other cases young people were hospitalised because of their injuries.

My mother initiated a fist-fight. She began to hit me out of anger because of my sexual orientation. (Mary-anne, 15 years)

i have been beat up numerous times since coming out at 14/15 at school. I was beat up by 3 men at a local pub because i wouldn't talk them about my sexual encounters, or go home with them. i also got beat and kicked out by my dad when he found out i was gay. (Talon, 20 years)

Dragged behind a tool shed and beaten once... otherwise just generally chased and pushed. (Roxanne, 20 years)

Once in a PE change-room I had someone throw their testes in my face with a massive crowd around them all laughing and pushing me around.. it was the most demoralising moment of my life. I've managed to get over this on my own but today I wish I talked to people about it. I guess I didn't really think much of it at the time (Jack, 16 years)

Often the assaults occurred in public places and a common theme was bystander apathy and neglect by people who had a duty of care.

I was at a local pub where I had a rainbow flag logo on the side of my arm on my shirt. An English guy came out from the side and punched me in the head and called me a faggot. He threw his beer on me and then shoved me to the ground - my best friend was a few chairs away and stepped in and punched him in the stomach. The guy then backhanded my best friend in the side of his head. We walked away as security was just staring at us and told us it was best we leave as we were causing "controversy". I live in a low income suburb so I know that this is a major factor in this guys behaviour! (Ricardo, 21 years)

myself and 6 of my friends were targeted on a late night train and bashed by a group of 25-30 people aged mid teens to early 20's, many of us were hospitalised from the brutal attack, and sustained horrific injury, the police arrived on the scene at the train station, ignored our complaints, and allowed our attackers to leave, QR video surveillance recorded the entire incident and to my knowledge, nobody has been charged. (Charlie, 19 years)

It is difficult for those of us who are working towards social change to be anything but discouraged by these rising levels of homophobic abuse. The examples of abuse used in this report are typical rather than the extreme. More troubling is the ubiquitousness of the abuse which can be seen to create what Leonard (2008) refers to as an everyday culture of harassment which young people accept as their due. It is not unreasonable to assume that many SSAGQ young people live with this expectation of violence and abuse and have no expectation of bystander support or redress from teachers, parents or police. The evidence that this unacceptable situation is increasing in severity must be taken seriously by all those who have some power to change it. We cannot allow young people to continue to manage it alone or to be exposed so regularly to incidents which cannot fail to compromise their health and wellbeing.

Other types of homophobic abuse

i have never been confronted face to face with verbal abuse but, around school people always thought/ knew i was gay so snide remarks from people as i walked by or word of mouth around school about words being directed at me happened often but i never gave thought to that kind of thing cause it wasn't worth it to care what a few lower IQ's thought about me. (Jonathon, 18 years)

In the 2010 study we included measures of 'other homophobia' that had been described to us, particularly by young women in previous studies. Sixty-nine percent reported being subjected to at least one other type of homophobic abuse with the most frequent being rumours (58%), tolerating homophobic language (46%), social exclusion (39%) and humiliation (32%). Less common forms were written abuse (14%) and graffiti (9%).

Figure 10. *Other types of homophobia by gender*

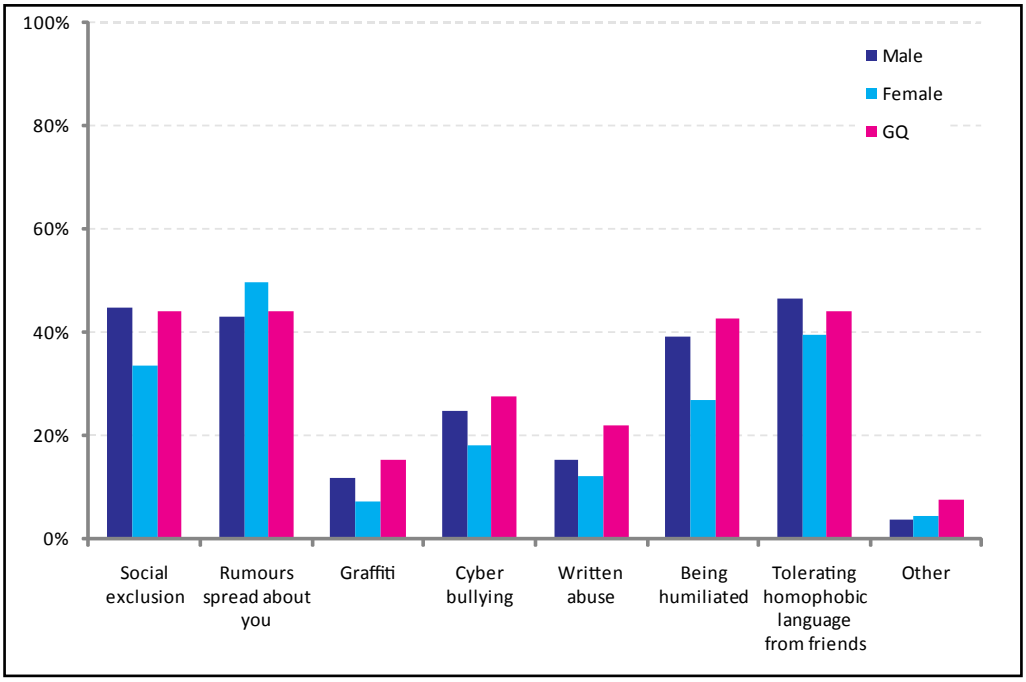


Figure 10 is illustrative of the gender differences in the experience of other forms of homophobia with young men and GQ young people experiencing more of everything except rumours to which young women were more likely subjected.

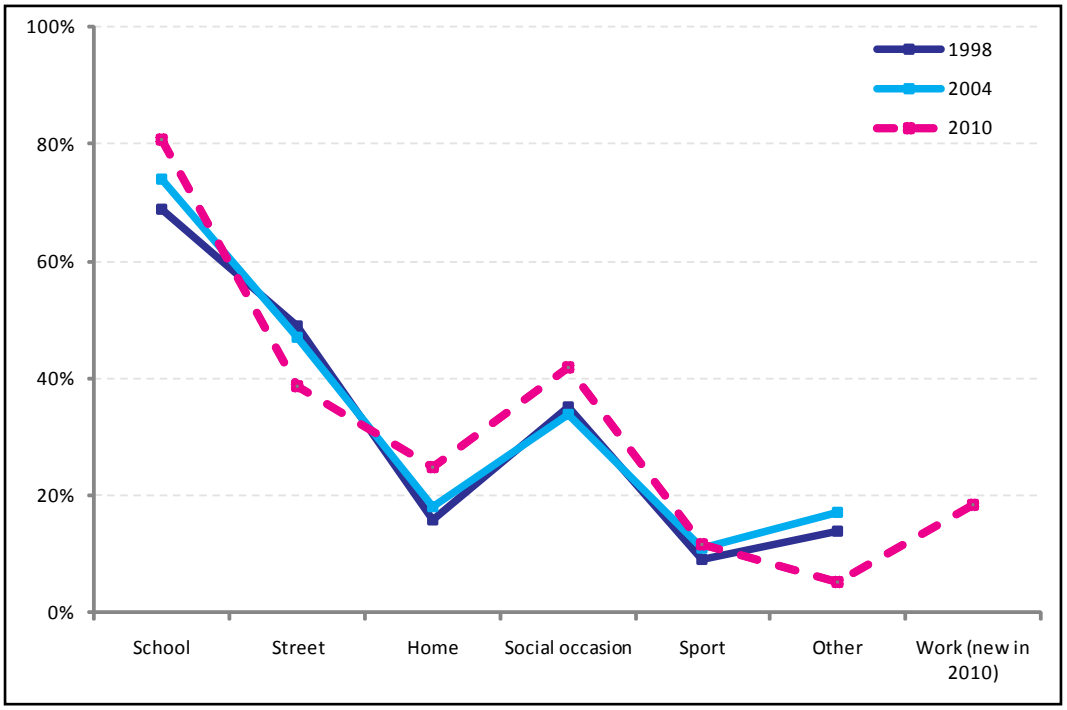
Where the verbal and/or physical abuse occurred

I was getting books out of my bag for my next two classes, when these two girls walked past me about 4 metres away to get their books. If they didn't call me a fag, I probably wouldn't have taken any notice, but as I went to walk down the concrete stairs to my class the two girls 'tripped' and pushed me down the stairs and onto the concrete floor at the bottom. I had a blood nose, split lip and mild concussion. The two girls stood at the top of the stairs and laughed until the noticed a teacher coming their way. They got no punishment because the teacher believed their story about it being an accident. (Lucy, 15 years)

Young people were asked to identify where they experienced homophobic abuse and 80% experienced the reported abuse at school (see Figure 11 below). This figure is higher than that of the previous two surveys (74% in 2004; 69% in 1998). Much work has been done in schools over the last decade to address homophobia and the increase may in part be due to a number of factors such as SSAGQ young people being more likely to be 'out' and therefore more likely to be aware of homophobia as well as being more visible targets for abuse. We are, in Australia in 2010, in the midst of substantial social change which has brought in its wake more inclusive laws in terms of sexual difference, broad-based and positive media visibility, high profile gay and lesbian adults and a range of protections and supports for SSAGQ youth. Many changes for the good are occurring in schools as well, however, there is considerably more work to be done in schools before they provide SSAGQ students with the safe haven they are entitled to expect.

Sport was reported overall as the place of least abuse, however, young men and GQ youth were over represented in this figure (young men 15%, young women 8%, GQ 18%). The abuse of young men in sport has been a consistent finding in all three *Writing Themselves In* reports and the higher percentage of abuse of GQ young people occurred in all venues. Homophobia in Australian sport was the subject of a recent report titled: *Come out to play* (Symons et al., 2010) and includes the abuse of SSAGQ young people and adults. In that study, 41% of participants had experienced homophobic abuse in sport and almost half the participants were not out when the participated in mainstream sport, indicating that this may remain a lifelong problem for SSAGQ young people.

Figure 11. *Comparison of place of abuse: 1998, 2004, 2010*



Because school remains the most likely place for abuse of SSAGQ youth, their stories of abuse often mentioned school and abuse taking place without teacher intervention.

i used to get beaten up at school because i am a dyke. one day i had about 8 guys all in circle spear tackle me to the ground and kicking me, i used to get fruit thrown at my head every lunch time and pushed into brick walls. (Christie, 20 years)

I don't know whether this counts as abuse, but guys who suspected i was gay at school used to touch me and grope me suggestively and say suggestive things, which although sometimes I was aroused, I still felt very uncomfortable having my personal space violated. (Ronan, 20 years)

The young person quoted in this last example went on to describe how he left the school and moved to the TAFE system, a common pathway for many young people who suffer abuse at school. However, we have also learned that SSAGQ young people can be safe at school through the implementation of appropriate policies and practices. The following example demonstrate that schools can stop homophobic abuse, by intervening and changing the culture of the school:

I was beaten up a couple of times, in early high school, once was very bad with three other people involved. After this time, the staff intervened and it never happened again. (Terry, 18 years)

Even more encouraging were the examples of schools that not only worked against homophobia but that also celebrated sexual diversity in their student population:

my high school is very gay friendly. They promote a lot of awareness and encourage a lot. They also participate in pride marches. (Roxanne, 18 years)

Twenty-four percent of young people who were abused suffered abuse at home. This was often by their parents, some experiencing verbal abuse and others physical. This figure is higher than in previous studies (2004 18%; 1998 16%). Fathers were more likely to physically assault their children but, in some cases, mothers did as well. The following young man's parents reacted badly when they suspected he might be gay. He described feeling very unsafe at home.

Like I've said above, at one point they suspected I was gay (left something open on the computer. Those things will be the death of me!) I was locked into a room (by my parents and brother), much like an interrogation. Physically and mentally abused for a few hours and "released" after I'd kept saying I will kill myself (although, their reply was "Either kill yourself or we will kill you") (Peter, 15 years)

The following assault by a father was an extreme example which unquestionably would have had a long term impact on his daughter.

i got 3 broken ribs, a broken collar bone, a punctured lung, my jaw broken in 2 different places and 7 of my teeth got punched out when my father found out i was a homosexual. (Sian, 19 years)

Though this young woman received support from her mother, at the time of the survey she was unemployed and living in a squat.

Despite the workplace being the second least common site of abuse (17%), there were a number of descriptions of abuse that occurred there. The following case also illustrates the fear in many perpetrators of abuse of being regarded as an object of desire, and explains in part why change rooms and toilets are most common places of assault of SSA young men by young men.

I was at work and this guy in the locker room thought I was looking at him so he grabbed my arm and did that weird thing where it twists and ends up behind your back, two days later I found out it was fractured (that was fun explaining) (Joey, 17 years)

Many people described verbal and physical abuse in the street (35%), though it is less common than in previous studies (2004 47%; 1998 45%). In the first case, the young woman was left alone and naked in a park at night and in the second example, friends stepped in and stopped the abuse.

Beaten, stripped and left in a park at night. (Susie, 17 years)

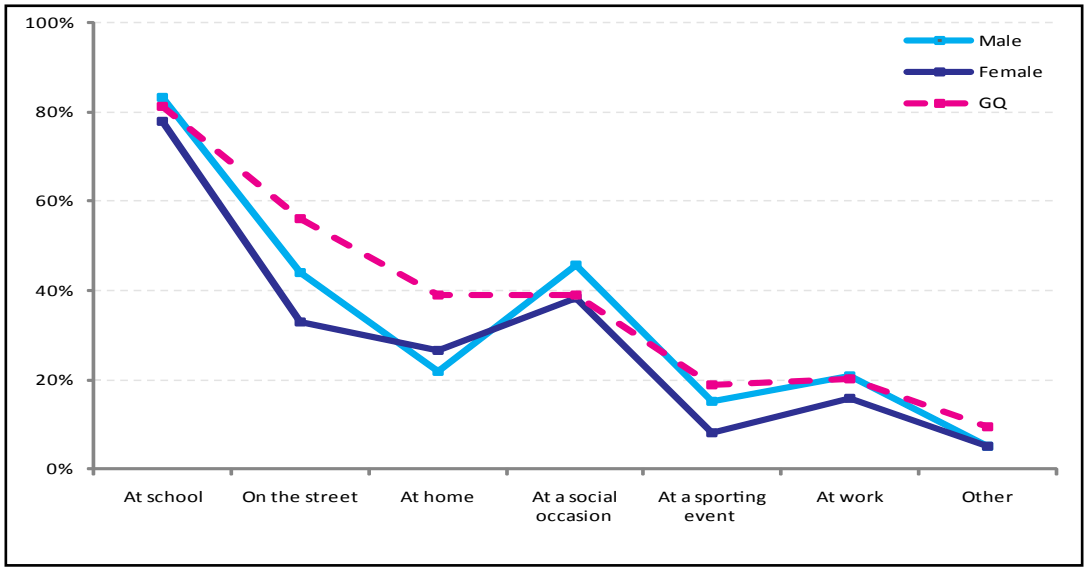
I was at the station with my girlfriend and a few other friends, I was walking over to get on a bus to go home -- my girlfriend coming with me -- and these people from various schools around me came up to us and started verbally abusing us, calling us faggots and losers, how we should go home and stop being disgusting "carpet-munchers". I got my girlfriend to get on the bus -- she's younger than me, I feel a strong urge to protect her -- and told her to get a seat, that it'll be fine, and when I turned around one of them punched me in the face for "being a self-righteous lesbian cunt who needs to be taught a lesson". They then proceeded to grab my bag and throw it onto the road, destroying everything inside as cars ran over it, and attempted to sexually abuse me, ripping my clothes. Thankfully, some friends of mine who knew the offenders came up and told them to back off and leave me alone. (Marina, 17 years)

Social occasions (40%), especially parties were also a common place of abuse, in part because of the consumption of alcohol.

I was bashed at a party once for being gay. The guy snuck up on me and punched me in the head, and I was knocked out for a while, where him and his friend kicked me. People came and broke it up and I got away with just a few grazes (Mickey, 18 years)

at a party when i was 15, i was attacked by several straight men, where i then ran from them when i could get up, and a passing motorist stopped and took me to the hospital.....i remember telling my nan that id walked into my friends door, and fallen down a few of the stairs in their staircase. (Hugh, 20 years)

Figure 12. *Place of abuse by gender*



Gender was relevant to the place of abuse, with GQ young people and young men being more likely to be abused than young women in most places.

8. Links between abuse and negative health indicators

i was attacked at school with a large tree branch across the face. People would walk right up to me in the canteen and punch me in the face. People would follow me around and throw their lunch/drinks at me. one of them cut my long hair in class and lit it on fire. I guess thats why i sought mental help. (Jan, 16 years)

Yes i have been "bashed up" before, going on about 10 times now and still ongoing, the first few were ok just a couple of school yard fights they were fine, than it got worse as i got older and went from a punch in school to being on the ground getting kicked, and then attempted rape once as well. As i was saying before it is something i have gotten used to and i have taken steps to prevent it now, i have been taking lessons in self defence. (Bern, 20 years)

Key Findings

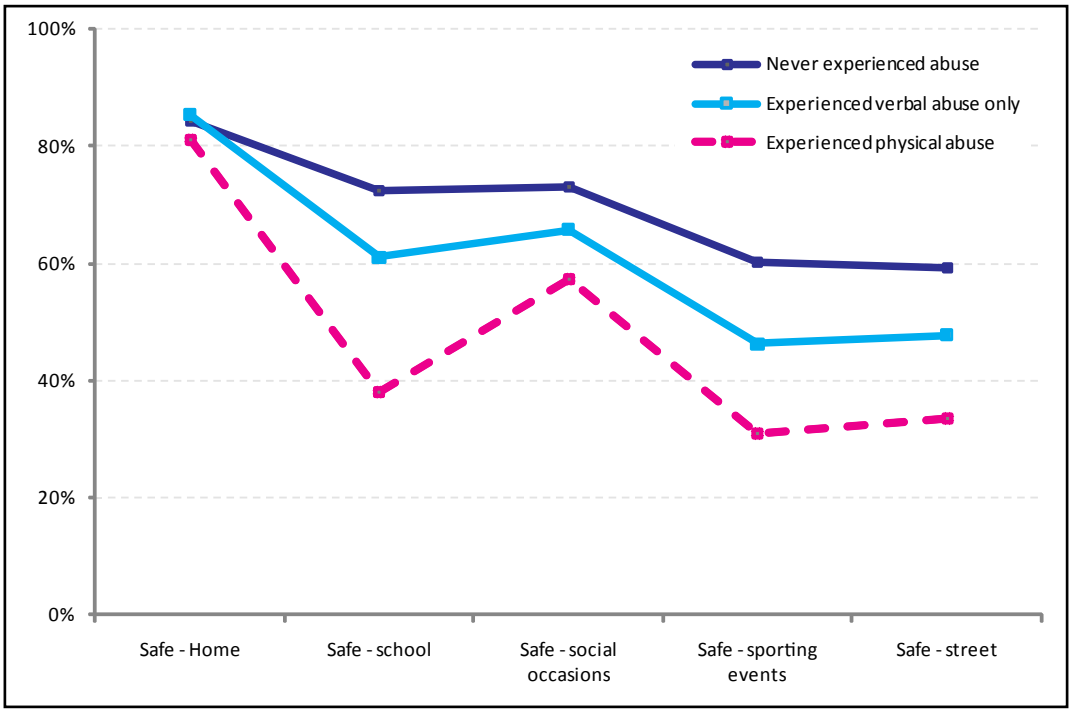
- Homophobic abuse was associated with feeling unsafe, excessive drug use, self harm and suicide in young people.
- For more than half of the participants, homophobic abuse impacted on a range of aspects of schooling.

In the 2004 study, we divided young people into three separate groups: those who reported no abuse, those who reported verbal abuse only and those who reported verbal and physical abuse. We then explored the relationship between level of abuse and feeling unsafe, excessive drug use, self harm and suicide.

Abuse and feeling safe

Young people who had suffered verbal abuse, but not physical abuse were less likely to feel safe in all places, including at home, at sport, in the street, at school, at work and on social occasions than those who had not suffered abuse (see Figure 13). Those who had suffered physical assault were least likely to feel safe in all places particularly at school, at sporting events and in the street. This finding is significant and consistent with the 2004 data. Despite sport being a place where a relatively low amount of abuse took place (12%), young people generally felt least safe there, especially those who had suffered physical abuse. This was especially the case for young men. However, the finding is strongest at school, with only 38% of those who had been physically assaulted feeling safe at school. It hardly needs to be said that school is one place where we, as a community, expect young people to be kept safe. In fact, we think of the school staff as *in loco parentis* while young people are at school and we expect them to take good care of our children.

Figure 13. *Relationship between abuse and feeling safe*

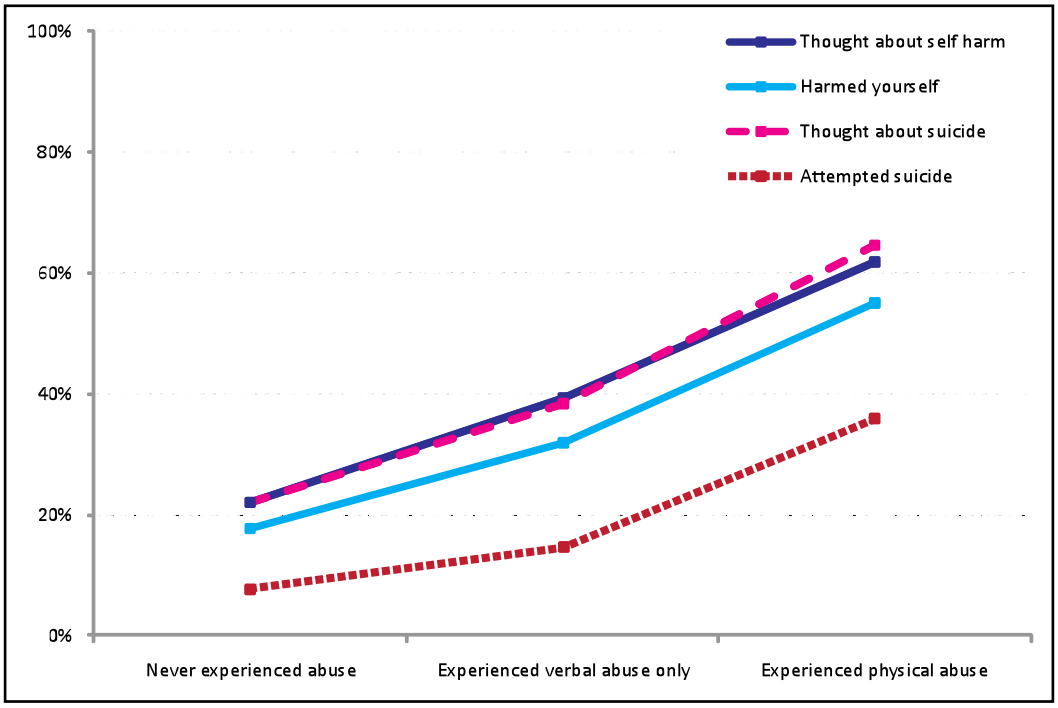


Abuse and self harm

I have had multiple thoughts of suicide. I have acted and failed on those thoughts a few times. I am never able to actively harm myself (i.e cut myself) but I've wanted to many times. I would say any gay person who says that they have never even thought about suicide is lying. Not being able to act on any of your desires, having to actively hide your true self, often having to pretend to hate the very thing you are. All of these things equates to a deep feeling that you don't deserve to live, or failing that, a deep desire to end the suffering. On a happier note, coming out has turned my life around. All of those things mentioned are starting to become a thing of the past. (Christopher, 20 years)

Young people were asked about four separate issues: whether they had thought about self harm; had self harmed; had thought about suicide or had attempted suicide as a result of homophobia and we compared these findings with the three levels of abuse mentioned in the section on verbal abuse.

Figure 14. *Relationships between homophobic abuse, self harm and suicide*



Similar to the findings in 2004, Figure 14 shows strong relationships between abuse and self harm at all four levels. Almost double the number of young people who had been verbally abused (40%), in comparison with those who had experienced no abuse, had thought of self harm (22%). Three times those who had been physically abused (62%), in comparison with those who reported no abuse, had thought of self harm. This pattern was repeated through self harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. For example, in comparison with those who reported no abuse, twice the number of young people who suffered verbal abuse, had attempted suicide and four and a half times the number of young people who had been physically assaulted, had attempted suicide.

We asked young people to tell us more about their experiences of self harm and suicide. Some, who had written 'none of the above' described self harm unrelated to homophobia and many who chose 'none of the above' wrote about why they would never hurt themselves. The following young people were typical:

I have contemplated suicide. I have also performed self harm. However neither of these were because of homosexuality or homophobia. (Joachim, 15 years)

Whilst I have thought about suicide when I was younger, it was more related to my denial of my homosexuality and not wanting to grow up "gay"; rather than overt homophobia per se. To me, it was just a phase and I have learnt from it. I never acted on anything and would not harm myself. (Trevor, 21 years)

Many young people had thoughts of self harm and suicide but had never acted on them. James wrote:

It was more myself thinking that i was not normal, that i wasnt allowed to be gay that made me sad. With all the pressures i was getting from the outside world, and then myself amplifying it, it was becoming too

much. This escalated until i was 14-15. Though, instead of buckling in and committing suicide, i stopped and thought "Hey, if this is who i am, this is who i am. I have to live with myself for the rest of my life, so i might as well be happy." I finally believed in myself, and accepted myself. I was, and still am happy. (James, 17 years)

Young people who reported self harm often mentioned the scars as a reminder of dark times:

it gets me down wen people don't accept me for who i am. now i'm learning to deal with it but as a result of this i now have many scars i have to live with. (Patricia, 16 years)

Homophobia, confusion and quite a few other things, led me to self harm (cut myself) through all of year 8 (when I was 13) to half way through year 9 (14)I regret it a lot because of the scars it left but I didn't have much of a support from any direction, or advice, and counsellors and parents both proved to have a completely unhelpful attitude. So I didn't know which way to turn and that way presented itself to me. (Robyn, 16 years)

Those who reported suicidal thoughts and attempts did so because they either found life either too difficult or because they felt that their loved ones would be better without them. Depression was regularly mentioned as a precursor to a suicide attempt:

there's not really much to say, aside from six years of depression, i feel that being treated like dirt re: my sexuality added to my lack of self esteem, depression and definitely contributed to self harm and thoughts of suicide. (Tracey, 20 years)

My existence seemed to be a burden on my family growing up, and when I came out to them, it just seemed to create such an emotional strain. I thought that maybe if I just went away, that things might be alright for them again. (Stefan, 19 years)

when i get extremely depressed i think about suicide and how it would be easier to get out now (Toby, 15 years)

As discussed earlier, suicide attempts were significantly related to abuse; however, support could ameliorate the impacts of abuse, and rejection could exacerbate it. In Chapter 11 we will examine in more detail the ways that rejection by various community and family members plays out on young people's self harm and suicidal behaviours. In the following example, Thalia suffered rejection from her mother and was sent to boarding school with terrible consequences:

Due to my mother's homophobia I was sent to a strict Catholic boarding school where I was forced to scrub floors and walls on my hands and knees and pray multiple times a day. I am not religious and it was an extremely homophobic environment. Within a month I was on anti-depressant and expelled after attempting suicide because 'Suicide is a sin and so it was not acceptable to take part in the school' (Thalia, 17 years)

Declan, who was 15 at the time of the survey, wrote about how having support stopped him from attempting suicide and supportive people were also responsible for him eventually stopping harming

himself. Daisy also described how thoughts about self harm and suicide stopped when her family and her friends supported her:

I self harmed for about 6 months, and thought heavily about suicide, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, because there are still people that care about me, and they are also the people that stopped me self harming. (Declan, 15 years)

used to think about it a lot when i was at school but not anymore after being accepted by my family and friends (Daisy, 20 years)

Very often the loneliness and alienation that comes with knowing about one's sexual difference, before telling anyone, was a time of danger for these young people. Steve had self harmed and attempted suicide before he came out:

When i was in the closet and was being called names because i was gay and i didnt accept that at this point i got depression and then when i did accept who i was i still had depression because i was in a catholic school and i didnt know anyone else like me in the school (Steve, 19 years)

Though a certain amount of homophobia is about gender transgression, Reagan, a transgender f–m young man, felt that transphobia, not homophobia, was the cause of his serious self harming and suicidal attempts:

Homophobia, once again, didn't affect me as much as transphobia. I left school/let my grades slip because I truly believed I couldn't live in this world, and that I wouldn't need an education because I'd kill myself before it mattered. I suffered severe clinical depression (which still affects me, to a lesser extent) and self harmed constantly and to a physically dangerous extent - I stopped it a year and several months ago and I still have large, visible scars. (Reagan, 17 years)

Drug Use

i stopped taking drugs heavily at 18. be4 that i was a daily uses of E and pot and booze. 19 i stopped drinking daily. now am a youth worker and nursing uni student. have good support from family and friends and if someone called me a fag i could happily ignore it (Alana, 18 years)

well my life is bad.. i was kicked out of home at 15 when i came out.. could not attend school because my teachers used to throw objects at me and not let me sit near them + after school i would get bricks and rocks thrown at me and was not able to catch the bus or walk home safely, so because i havent finished year 10 i cannot be as successful in life as i want to be.. after moving out i was poor had no money. had no one to go to. i then started drugs, i believe now that i am older i still suffer depression.. miss being able to be able to go to school and do things like normal teenagers instead of having to support myself and be poor.. i tent to not have trust in anyone after going to my high school.(Tim, 20 years)

Australian and international research has documented higher levels of drug use in non heterosexual populations with these patterns of higher drug use generally beginning in adolescence (Fergusson et al., 2005; Murnane, 2003; Smith, et al., 2009; Hillier et al., 1998; Hillier et al., 2005).

Drug cultures are constantly changing in Australia, with trends in use following availability and price. For this reason we have extended the list of drugs in this study to include amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, inhalants, sedatives, hallucinogens, non-prescribed stimulants and heroin. Young people were also asked whether they had injected drugs.

A comparison of rates of weekly alcohol use, use of marijuana ever and ever having injected drugs with the SSASH study (Smith et al., 2009) show that the 15 -18 year old SSAGQ young people were more likely to consume alcohol weekly, use marijuana and to inject drugs. This is consistent with findings from previous studies.

A comparison between drug use in 1998, 2004 and 2010 studies of same sex attracted young people shows that young people's heroin and injecting drug practices are lower; however, levels of excessive use of drugs tells a more comprehensive story. Forty-eight percent (1400) of young people drank alcohol at least weekly, 9% were smoking marijuana at least weekly, 23% were smoking cigarettes daily, 9% were using amphetamines at least monthly, 1% had taken cocaine more than once, 3% had used ecstasy at least monthly, 3% had taken inhalants at least monthly, 9% had taken sedatives at least monthly, 3% had taken hallucinogens more than once, 2% had taken non-prescribed stimulants more than once and 2% had taken heroin and 4% had injected drugs. Young women were more likely to excessively use a range of drugs than young men, for example, alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana and sedatives; however, GQ young people were most likely to use all drugs except for alcohol and cigarettes.

There has been a tendency in the literature to think of the higher rates of drug use in GLBTI adults as connected with sociability and the gay lifestyle, however this has recently been challenged (Leonard, 2008). Research with SSAGQ youth suggests that higher rates of drug use are associated with homophobic abuse. We have concluded that many of these young people are in fact self medicating to ease the pain of the rejection and hostility in their families, schools and communities. James' story below is an example.

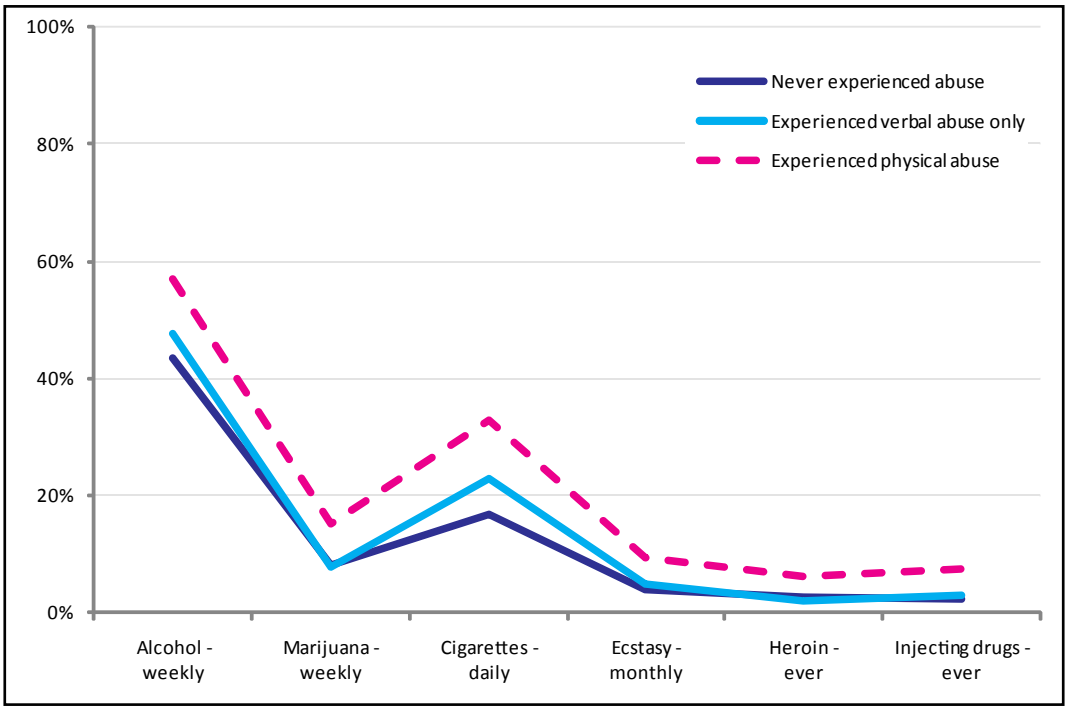
I grew up in a homophobic family. I came out at the age of 13 and was forced out of home. I lived through youth shelters and at times on the street. I was unable to eat much and turned to cutting myself. I turned to drugs and alcohol. One day I decided it was time to grow up and take care of myself. noone else was going to do it for me. I set myself up on centrelink at age 16 started working and got myself set up in youth housing. I am now studying at Central Queensland University and looking to become a psychologist who can help others who are in the situation i was. I'm loud, proud and now at last respected because of my efforts in life. (James, 18 years)

The following section examines young people's drug use as a correlate of abuse.

Homophobic abuse and drug use

In past studies we have found a relationship between the homophobic abuse of young people and higher rates of excessive drug use. As before, we looked at excessive drug use (see Figure 15 below) of the three groups, young people who experienced no abuse, young people who experienced verbal abuse only and those who were physically assaulted. In all cases drug use was significantly related to abuse with those reporting no abuse being least likely to use drugs excessively followed by those who were verbally abused and finally those who were physically assaulted. These findings show the same pattern as that of the 2004 study.

Figure 15. *Relationship between abuse and excessive levels of drug use*



Homophobic abuse and schooling

People at my high school found out I was a Lesbian and after school one day, a group of six (girls and boys) shoved me against the wall and punched me and kicked me until a teacher saw what was happening. I had one of my teeth punched out, my lip split open, cracked ribs, severe bruising on my face and body and head trauma. I left the school that week, and now I'm happily attending TAFE where I am accepted (Veronica, 17 years).

In a new item in this survey, we asked young people: *In what ways, if at all, has homophobia impacted on your schooling?* There were 13 multiple response items including *It hasn't affected me at all* and *other.* The complete list can be seen in Appendix 1.

It was pleasing to see that almost half of the sample reported that homophobia had not affected their schooling (42%). One young woman who reported no effects of homophobia commented:

Asked them did they really think it bothered me? I've dealt with worse than petty rumours. They stopped, because they realised it didnt affect me. (Bethany, 18 years)

Thirteen percent of young people reported that the impact of homophobia on them was to fight back and become activists. Mickey is an example:

I have encountered a lot of homophobia in my life...I've been bullied in every way imaginable, been gay bashed, been treated unfairly. And while it almost got the better of me when it was at its worst, all its done now is make me a much stronger person, and so fiercely committed to fighting for gay people's rights. I do not accept homophobic behaviour around me in the slightest. I'm currently working my way towards a Law degree, so I can eventually one day become a prosecutor, fight for gay rights, and one day become a High Court Judge, just like Michael Kirby. I want to help make Australia a better place for gay people, and I know I will. I hope this survey helps make things better for gay youth. I was happy to do it. (Mickey, 18 years)

For others, however, there were serious impacts with 29% not being able to concentrate in class, 20% missing classes and 21% missing days at school with marks dropping for 20%. Impacts on school career were particularly severe when young people felt they had no support at school.

I didn't really feel like I could do anything, didn't feel like i had any support. I doubted my school would have really helped. (Pablo, 21 years)

Some young people used avoidance behaviour, for example, 18% hid at recess and lunch and/or did not use change rooms (16%) and toilets (9%). Rodney, is one example:

I struggled a bit through years 9/10. Coming from a rural town, I did have to endure quite an amount of physical comedy at my expense. The change rooms before and after PE were the worst, you always had your back turned on at least some of the other boys. You never knew what they would do - hit you, trip you. I was the only openly gay boy at my 7-10 school, and one of about 4 and my year 11/12 school. I have no issues with my sexuality myself, but derogatory words such as "fag" said under breath as people walk past does sometimes get me down. (Rodney, 17 years)

We have learned from past research that toilets and change rooms can be dangerous places for young men in particular, and they pay a high price for trying to maintain their safety, for example, 13% dropped out of sport and other activities.

In terms of education, the most serious impacts were that young people left their school to go to another (10%) or left school altogether (8%). The following young man left school after being abused by the parent of another student, complaining to the principal and having nothing done about it.

At my Christian High School I was approached by a parent of a schoolmate who informed me that I was 'Bringing an unwholesome agenda into the school" followed by various statements about satan, sin etc etc. I spoke with the principal of the school, and eventually left the school as I felt as though I was being deliberately but subtly rejected. (Jackson, 19 years)

Homophobia is clearly a disruptive influence on SSAGQ young people's education and there is little doubt that it affects other students as well. One school principal recently remarked that he believed that by addressing homophobia in his school, academic performance improved (Tobias, 2004). Beyond protecting the rights and safety of these young people, vital as they are, it may also motivate school leaders to know that there are many other benefits of dealing with homophobic abuse in their school communities.

9. Internet use

The Internet had tons of accurate information regarding sexuality, things that were neglected in my schooling education and household. It told me that I was not alone, and that I didn't have to act in a certain (stereotypical) way, that I just need to be the person who I've always been. (Christopher, 18 years)

The internet offers information which is non-confrontational (where some may not wish to speak to counselors, etc). It is a playground for ideas and personal exploration, available to masses of people. The sites I have been a part of and are still apart of, have been used to hear other people's stories, get personal advice and to help others. Also, a sense of belonging is important to me in my online communities. (Markus, 17 years)

Key findings

- Almost all young people had access to the internet at home.
- The internet was important in feeling accepted, exploring sexual identity, finding others, coming out and feeling proud.
- Young people who reported using the internet to explore sexual identity were more likely to be male and attracted exclusively to the same sex.

Internet access at home

Since the 1998 study there have been many changes in internet availability and services. Australian household access to the internet has more than quadrupled from 16% to 72% (ABS, 2009). As this survey was totally online, and knowing from previous surveys how important the internet is to SSAGQ young people, we asked: *do you have internet access at home?* In total, 97% of young people answered yes (n=2997).

Feelings about internet sites

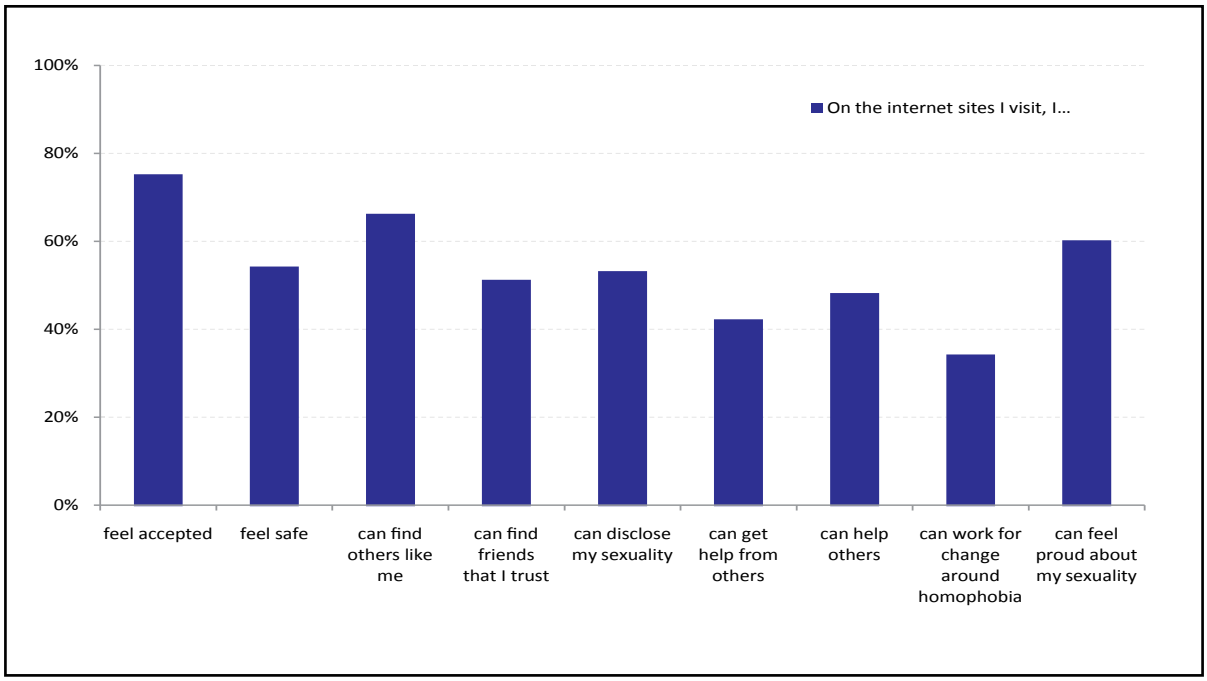
I really just come on when I'm bored, to socialise with my real life friends, I feel the same, just not as accepted in public or not as safe so yea... (Malcolm, 15 years)

Research has clearly acknowledged the importance of the internet and virtual community for SSAGQ young people as offering a safe, supportive and anonymous space to practice and explore their sexuality (Driver, 2006; Harper et al., 2009; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Hillier et al., 2004)). The internet also offers a cultural context where SSAGQ young people learn how to be same sex attracted, and participate in a sexually specific subculture without fear of community reprisal (Bryson, 2004). Yet young people's internet use has been the subject of much negative publicity and community concern (Dooley et al, 2009; McGrath, 2009). Such concerns relate to the difficulties of monitoring their online contacts and behaviours and the potential for establishing relationships which cause them harm either online or offline. While these concerns can be seen to apply equally to SSAGQ young people, their internet use is

arguably a means to establishing a world where their sexuality is normalised and their concerns heard and addressed. So little of this is available to them offline, particularly before they come out, that the internet is a lifeline for many, at least for some part of their lives.

To further understand SSAGQ young people's internet use and what sites they belong to and or visit often we asked what they personally got out of visiting these sites. The question was broken down into nine categories which were loosely informed by McMillan & Chavis' (1986) four criteria for sense of community which includes membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connections. Young people were asked to choose as many items as applied for the following question: *When thinking about internet sites you belong to or visit often which of the following statements are true for you?* The site/s are places where I…. Young people's responses can be found below in Figure 16.

Figure 16. *How young people felt about the internet*



.... Reading peoples blog or social networking pages about their feelings about their own sexuality. Reading stories about homosexuality because i had no access to any literary of visual mediums to read about homosexuality as a normal practice. (Andrew, 21 years)

In general, young people were most likely to feel accepted, find others like themselves and feel proud of their sexuality when on the internet. Because of discrimination and homophobia these often elude them in their offline lives. Around half felt safe online and were able to disclose their sexuality, something that is not always easy to do offline. When it came to activism, almost half felt the internet was a site where they could help others and around a third felt it was a place where they could work for change around homophobia. The evidence is clear in supporting this when looking at *Facebook* (a site that was often mentioned as helpful) where there are over 500 groups set up to combat homophobia, many of which are set up by young people. Steve and Katie are examples of this.

Share my passion for helping against homophobia and trying to meet others with this passion (Steve, 19 years) and *i read about how open people are and it makes me proud* (Katie, 17 years)

These results support what we have known for some time, that the internet remains an important point of connection for SSAGQ young people and, anecdotally, the stories would suggest that the internet is most important for younger SSAGQ people around exploration and older SSAGQ people for maintaining friendships and involvement in groups and interests.

Which Internet sites were most helpful?

These days the main site I visit is Facebook, and mostly the people on there are people I know and trust already, on Facebook the people I know already know about my sexuality, and anyone else doesn't matter....(Raquel, 20 years)

In order to find out what sites young people visited often and which were most helpful one survey item asked: *Please tell us more about your answers including which internet sites have been most helpful and how you have used them.*

There were numerous internet sites mentioned in these two questions, *Facebook* was overwhelmingly the most popular. This is of no surprise as *Facebook* has become the number one social networking site in the world with up to 500 million members. *MySpace* was also mentioned by some. There were various other sites mentioned for finding information, reading stories, chatting to others and finding out about up and coming events including *After Ellen.com, Same Same,* and *Live Journal.* Australian sites were often mentioned including *Minus 18, Freedom, Same Same* and *Mogenic* (the site has since shut down and the sadness about this was reflected in many of the comments). Pornography sites (none specified) were mentioned regularly as a place to find out how to have sex, to clarify attraction and to have fun. *YouTube* was mentioned especially as a site for watching videos of young people coming out.

Using the internet to explore sexual identity

For SSAGQ young people, forming a positive sexual identity involves clarification, exploration, acceptance and integration of a non-heterosexual orientation. It includes not only making sense of sexual feelings, but choosing whether or not to disclose to others. Given the frequent lack of safety in their offline communities and the anonymous nature of the internet, it is not surprising that it is a central place for these young people to explore their sexual identity. Young people were asked: *have you used the internet to explore your sexual identity?* Three-quarters (76%) of young people responded that they had used the internet for this purpose.

Those who reported using the internet to explore sexual identity were more likely to be male, over 18, non-indigenous, attracted exclusively to the same sex, and identify as gay, lesbian or homosexual. For

many of the young people in this study, the internet played a particularly important role in exploring issues around sexuality and sexual identity. Jayne was typical:

When i was first questioning my sexuality i was about 15 and didn't have anybody around me who i could talk things over with or question, so i joined 'community' groups on livejournal with like minded people... i posted my questions concerns and strangers from across the world, who did not know my name, face or hometown, but who knew me through my posts, would answer the questions and give real feedback which helped me a lot through my teenage years at high school. I didn't have a face to face group... the people on these live journal communities were my support group and the support had a huge impact on me. (Jayne, 18 years)

Many young people mentioned that the internet played an important role in seeking information, support and connection with similar others that was not available to them offline, particularly those not out, those in hostile environments, and those with little support - including those living in rural areas:

I have used the internet to gain a sense of belonging and pride in the gay community. I live in a small, Christian town and I sometimes feel isolated and lonely. Sites such as afterellen.com help me to appreciate the lighter side of gay culture and to realize that it involves fun as well as struggle. (Violet, 15 years)

ive visited lesbian chat rooms and dating sites… i feel so good there… as soon as I get back to the real world… its fucked all over again. (Marsha, 15 years)

The anonymous nature of the internet allowed these young people to be more courageous with self-disclosures and to ask embarrassing questions:

I find that the internet really allows you to be a lot more open about yourself without a big risk of backlash. Whilst some people will say bad things about you, it's a lot easier to brush off or have the confidence to fight back on the internet as compared to real life. (Corey, 19 years)

The anonymous nature of the internet also allows young people to play with identities (Turkle, 1995), and practise coming out to others in a less daunting context (Hillier et al., 2001). For Alex, coming out online provided courage and confidence to come out in real life: *I read a lot of "coming-out" stories when I was younger which gave me the confidence to do it myself.* (Alex, 18 years)

Reasons given for not using the internet for this purpose included not needing support or information for sexuality related issues, and having adequate sources of information and support in real life. For example Angel wrote:

I'm lucky in that most things that I need to know about sexuality I can ask of my friends and family (my mum is bi and also a midwife/sex ed teacher and I can't begin to explain how helpful that is!) so I don't actually need to turn to the internet much. Well, at all really. (Angel, 17 years)

Others such as Helena were reluctant to use the internet because she was not yet out to her family: *I have avoided using the internet at home to find sites about homosexuality simply because I don't want it to show up in the browser history.* (Helena, 21 years)

Comments about negative experiences online were mentioned (and included problems with *sleazy and promiscuous older males*, but these were relatively infrequent.

Uses of the internet for sexuality related issues

In respect to the specific ways that the internet helps facilitate identity development, a range of themes emerged. Seeking both information and interaction, young people were able to meet a range of needs that often were not met in more traditional settings.

SSAGQ yound people reported that they sought online information about non-heterosexual sex, sexual health issues, same sex relationships and community, and that this type of information was not always available to them via more traditional channels such as family or school.

*Have used net for "finding information about lesbian sex – I still get worries that I wont know what to do with a girl if I ever get one! (*Roberta, 18 years)

For some, the internet provided clarity around same sex attractions. Similar to young people in Hillier's study (2001), the internet was identified as a safe space to explore feelings, gain clarity about sexual attraction, and to develop a more certain sense of self-identity.

When first evaluating my same sex attraction I explored the internet for answers to my questions…. In my later teens the internet became a useful tool for establishing friendships and finding sex. (Brian, 18 years)

When I first started to think I might be gay or bisexual I used the internet a lot to find out about how I was feeling and what it meant. (Bronson, 16 years)

A strong theme was finding others like me, and some reported the relief that they felt around connecting with others who were going through similar issues. For example, (Samantha, 16 years) wrote: *My reading about others who face the same issues, I feel more comfortable with who I am and less alien.* Because of the breadth of internet users it is easy to find similar others on the internet, which can lead to feelings of connectedness and community. This also makes it a safe environment to try out new identities. Many young people indicated that they used the internet to meet others who were in similar situations, and that it helped to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Some reported meeting up with online friends in real life, for friendships, relationships, and sexual experiences. Connecting with others (often in the form of reading others' blogs or stories) provided a sense of being less alone, and provided hope and possibility for the future:

I read stories about other people coming out and being in relationships etc and it helps me feel more normal and it gives me hope that I can have the relationship I want one day. (Frances, 18 years)

And going online to find comfort in others stories helped a lot, coming out stories etc. Helped me realize I can make my own story. (Henry, 17 years)

The internet allows for anonymous communication which reduces the emotional risk of disclosure to others and 85% had disclosed their sexual orientation to someone online, higher than the 73% in the 2004 study. Brad remembered a time in when he was only out online:

When I was younger I used the internet to compartmentalize my sexuality, as the 'gay me' only existed online. This left the real me often at a loss without the internet, and without any 'real' gay friends, I felt quite lonely. As I got older and started meeting people in real life, I became less reliant on the internet as a place to find acceptance. However, I'm glad I had the ability to meet people online, because back then I was extremely confused. (Brad, 18 years)

Young people also used the internet to support others in need. For example Peggy wrote:

I like to talk to people that are feeling the same as I do/have and I like to help others going through the same thing. (Peggy, 14 years)

This use of the internet for supporting others was frequently extended to engaging in activism for more comprehensive social change. This opportunity to fight back was the trigger for some young people to enter a chat room or forum to address homophobic posts. In regard to this trend, studies have shown that active participation in online groups has resulted in increased self-esteem, positive sexual identity, and increased levels of disclosure to others (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

There is considerable concern in the community about the ready access young people have to pornography on the internet and the degree to which they may have their view of appropriate sexual behaviour shaped by it (Bryant, 2009). For SSAGQ young people who frequently live in an information vacuum about sexual relationships and sexual practices, it may be the only source of information. Young people reported accessing sexually explicit material for a range of reasons: to help clarify their attractions, for sexual education purposes, and for sexual outlet either when same sex partners were not easy to find, or to minimise risks associated with real life contact.

In regards to using the internet to explore my sexuality, porn was definitely the best thing (as embarrassing as it is). It allows you to have a look at what interests you within your own comfort zone so you don't go off and do something stupid in real life. (Blythe, 17 years)

Young women also reported accessing pornography online:

In relation to how I have used the internet to explore my sexual identity, I'd say porn - it helps you realise what you're attracted to. (Becky, 15 years)

Brae's story, 15 years

I started using the internet to explore my sexuality many, many years ago, when I realised that it was something that I needed to explore more fully and didn't have any resources around me. Even today, the internet is still my primary way of integrating and communicating with the gay community, and it has been the principal force behind my acceptance, understanding and disclosure of my sexuality… I think I can safely say that if it were not for the internet, I would not have been able to accept myself as gay and come out in the way that I have; I would still be one confused, lonely and in-denial teenager.

Sally's story, 21 years

I followed a lot of gay people on youtube who had gone through, or were going through the same thing as me, which helped define what being gay meant in my mind, erasing the stereotypes, and helped me relate in a way that let me admit to myself that I am the same as these people, and they're ok, so I must be okay too. I watched a lot of gay-themed feature films online, that I wouldn't have had access too otherwise, and wouldn't have been comfortable buying or renting anyway. These provided positive depictions of gay relationships to me, and helped me learn how gay relationships work, and differ from the norm. Relationships for same sex couples were never addressed throughout school, and I had no friends I could talk to about this. Online forums allowed me to interact with other gay males of a similar age for the first time, seek support, learn about what it meant to be gay, and once again provided an education in areas of social life, relationships, and sex-ed that simply weren't addressed while straight relationships and issues were being discussed in the classroom and the playground at school. Before I joined these forums, I had never had any interaction with openly gay people. It took away the bogey-monster stereotyped image I had in my mind, these were just teenagers like me, normal people. Most of all the internet taught me that I was not alone, and there were ways of finding people like me, even if I couldn't spot them, they were there.

10. Disclosure and support

I'm a HSC student just trying to live my life. Being in the closet nearly killed me and I know it has killed others. I hope to study law next year. Since coming out none of the closeted girls want to date me but being open and honest is good for the soul. (Diana, 17 years)

After a rocky and confusing start being a practising Christian and realising I was a lesbian, I now feel happy and proud of my sexuality. I found telling friends harder than telling family at first - I always knew my family would be ok (I have an aunt who is a lesbian, so I wasn't the first) but I thought straight female friends would be 'freaked out'. In the end those friends were supportive. After leaving school I moved to Sydney and now have a wider circle of friends many of whom are queer. I live in a house-share with other queer women and am contemplating moving in with my gorgeous girlfriend that I've been with for 7 months. life is great! ☺. (Bettina, 21 years)

Key findings

- 97.5% of young people had disclosed their same sex attractions to at least one person, a continuing trend to openness from 2004 (95%) and 1998 (82%).
- Support from almost everyone was higher in 2010 than in previous studies.
- Friends continue to be the most popular choice as confidantes for young people disclosing their sexual feelings.
- In general, young men were more likely to disclose, and more likely to be supported compared to young women.

Over the last 12 years in Australia we have seen a trend towards visibility and disclosure of young people in their families and communities. From early *Writing Themselves In* surveys and overseas research (Savin-Williams, 2005), we know that young people are coming out at an increasingly early age. This may in part be because of the greater visibility of gay issues and characters in the media, the increasing profile of gay men and lesbians in society generally, the changing of laws in Australia and improved policies in education and health.

Young people were asked: *Have you told the people below about your feelings of being attracted to people of your own sex? How supportive were they?* A list of 17 possible confidantes was provided, with three potential responses: no, haven't told, yes and was supportive, or yes but was NOT supportive. Responses were grouped into three categories based on relationship type - family, peers, and professionals.

Despite the trend towards openness there remained in the 2010 sample, around 75 young people who had not shared their secret with anyone and who as a consequence received no support. As is obvious from Thom below, the burden of the secret can be quite overwhelming for young people:

I still haven't told anyone yet, it is only me who knows of my homosexuality, which bothers me a bit… I haven't told anyone yet, but with myself am far more comfortable, and am seriously contemplating telling my closest friend… I am very apprehensive about coming out to my family and friends, especially because I live in a regional area, in a town of 38000 people (which I suppose is relatively urban but... not) and because my school is part of the Anglican Church, and as it appears to me (due to quite a few homophobic jokes made by the chaplain) the school by way of the church is against homosexuality. I don't really want very many people to find out because I don't get along with any of the rugby boys and machos anyway being "straight" - Imagine the crap I'd get if they knew I was gay. I really don't know what to do, but would really like to share this with someone. (Thom, 16 years)

Long before they come out, these young people listen to what is said and in many ways soak up negativity long before it is directed at them. In the following young man's case, homophobia alienated him and caused anxiety. The closet is not necessarily a safe place for many SSAGQ young people.

I feel i have always known that i was gay. When i was really young, i knew that i was gay, but i was scared. I picked up things from what people have said, and what was shown on tv. Little things like talk of playschool being changed because some critics said it encouraged children to be homosexual, or the tellytubbies being cancelled because Po was gay. These things sounded ridiculous to get worked up over, and it made me scared of how people would react to me if they reacted this badly over something so small. It made me feel alone (James, 17 years)

Disclosure to family

We know from previous research that telling parents is a traumatic event for young people because so much rests on these child-parent relationships (Hillier, 2001). Young people stand to lose not only emotional support, but also the resources that sustain them in their daily lives. Telling parents is one of the most difficult disclosures and the secret is often kept under very difficult circumstances; for example, in the following two cases when a homophobic assault caused physical injury and a young person was left to explain it to his/her parents:

I was hit by three guys at school one day; one held me while the second punched me in the stomach once, then the third kicked me when i was on the ground. They then forced me to suck their penises. They told me if i said anything about it they would come back and do this again till i learnt not to "open my cock-sucking mouth". I was so ashamed to tell my parents that i told them they beat me up to take some money. (Carl, 19 years)

I had a glass bottle broken on my head whilst in Hyde Park very late one night when I was 13. I didn't go to the hospital to avoid my parents finding out. I now have a scar leading out from my hairline on my forehead. (Melinda, 18 years)

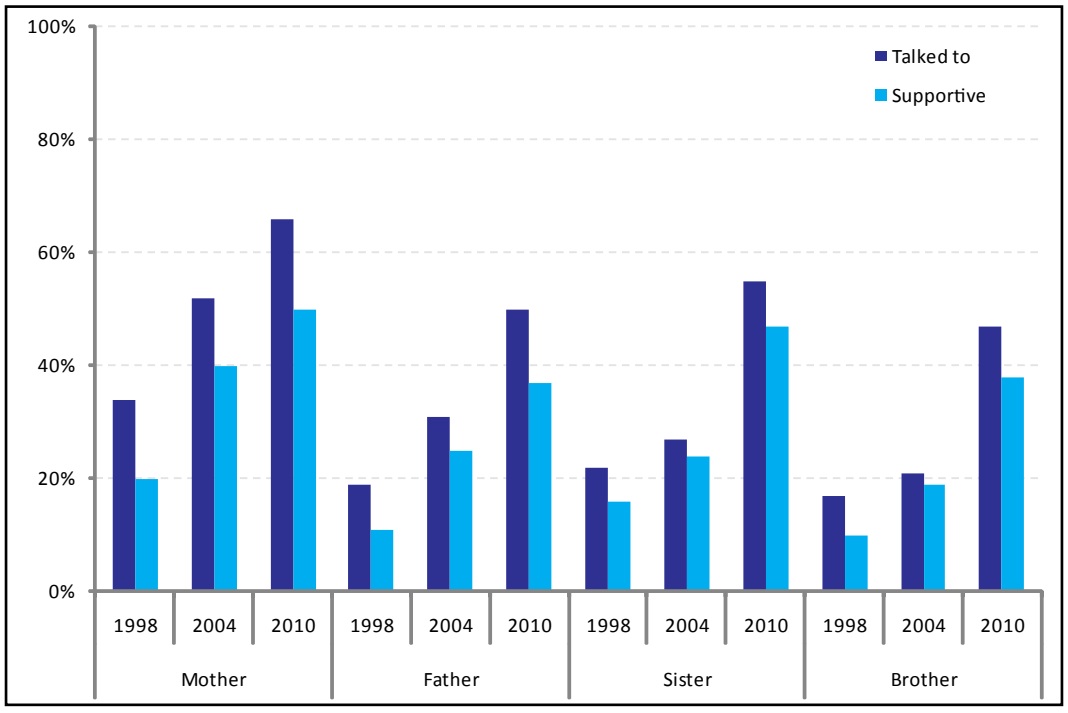
Compared to 2004, there was an increase in the percentage of young people disclosing their sexuality to family members and an increase in the support they were given. Merida is an example:

i was very lucky to grow up in a family where being gay was a non issue, i didn't even feel the need to come out to my parents, i introduced my first girlfriend to them when i was 15 and they were aware and supportive from there on. One of the best time this year was marching with my mum in the equal love protests. i value this support so much because i realise that it is very difficult and sometimes impossible to reconcile your family and sexuality for some people. (Merida, 21 years)

While the majority of young people reported support from the parents they had disclosed to, there remained a significant percentage of young people who were not supported. Research tells us that SSAGQ young people are over represented in homeless populations (Hillier et al.,1997; Rossiter et al., 2003). In some instances, parents were so distressed or angered by their child's disclosure that this led to the young person leaving home. Missy felt unsafe at home:

I have generally been quiet about it, although when I came out, I received both a lot of hate and a lot of love and acceptance. I have been called faggot, lesso, retarded, miscreant, and my mother has told me that she doesn't want me. (Missy, 14 years)

Figure 17. *Disclosure to family; 1998, 2004, 2010*



Young people from CALD and religious backgrounds were less likely to tell their parents and less likely to be supported. Monica was particularly concerned about telling her parents.

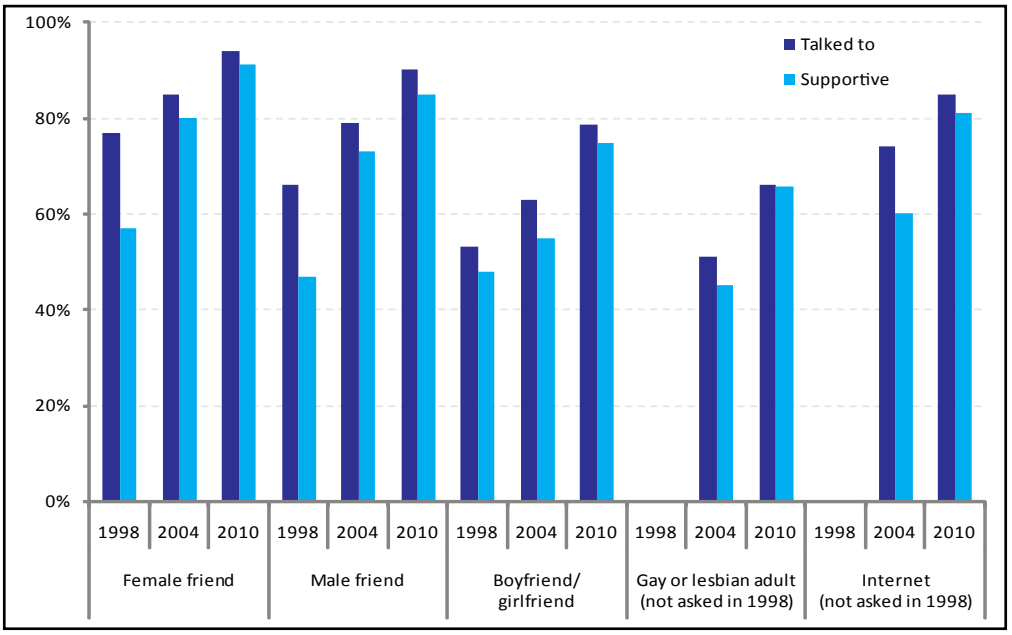
It isn't something I would choose if I could help it. My parents would not be accepting in the slightest if they knew this, and of course I have had conflict with my faith- being Christian. Though I have come to terms with this and believe I can be bisexual and Christian I do sometimes doubt myself and I'm not open about it with most people. (Monica, 18 years)

Disclosure to friends and peers

One of the people i thought i could trust was disgusted with me when i came out to him. He would say things like "your a disgusting little fuck, faggot go kill yourself, do the world a favour" and also "theres no place in the world for people like you". (Cadell, 16 years)

As in previous reports, friends, more than anyone, were the first confidantes for SSAGQ young people and their friends were overwhelmingly supportive – the excerpt above was clearly an exception.

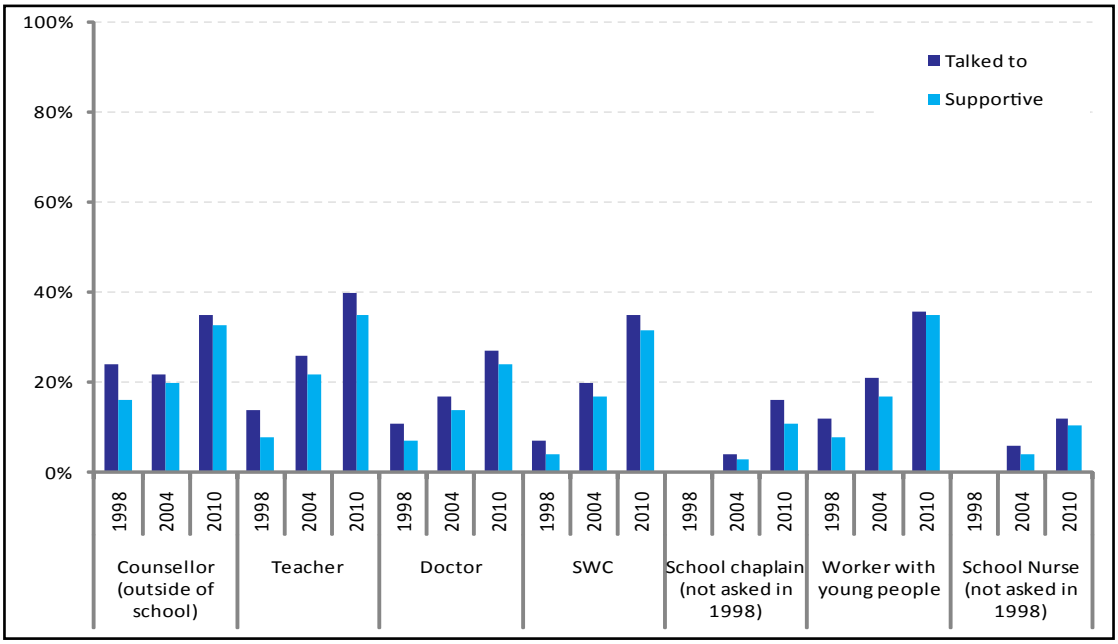
Figure 18. *Disclosure to friends and on the internet; 1998, 2004 and 2010*



Disclosure to professionals

Despite young people being least likely to disclose to professionals, more young people disclosed to them in 2010 than in previous surveys (see Figure 19 below). As with family and friends, support from professionals was also higher in this study.

Figure 19. *Disclosure to professional; 1998, 2004 and 2010*



The support of professionals is important for SSAGQ young people, particularly youth workers and teachers who work closely with them. Schools are beginning to address homophobia with at least one state education department releasing a specific policy with clear guidelines for school communities in dealing with homophobia and supporting sexual diversity[3]. However it took many years to produce the vehemence of homophobia in our culture today and it will probably take many more years to fully remove it. In the mean time we need to find a way forward to help buffer young people from its negative impacts.

3 The DEECD, Victoria released Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools to all school principals in 2008. It directs teachers and others to provide an inclusive curriculum and to address homophobia when and wherever it appears.

11. Support as a buffer against negative health outcomes of homophobia

I have not been physically abused because it is against the rules at our school to hit people. It is more likely that if I went to another school I would risk being beaten up. (Nora, 15 years)

Key Findings

- Rejection following disclosure was associated with higher rates of self harm and suicide attempts in these young people.
- Knowledge that their school had policies that protected them from homophobia, meant that young people who suffered no abuse, were less likely to self harm and attempt suicide.
- Young people who attended a school that was supportive, rather than homophobic, were less likely to self harm and attempt suicide.

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth, 1999) has identified three key determinants of positive mental health which were subsequently adopted by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2004). These are social inclusion, freedom from discrimination and violence, and economic participation. SSAGQ young people are significantly challenged around each of these including the economic disadvantage that comes with rejection by family or dropping out of school. The VicHealth framework for Mental Health Promotion sees supportive relationships as a key area for action if negative mental health outcomes are to be prevented. The close relationships with family and friendship groups which nourish other young people who experience alienation because of ethnicity, body size or disability, for example, are not readily accessed by SSAGQ young people. When high rates of homophobic abuse are experienced by young people in school and the community, supportive relationships become even more critical.

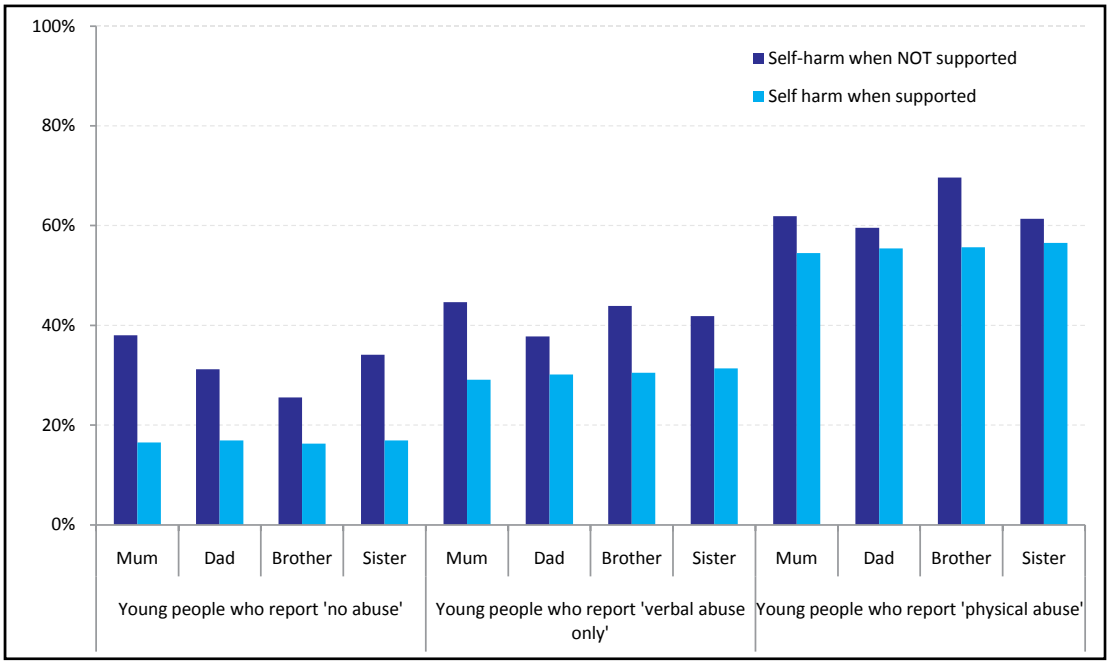
Because of this we were interested in the buffers against this damage to mental health provided by people to whom a disclosure was made and who were supportive. What difference does it make to a young person's wellbeing if people are supportive of them when they disclose? What are the consequences for a young person when a trusted confidante is dismissive or rejecting?

To ascertain whether support of a range of different people was associated with better outcomes regarding self harm and suicide, despite abuse, we explored young people's reports of self harm and suicide attempts by support and rejection. We will look at these findings for family, friends and peers and professionals.

We learned from the findings in Chapter 8 that homophobic abuse is significantly linked with a range of negative health indicators including; feeling unsafe, drug use, self harm ideation, self harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. We examined young peoples' rates of self harm and suicide attempts when they had support and when they were not supported. Below we discuss the links between rejection by family members, friends and professionals and self harm and suicide attempts. In some cases cell numbers were too small to be reliable and so we have chosen the most robust analyses to report here. These are family support and rejection and their links to self harm and suicide attempts and then, taking the group that suffered homophobic physical assaults, we have looked at disclosures to all three groups (family, friends and professionals) and the different rates of self harm and suicide according to whether they received support or not.

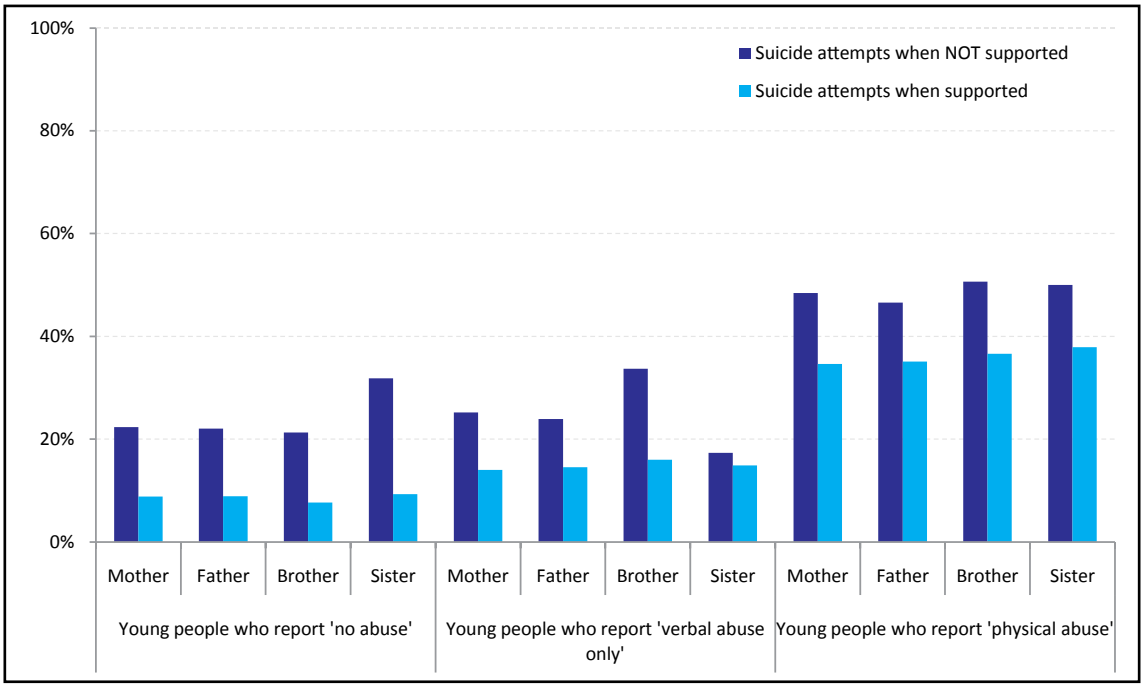
The support of a family member was linked to lower rates of self harm and lower rates of suicide attempts, regardless of what level of abuse young people experienced. From Figure 20 it can be seen that rates of self harm are higher in SSAGQ young people who are not supported when they disclose to mother, dad, brother or sister.

Figure 20. *Rates of self harm in young people when supported or rejected by family*



Similarly Figure 21 below shows the higher rates of suicide attempts in young people who are not supported by family members, whether it is mother, father, sister or brother. What is also clear is that these rates of self harm and suicide increase, regardless of support according to the level of homophobic abuse that young people experience. These are salutary findings for families, in particular parents, who later regret not giving their SSA and GQ children support when they disclosed to them. It also shows the importance of parental education where issues of same sex attraction and gender identity are concerned.

Figure 21. *Rates of attempted suicide in young people when supported or rejected by family*



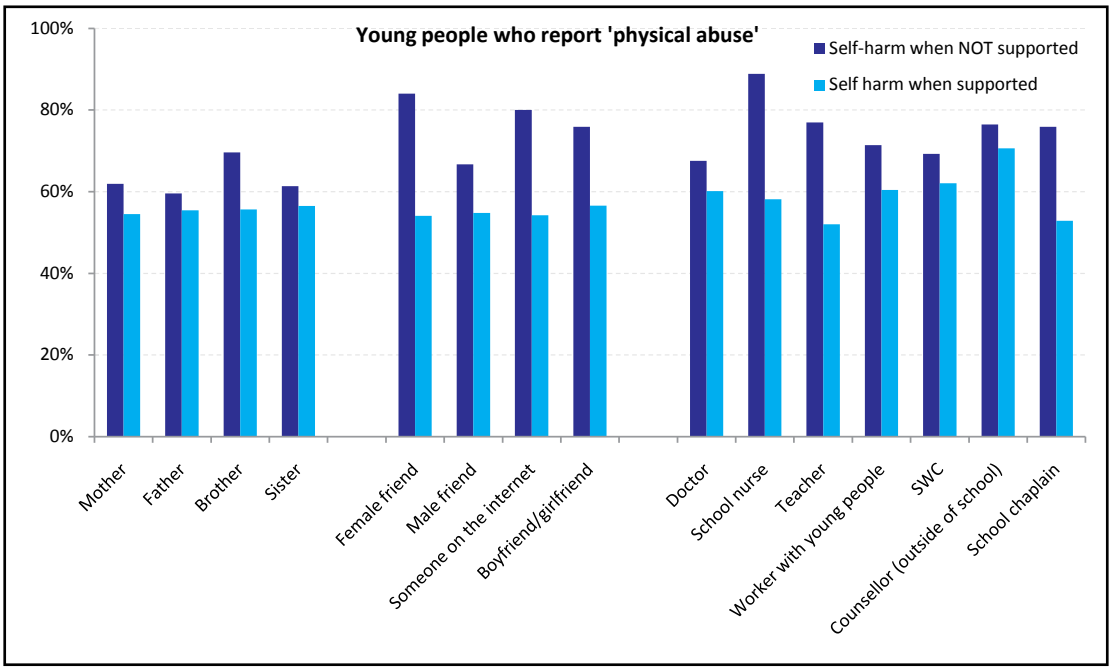
In summary these data demonstrate that parental rejection of a child's sexuality is associated with higher rates of suicide attempts and to a lesser extent, self harm. Conversely, family members who are supportive of their children when they disclose, are less likely to have their child or sibling engage in self harm or suicidal behaviours. These findings are incredibly important in developing a way forward to improved mental health for SSAGQ youth. Consistently through these data we have found examples of happy, well adjusted young people, despite abuse, who are unconditionally supported and loved by their families. Minika was one of them:

I feel as though i have been very fortunate in my life. My family at home, extended family and friends have always been 100% supportive and i don't feel as though my life would be very different (apart from in the obvious ways) if i was living a heterosexual lifestyle. Although my own experience has been one that many wish for, i know this is not the case and i feel no hesitation in ensuring that same sex attracted young people have the courage as well as the access to support groups if necessary (Minika, 21 years)

Community education, which prepares parents for a possible revelation of this kind, and the identification of some clear sources of ongoing support for parents are legitimate and necessary mental health initiatives.

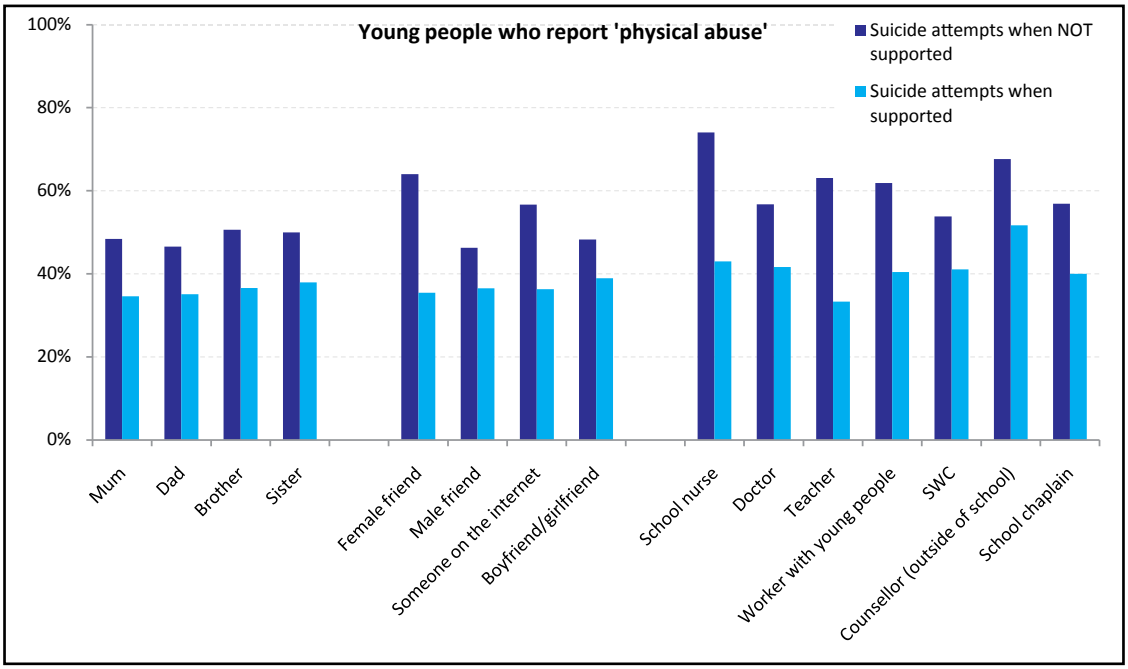
Below in Figures 22 and 23 we have taken the group of young people who suffered physical assault and compared their rates of self harm and suicide according to whether they were supported or rejected by family, friends and professionals.

Figure 22. *Rates of self harm in young people who had been assaulted when supported or rejected*



In all cases, rates of suicide and self harm are lower if young people received support when they disclosed. Everyone has the potential to influence this when they support or reject a young person who comes out to them.

Figure 23. *Rates of suicide attempts in young people who had been assaulted when supported or rejected*



School policies and climate

For SSAGQ young people, school is important in whether they can explore their identity safely and experience social inclusion. Sadly we know from the data on place of abuse, that schools seldom play such a role. However, in the face of high rates of violence found in previous surveys many schools around Australia are taking measures to address the issue and these efforts are having an impact.

Young people were asked two questions in particular about school support, first whether their school had policies that protected them against homophobic abuse and second whether their school was homophobic, neutral or supportive of diverse sexualities. We carried out the same analyses as before with the three independent abuse groups to ascertain rates of self harm and suicide in schools with, and without, policies and with supportive or homophobic school climates. Those who were aware that their school had policies to protect them were less likely to attempt suicide if they had not suffered abuse (7% v 15%), however for those who had suffered homophobic abuse, school policies had little or no connection to self harm and suicide. It stands to reason that protective policies that exist but do not protect SSAGQ youth from homophobic abuse are ineffective in reducing rates of self harm and suicide.

In regard to school environment, young people who reported their school as being supportive were less likely to harm themselves or attempt suicide regardless of whether they experienced abuse. These data about self harm and suicide in relation to school policy and environment indicate that school policies that are not put into practice are far less effective in engendering mental health in SSAGQ students than schools which show by their actions that they are supportive of these young people.

We know that rates of self harm and suicide in SSAGQ young people in Australia are high and these rates are significantly linked to homophobic abuse. Reducing rates of community homophobia is an important responsibility and imperative if we are to reverse this situation. However, in the mean time we have found that support of family, friends and, to a lesser extent, professionals can ameliorate the destructive impacts of homophobia. As well, schools play an important role in the mental health of their students. If they do nothing, they will exacerbate mental ill health in their SSAGQ students by allowing homophobia to flourish. On the other hand, if they develop policies that protect students, advertise them to the school community, and put them into practice by supporting sexual diversity, they will improve the mental health of their SSAGQ students. No longer can schools argue that ‘letting things be’ is a better option because ‘letting things be’ is likely to mean that SSAGQ students’ rates of self harm and suicide attempts will increase. No school would want to have this as a legacy of its work.

12. Sexuality education and school experience

well my life is bad.. i was kicked out of home at 15 when i came out.. could not attend school because my teachers use to throw objects at me and not let me sit near them + after school i would get bricks and rocks thrown at me and was not able to catch the buss or walk home safely, so because i havent finished year 10 i cannot be as successful in life as i want to be.. (Russel, 20 years)

Good times would be the Mardi Gras, Rainbow Love day, at my school which was a day where the whole school wore rainbow colours as support for homosexuals, my teacher telling me, the day after my school dance, that she thought my girlfriend and I, were beautiful. (Gabby, 14 years)

Key findings

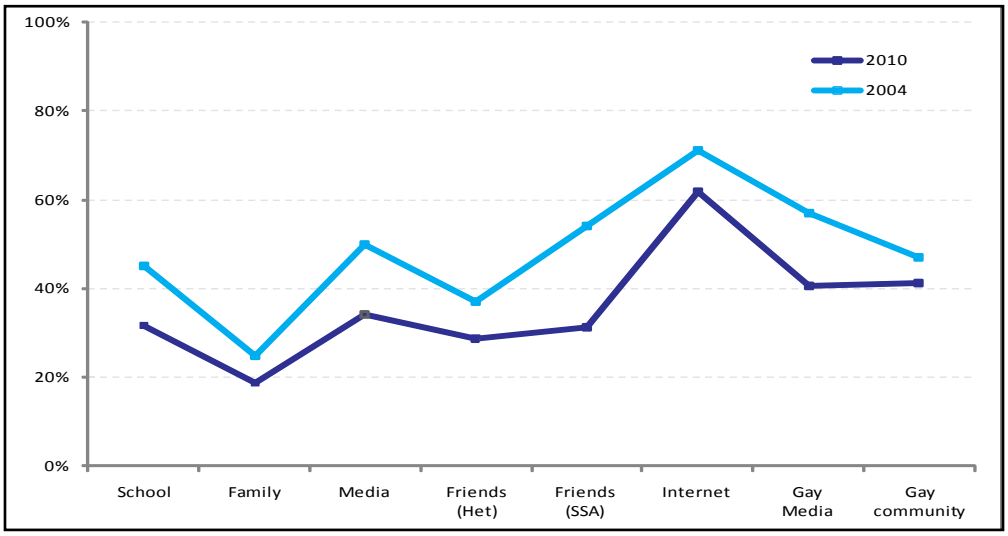
- A quarter of young people attended a school where they knew there was policy-based protection from homophobia and discrimination.
- 10% of young people reported that their school did not provide any form of Sexuality Education at all.
- 40% attended a school with no social or structural support features for sexual difference.
- Only 19% of young people attended a school that was supportive of their sexuality.
- Over a third described their school as homophobic.
- The internet was the most important source of information about homophobia and discrimination, gay and lesbian relationships and gay and lesbian safe sex.

Since the advent of HIV/AIDS it is generally accepted in Australia that the community has a responsibility to provide information about safe sex and relationships to young people. This responsibility is not consistently attributed to any single source – parents, school and other bodies can be implicated. The original *Writing Themselves In* (1998) found that the family and the school largely confined information provision to heterosexual safe sex and relationships. This left young people who had same sex encounters with little information about the prevention of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) or conception and pregnancy. Young people were asked if they had *received any useful information about the topics below from these sources* with the options of school, media, gay media, internet, heterosexual friends, SSA friends, family and gay community (see Appendix 1).

Sources of information about homophobia and discrimination

Access to information about homophobia and discrimination can assist young people in reframing negative messages about sexual difference and decrease discriminatory attitudes and homophobic behaviour among young people who are opposite sex attracted. It can also allow same sex attracted young people to move from the assumption that there is something wrong with their sexuality to an understanding that the problem is the reception and treatment of that sexuality within social culture.

Figure 24. *Sources of information on homophobia and discrimination*

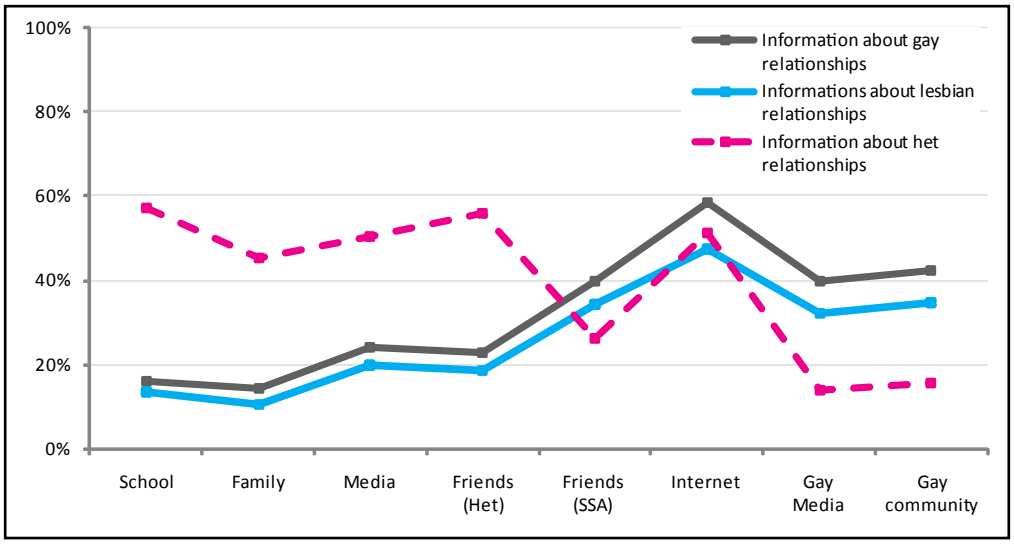


A little over one third of young people gleaned useful information about homophobia and discrimination from school. Most sourced it from the internet, friends and community (see Figure 24). It is difficult to explain the decrease in access to homophobia and discrimination information from all potential sources since the 2004 study.

Sources of information about relationships

Almost a fifth of young people were able to access information about gay or lesbian relationships from school. The internet was their major source and gay community provided information to about half.

Figure 25. *Sources of information about relationships*



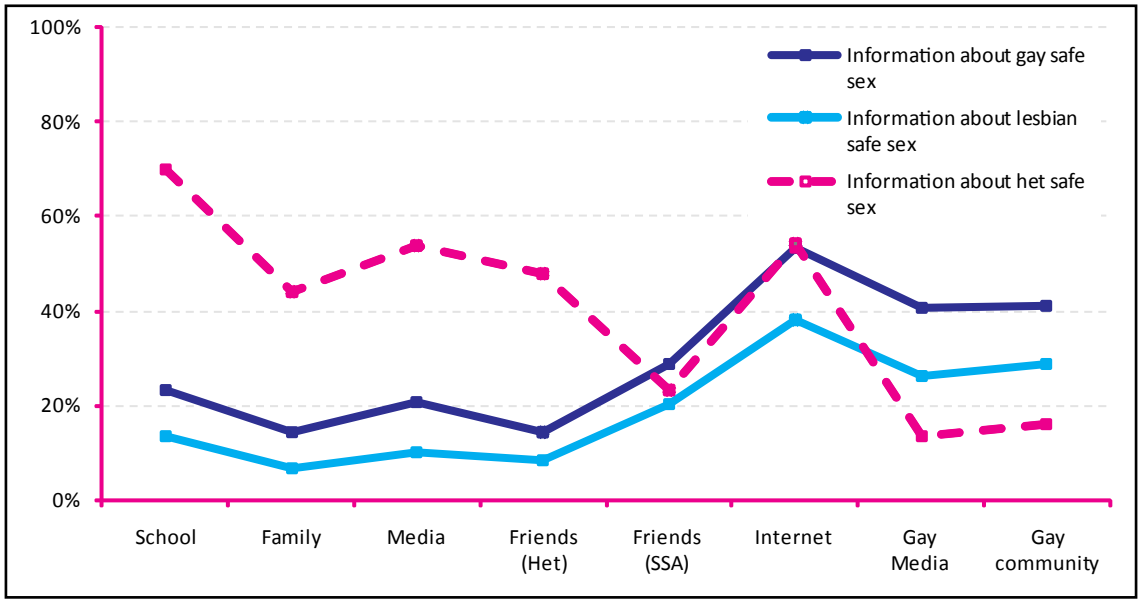
Information on heterosexual relationships was more readily available at school and other places.

Sources of information about safe sex

Less than one in five young people were able to access relevant information about gay or lesbian safe sex from school and as with gay and lesbian relationships they were most likely to use the internet and gay community to get this information. The religious group were the least likely to get this information from school and were more likely to source it from the internet than other participants suggesting their greater need to supplement such information.

There has been no significant development in the provision of information on gay or lesbian relationships or safe sex since 1998.

Figure 26. *Sources of information about safe sex*



Policy-based protections in schools

Young people were asked if their school had policies that protect them against homophobia. Only 25% reported in the affirmative leaving 75% of young people in the study who did not enjoy the certainty of policy-based protection at school. The GQ group was more likely to report that their school did not have this policy as were students in the religious group.

A variety of strong associations suggest policy-based protection makes a difference to SSAGQ students in many areas. Firstly, comparative data suggests that perceived policy-based protection has correlations with these students' rates of self harm and suicide (this issue is discussed more fully in Chapter 11).

Secondly, the data indicate that perceived policy-based protection may improve SSAGQ students' feelings of safety at school. Indeed, 75% of SSAY who were aware of policy-based protection against homophobia at school felt safe there, compared to 46% who said their school had no policy and 64%

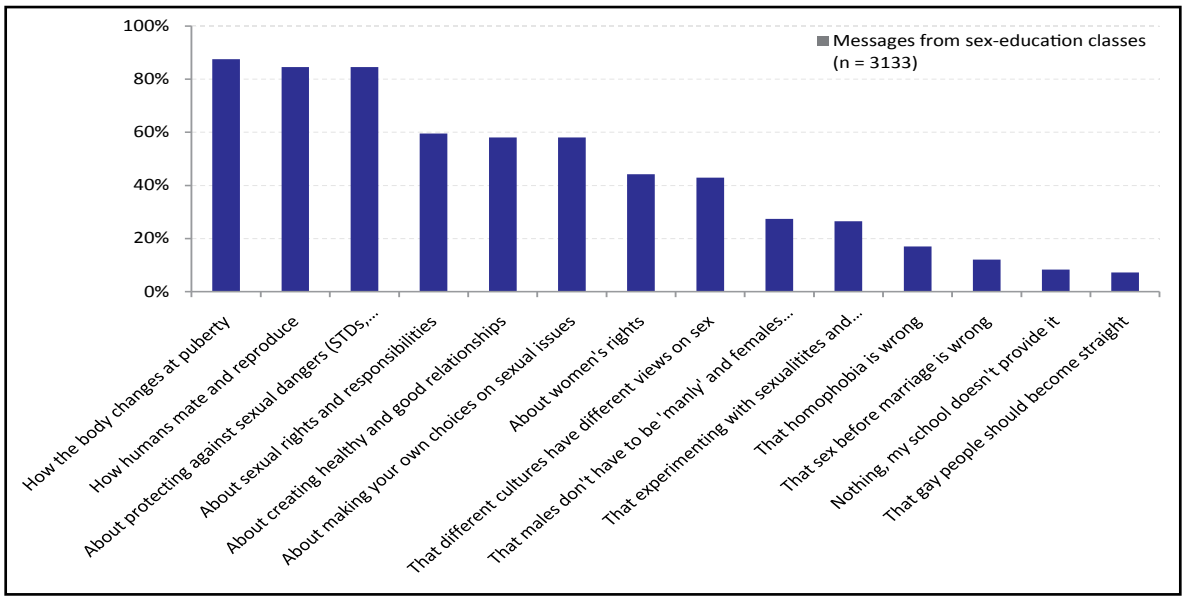
who didn't know. Thus, protective policy could be a contributing factor to SSAGQ young people feeling safe at school.

Thirdly, perceived policy-based protection has correlations with students' feelings about their sexuality. Overall, 85% of young people who were aware of policy-based protection against homophobia at school felt good about their sexuality compared to 78% who said their school had no policy and 76% who didn't know. The evidence suggests policy-based protections against homophobia at school could be an influence on factors leading to mental health in SSAGQ young people.

Sexuality Education classes and lessons

An item in the survey asked young people to indicate which messages, out of a total of 13 they had been taught in Sexuality Education Most Australian students are exposed to a very particular combination of messages in their Sexuality Education.

Figure 27. *Content of Sexuality Education*



According to the young people in this study the three strongest messages coming through in their Sexuality Education were about how the body changes at puberty (88%), how humans mate and reproduce (85%) and about protecting against sexual dangers (STDs, pregnancy (85%). Because the research has demonstrated that schools are more likely to be sources of information on heterosexual safe sex and relationships than other types, it is likely that gay and lesbian sex, relationships and reproductive possibilities are being overlooked in these messages. From these findings it is clear that quite conservative messages emphasizing heterosexual sex and danger are the norm in most Australian schools with a far smaller number providing critical messages inclusive of SSAGQ youth.

Young people in the religious group were taught the most conservative messages.

Usefulness of Sexuality Education

Yong people were asked how useful their Sexuality Education was and why. There were 2392 written responses to this question and a sample of 200 responses were analysed in detail. Of this sample, 44% found their Sexuality Education not useful at all, 40% felt it was only partly useful, 11% found it moderately useful and 5% found this Sexuality Education very useful. This was loosely comparable to 2004 data on usefulness of Sexuality Education, however, in 2010 a slightly higher percentage found their Sexuality Education useless, and a lower percentage found it very useful.

Perhaps the key feature of the 2010 data overall, which was reflected in the sample, was young people's critique of the way their Sexuality Education had a chiefly heterosexual focus and largely overlooked any kind of information around same sex attraction. Indeed, 44% of the written responses across the sample used for this report made some direct reference to this issue. For example, Mini (20 years) commented, *they didn't mention anything about gay sex. just hetro sex.* Eva described her Sexuality Education as not very useful because of this limitation:

when talking about SSA same sex there was one sentence - Homosexuals exist and form sexual relationships. Now when a man and a woman... I never even knew a dental dam existed until i found a local Gay Youth Group. (Eva, 19 years)

Ross also found his classes a poor guide, arguing:

if sex ed classes were the only influence on me, I'd probably be completely paranoid. Non-heterosexual relationships were really just glossed over. (Ross, 15 years)

Another recurrent theme in the young people's comments was their initiative and determination to get information for themselves when it was not provided by the traditional sources of school or family. There were several students who used self-education as a means of overcoming the homophobia in the curriculum or specific gaps around same sex attraction or transgender issues. For example, on the question of usefulness, Kristen responded:

For me, not at all. I spose at the time it was relevant as it was in my first year of two of high school which is when i was still identifying as heterosexual. The fact that the school failed to address issues for SSA people just meant that i was unaware of sexual issues later on and had to do my own research. (Kristen, 21 years)

Richard (21 years) described his school's Sexuality Education as: *Moderately useful, but less useful than internet or self education.* A lack of information on lesbian safe sex in particular was noted by young women who had to seek out other sources. Lindsay reflected:

I think gay sex was mentioned once in 6 years (if that), and lesbian sex never. In the end I had to ask my doctor for information on lesbian safe-sex. (Lindsay, 18 years)

While it is heartening that these young people took responsibility for their sexual lives and were actively researching the information they needed, it seems that schools are missing the opportunity to meet the needs of all their students and provide equitable sexual health outcomes.

Another theme was that classes on this topic often came too late. This description was sometimes applied to its positioning within more senior year level curricula, and sometimes related more specifically to individual's or group's pre-exposure to sexual knowledge or pre-engagement in sexual activities.

It was too late. I already knew this stuff when they were teaching me in high school. They did make us familiar with the anatomical words when we were much younger.. but I really didn't feel like the lessons were practical when we were 15/16.. There needs to be more information on S.T.I's, U.T.I's.. they really need to assume the worst: WE HAVE ALREADY HAD SEX... A FEW TIMES... (hiss, boo!) :P and therefore provide information surrounding that.. assuming we already know what penetrative sex is and where it all goes...! (Paris, 19 years)

Amongst the responses that ranked Sexuality Education efforts at certain schools as not useful, there were also some responses describing these classes as being actively harmful. Several young people described the classes as promoting homophobia, or as presenting perspectives in which homosexuality is framed as evil or dangerous. Carmen complained:

Religious Education involved speeches about how premarital sex is wrong, and how same sex parents could never raise a child well. It was pretty disgusting, and made me angry. (Carmen, 20 years)

There were cases where the damage was the spread of other types of misinformation:

Students were also told that condoms bore no protection against STIs In some cases teachers who were virgins were talking to sexually active students about sex and pregnancy (Royce, 6 years).

There were also cases where a damaging sense of homosexual abnormality was created in the class by virtue of poor or disengaged teaching:

Going through three terms of sex ed without homosexuality being mentioned was pretty awful. In one class the teacher set up an anonymous question box, so I put in "I'm gay. How is this class relevant to me?" When the teacher pulled it out of the box she said "Oh, that's just a silly question." and threw it out. So it was pretty much a daily class of 'you are not normal'. (Dianne, 21 years).

While it is inspiring to see these young people resist negative rhetoric and clearly identify the negativity to which they have been exposed, there would certainly be students with less confidence who may experience severe consequences. On the other hand, there were some schools that had programs and school-wide approaches that young people were very positive about. In analysing the Sexuality Education that earned the description of being very useful in the descriptions given by young people, it was clear that quality provision has some distinguishing features:

Sexuality Education that combined a large variety of positive messages, for example, Blair enthused *IT was amazing my teacher went through everything systematically.* (21 years)

Critical thinking and exposure to more fluid constructions of sexuality were appreciated by young people. Perry reflected:

It has broadened the minds of my peers and myself to understand the fluidity of sexual feelings and sexual identities and opened them up to accepting the LGBT peers of my year. (Perry, 17 years)

Wide-reaching inclusion of same sex attraction and sexual diversity beyond token inclusion attempts were also useful:

My school has really good sexual education - it's been good. We spend approximately 6 weeks of sex ed classes in year 10 exclusively talking about same sex attraction" (Corinne, 17 years).

Anti-discrimination and anti-homophobia efforts were valued, for example, Rowena described her Sexuality Education as *good because it doesnt discriminate against anyone. it was open minded.* (Rowena, 20 years) and Sexuality Education that changed the social dynamic at school so that people became more understanding and supportive was important: *Very helpful. Other people better understood some things I may be experiencing. Understanding through education is really helpful.* (Nathan, 19 years)

Teachers who went into detail, were supportive and used diverse resources inspired Samson:

I felt that the health education classes we had at school really guided me towards my current degree and career choice. It was also in depth and engaging, taught by an excellent teacher who had some excellent guest speakers come talk to us about specific things. (Samson, 20 years)

Also included as useful were supportive peers and moments of social affirmation. Tobias described these classes *"mega useful!"*

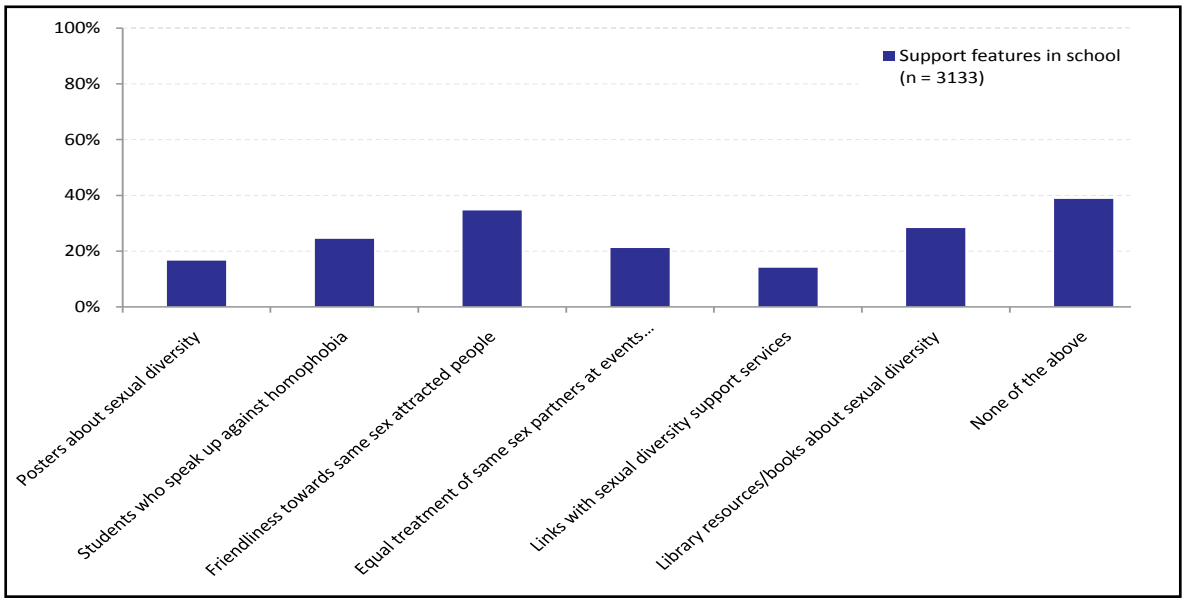
We had this thing called the "secret box" or something with an equally silly name, where we could write questions for the teacher or for the class as a whole to discuss. I put in several questions around gay issues, including the one that meant the most to me "How would you feel if a close friend came out to you?". The responses I heard to these questions anonymously were great and made me feel more comfortable about coming out. (Tobias, 20 years)

These findings reflect that while there may presently be some barriers to overcome, it is certainly possible for schools to implement broad-ranging, inclusive and challenging Sexuality Education that meets the needs of SSAGQ youth and creates a more positive school culture for all students.

Support features of schools

Young people were asked to report on the support features that existed in their schools (see Figure 28 below). The most common response was none of the features listed. Overall, none of the support features listed is standard in Australian schools, but most participants (60%) attended a school with at least one or more of them and this is pleasing to see.

Figure 28. *Support features in school*



Students identified as having religious backgrounds were less likely to report a range of features as were GQ young people. All students could benefit from more sexual diversity supports at school and a friendlier school climate, particularly the more isolated religious and gender diverse SSAY.

The School Culture in General

Young people were asked to rank their school overall on a scale from Very Homophobic to Very Supportive. Most classified their school as Neutral (44%), with 27% classifying their school as Homophobic and 14% Supportive. At the extremes of the scale, 9% classed their school as Very Homophobic and 5% as Very Supportive. Young people who mentioned religious discourse were also more likely to rank their school as Very Homophobic.

There were also associations between a school's rating in terms of supportiveness and how SSA students felt about their sexuality. Overall, 87% of students who ranked their school as supportive felt good or great, compared to 75% at a homophobic school and 78% at a neutral school. Thus, we have an important and clearly emerging picture of the importance of addressing homophobia in the school culture in order to improve the mental health and wellbeing of SSAGQ students.

What young people want from school

In the past we have used research findings to deduce what SSAGQ young people need from their schools based on their reported experiences. This has been useful information a catalyst for the development of some Australian policies, training programs and resources in the field. In this survey we asked the question specifically by getting participants to respond to the open-ended question *My school could better support my sexuality by….* There were 1949 written responses and a sample of 200 responses were analysed in detail. The strongest theme (appearing in 40% of responses) was that young people wanted Sexuality Education to be more inclusive of same sex attraction and gender diversity. Victoria (15 years) was part of this group who typically wanted schools to support her sexuality by *helping more with it and educating people more.* Samara (15 years) specifically wanted her school to be *Teaching that homophobia is wrong and shouldn't be tolerated*. Hamish wanted earlier educational interventions in this field:

Including sexual diversity in the sex ed courses and put SSA information around alot so that it becomes neutral in the kids mind and they do not hate later on and just accept that there are SSA because they have been neutralised. (Hamish, 18 years)

Chloe also wanted this education to include:

Teaching that there is diversity in family structure. Learning about gender fluidity and sexual fluidity. Teaching same sex safe sex techniques...however this is a long shot considering lesbian Sexuality Education does not even feature within the queer community. (Chloe, 20 years)

Marisa suggested schools should stop: having such a heteronormative curriculum in the first place which is implicitly in its self homophobic as it does not address any other types of sexuality or gender issues. (Marisa, 21 years)

The second strongest theme within the sample (reflected in 27% of responses) was that young people wanted their school to simply discuss same sex attraction and/or gender diversity. Ian, who described his school as very homophobic, called for whole-school announcements to be made on the issue amongst other approaches:

well i dropped out of school for these reasons but they could make announcements, teach about awareness and have rules put in place to protect from discrimination. (Ian,15 years)

Jock spoke of a lack of acknowledgment of homosexuality at his all-boys school that may contribute to a lack of understanding:

I think the best way for them to support my sexuality is to actually acknowledge it rather than pretend that it is nonexistent. I know there are a number of boys out there who have got no idea whatsoever about homosexuality and such. (Jock, 20 years)

Within the sample, 19% of students described special needs for same sex attracted and gender diverse youth that could be recognised or met by the school. These included the need for social groups or gay-

straight-alliances (GSAs), information, support workers or (non-homophobic) counselling staff, referrals to services or external support groups. Regina (18 years) felt that her school should start acknowledging *… that some same sex orientated students may need more emotional and mental health help.* Brenton believed such support or services also needed to be promoted:

Openly offering help. I'm sure some of the staff would have offered help if it was sought after, but there is no advertisement of said help. The culture of the students is quite homophobic in general as well. (Benton, 19 years)

An additional 12% wanted their school to simply become aware that same sex attracted or gender diverse people exist and form part of the school community. For example, Eva felt her school could better support her sexuality by:

*Not glossing over the fact that there are SSA young people in ALL schools. By the time i graduated year 12 there was 8 openly gay people in my year level. While most of the teachers were fantastic, some ignored homophobic bullying in front of their eyes, and a few even perpetrated it. (*Eva, 19 years)

Vanessa (20 years) wanted an end to homophobic gossip amongst students and staff, calling for people to start *acting slightly more responsible about it, the teachers at my school seemed as gossip-interested as the students.* Fred also decried homophobia that was perpetuated by people rather than school structures as such:

My school was not against homosexuals however some teachers were homophobic and showed it and there was not nearly enough homosexual support. (Fred, 18 years)

A further 11% called for schools to enforce disciplinary procedures that punish homophobic verbal abuse, physical abuse and other types of bullying.

There was evidence of students describing their own attempts at actively pursuing their schooling ideals. In some cases these students were very successful at developing their schools and achieving their vision. Gina, for example, who described her current school as very supportive, reported how she brought change to this school after experiencing support at another; *the government school was spot on! Perfect the christian school had no programs or support of any kind when i attended, but partly due to my urging they do now.* (Gina, 17 years) Gillian, who described her school as homophobic, had plans to engage in active efforts to better conditions:

Next year I will be attempting to create a GSA to promote understanding. They could ban our religious teachers from telling us their opinion on homosexuality and introduce more homosexual/transgender information in health classes. (Gillian, 15 year)

All schools in Australia have students who are same sex attracted or gender questioning and need to be considered by them if their educational outcomes are to be equal. They should be included within Sexuality Education so that they do not need to rely on the internet and other sources to supplement

the deficiencies in their school-based Sexuality Education. They are also directly calling for a range of structural and social support features to be put in place at their schools. With a correlation between the existence of policy-based protection against homophobia at the SSA students' schools and positive outcomes for the students in the areas of self harm, suicide, feelings of safety and positive feelings about their sexuality, these data strongly support further development, promotion and implementation of education policy in this area. Schools can make a big difference to young lives if they aim at becoming "very supportive" towards SSAY, putting several social and structural support features in place, actively promoting and implementing anti-homophobia policies, and improving the content and messages of their Sexuality Education for all students.

This survey has made me think a bit more about my schooling. I would never have come out openly at school. It wasn't ever a part of the life. There was no sexual diversity. A past captain came out as gay. Best thing ever. (Clare, 20 years)

13. Multiple layers of influence

Religion

Some days the whole issue of homosexuality makes me feel depressed, alone and confused. I've been to the point where I've felt like it needs to end, that I shouldn't have to suffer like this. But there are two things that always have gotten me through the tough times. These are: 1 I would cause a lot of harm in my family. And 2 that God does not give a man more then he can handle. Therefore what ever comes my way, God will get me through it. (Daniel, 20 years)

Key Findings

Those who mentioned religion (n=267) were:

- More likely to feel bad about their same sex attraction.
- More likely to have experienced social exclusion or had to tolerate homophobic language from friends.
- More likely to report homophobic abuse in the home.
- More likely to report feeling unsafe at home.
- More likely to not be supported by their mother, father, brother, teacher or student welfare coordinator/counsellor, when disclosing their SSA.
- More likely to report thoughts of self harm and suicide or to carry out self harm.

Despite the gradual liberalization of some religious denominations and increasing social change within Australian society, religion is still correlating negatively with the health and wellbeing of SSAGQ young people. Although we did not ask any question regarding religion, a significant number of young people mentioned religious discourse within their qualitative responses. For the purpose of analysis, those who used religious discourse of any sort were classified as 'religious' and the rest as 'not religious', although we appreciate that many young people so classified may indeed be religious. The critical element for us was whether or not they used religion in their discourses to describe their journey, or to tell their story, as we reasoned that those who did, saw religion as an important issue. While Christianity was the major religion specifically mentioned in these data, many participants just referred to religion which may not have always been Christianity. Young people most frequently mentioned religion when responding to the questions on self harm and feelings about their sexuality. A conflict between same sex attraction and religion occurred frequently in regard to family, friends, school, and an internal conflict with their own personal faith.

While some churches in Australia have shed themselves of homophobic beliefs and now include LGBT people in all aspects of church life, others remain steadfast to their traditions and are increasingly out

of step with both science and Australian law. Homosexuality has not been considered a mental illness for some time, nor has it been a crime anywhere in Australia for thirteen years. Recent changes to Australia federal law saw same sex partners recognized as de-facto spouses, and same sex marriage has increasingly become legal around the world. Nevertheless, some SSAGQ young people who are involved in religion in Australia are often forced to negotiate their sexuality within the confines of a belief system that threatens an eternity in 'hell' for the feelings they experience as unavoidable. SSAGQ young people who accept their sexuality often face condemnation from their family and friends as well as from their religious community and may experience increased isolation and shame in the very places that are supposed to be supportive and safe: their school, church and home.

Feelings about sexuality

Our study showed that compared to those who did not mention religion, those who did, were less likely to feel good (67% v 80%), and more likely to feel bad (8% v 3%) about their same sex attraction. Like many SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion, Oscar tried desperately to change his sexuality but found himself in an impossible situation, becoming depressed and alienated, leaving him with no other option but to renounce his faith, all before the age of 14:

I kept on telling myself that homosexuality was immoral and wrong, and I prayed and told myself that I liked people of the opposite sex. This caused me a great deal of depression and alienation from my peers… Being a Christian made me hate myself and who I was, and I really believed that God could change me. By the time I hit puberty I had renounced my faith and accepted myself for who I was. (Oscar, 14 years)

Joshua had a similar response when asked how he felt about his same sex attraction:

When I was a religious person I thought it was horrible and spent two years trying to 'cure' myself to no avail, which led me into deep depression. (Joshua, 16 years)

Isolation and support

The stories of SSAGQ young people who experience religion are those of young people on a difficult journey. Some have only experienced life within the church, where their friends, family, education and social life are all a part of their religion. When they begin to question their sexuality these young people often discover that they are alone and begin to fear their religious world as much as they have been brought up to fear the wider secular one. SSAGQ young people who experience religion are often left to understand their sexuality alone with little, if any, information to help them.

Our study discovered that SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion were more likely to report having never told significant people in their lives about their sexuality including their mothers, brothers, teachers, and student welfare coordinators/counsellors.

Tomlin grew up Jehovah's Witness and found himself alone with his struggle:

Same sex is morally wrong in [the churches] eyes and they did make several references about it is wrong – using the bible of course. So my crisis of who I was and why I was feeling this was left to me to figure out. I could not ask my friends – especially my family – due to them all been in the religion. (Tomlin, 21 years)

Similarly Bethany felt that she was unable to talk about her sexuality with her three older brothers and father, whom she shared a home with:

They are all very homophobic and Christian. I fear I would be rejected and outcast. I hate it…I'm a bit stuck, a bit confused. I don't know whether or not to act on [my sexuality]…Whether I should go against what I've been brought up to believe…What's worse is that being in a Christian family I have no one to talk with about it. (Bethany, 19 years)

Unlike Tomlin and Bethany, Isaiah had told his mother of his same sex attraction but was too scared to tell his father:

My mum has been extremely supportive. My dad doesn't fully know yet but is extremely homophobic and I fear that he will divorce my mum when he finds out because he won't want anything to do with me. (Isaiah, 18 years)

Isaiah's fear of disclosure was not just for him, but also for his parent's marriage.

These young people experienced isolation and fear due to their family's religious affiliation. Their fear was fuelled by a potential negative reaction rising from their parent's homophobic beliefs. An individual does not need to experience a negative social reaction directly for them to feel fear or isolation; sometimes fear of an imagined negative sanction is more powerful than an actual assault (Savin-Williams, 1990). Disclosing ones same sex attraction to family can be traumatic, especially if they are known to reject non-heterosexuality (Weeks et al., 2001).

The data reveal that young people from the religious group who disclosed their sexuality were less likely to receive support from their mothers, fathers, teachers and student welfare coordinators. Ruth explained what happened to her:

I was raised in a Christian family so I was constantly embarrassed and disgusted with myself for feeling the way I did. I was constantly told it wasn't natural and that it was just a phase that I was going through. I got depressed and became suicidal. After I told my parents my mum freaked out. I decided a year and a half ago that I couldn't stay living with my parents and moved out. (Ruth, 18 years)

When Brianna told her school counsellor, she was condemned and abandoned. Her counsellor told her she was *under the influence of the Devil* and had to *convert to the true God to rid of the sin* from herself. In her own words:

That made me feel like I was evil and there was something wrong, so I started cutting myself, pulling out large quantities of my own hair, forcing myself to vomit, bingeing on food until I felt physically ill and alternately starving myself…I also started mentally abusing myself and turning to drugs and alcohol to solve my problems. (Brianna, 17 years)

For Minika the problem was more extreme and understandably created some anxiety about disclosure:

Well, my secondary high school was located in an Islamic country, where homosexuality was punishable by maximum sentence death, and most common sentence was 20 years. So there was no support at any stage of schooling. (Minika, 17 years)

Homophobic abuse and safety at home

SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion were more likely to experience homophobic abuse in the home than the non-religious group. Roman grew up in rural Queensland and explained that he became *'severely depressed'* from experiencing homophobia. He described what he called homophobia from his mother when he disclosed his sexuality to her:

Her reaction was not good…I got a tirade of homophobic abuse from her, was told I'd die of AIDS, told that God thinks it's wrong, told that marriage is between a man and a woman and that I was unnatural and disgusting. This didn't help with my confidence…I met my boyfriend…then told my mum about our relationship. She flipped out even worse than before and carried on about HIV, AIDS [and] religion for weeks. (Roman, 21 years)

Abuse within the home may make young people feel unsafe and isolated within the very place where they should feel loved, empowered, and safe.

Self harm and suicide

Our study found that SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion were more likely to report having thoughts of self harm and suicide. Those who mentioned religion were also more likely to have harmed themselves. However, there was no difference between the groups in the percentage of young people who had attempted suicide.

Sebastian was not out to his parents because in his words they were *particularly religious and homophobic* and *very strict Catholic.* Sebastian explained where this fear and isolation led him:

I would generally conduct myself in an unsafe manner as well doing dangerous things such as drugs and sleeping with people without a condom. I have to commute a lot for work and study and on numerous occasions I considered veering off the highway into a tree or taking lots different drugs and trying to overdose. (Sebastian, 20 years)

A new direction

Compared to WTIA in 2004, an increasing number of young people in this study have managed to live happily, reconciling being both gay and religious. Many young people wrote of their positive religious experiences growing up; others have actively resisted homophobic religious discourse and reframed narratives of hate and fear to those of love. Andrea was an out and proud catholic lesbian who believed that she was being called to help other young people reconcile their sexuality and faith. She explained that she is a *'Catholic Lesbian'* and is open about her sexuality to all but her grandparents:

God taught about love. So how is being gay against God…I believe in my lifetime I will be someone who brings (LGBT) Children back to the Church and lets them know there is a place for them. I will study Theology and see if I can do anything for gay marriage, if I can't I will still help all the LGBT people [and] let them know there's a place for them in the Church and Gods Kingdom. (Andrea, 19 years)

Stories from SSAGQ young people of growing up in a homopositive religious environment were more common than before. Dee told us of her supportive Christian family and community:

I've grown up with a supportive, loving Uniting Church family, and a wider UC Church community, both of which never went out of their way to mention homosexuality was bad or wrong. (Dee, 20 years)

At a church camp Joseph shared a cabin with two other guys, as well as his boyfriend:

They both kept an eye and ear out for anybody that was coming towards the cabin if my boyfriend was laying on me or I was hugging him. (Joseph, 18 years)

This changing narrative from a religious homonegative environment towards a homopositive one, is beginning to have immediate positive impact on SSAGQ young people's lives, and is evident in the growing number of positive religious stories we received.

Marriage and children

Getting married and raising children is often the bedrock of religious belief. The growing debate around same sex marriage and gay parenting appears to have a special meaning for the SSAGQ young people who mentioned religion. It provides religious SSAGQ young people with a future of connectivity with the once out of reach religious institutions of family and marriage. Lindsay showed a tenacious spirit, and wrote of one day being married in the eyes of her god:

I don't know what the future holds, but I am going to keep on going, love myself, and love my God…I will be married in the eyes of God, no matter what the government or the Church try to say. (Lindsay, 18 years)

Likewise, getting married and having children was so important to Mary that she planned to leave Australia to achieve her dream:

At the moment I am engaged to my long-time friend of 5 years who I began dating last year. We plan to live in Canada in the future to marry and raise a family through IVF. (Mary, 18 years)

SSAGQ young people are increasingly seeing marriage and children as possibilities in their lives, and this is providing those who mention religioned with the ability to live closer to the religious ideals they grew up with. The recent discourse of same sex marriage and gay parenting is helping some young people to resist homophobic religious messages, and is ultimately helping some to maintain their faith.

There is no doubt that, for the majority of those who mentioned religion, it has been a negative and damaging influence from which they feel the need to escape in order to preserve their health and wellbeing. For many who make this shift it is literally depicted as a choice between life and death when there appears to be no way forward for them within the church. It is a distressing thing to see young people who are committed to a religious faith and who have much to give to that community of religion being driven away by homonegativity. Churches are certainly the poorer for the loss of these young people.

Nevertheless, it is clear that a small social shift is occurring within this layer of influence. Some young people are searching out homopositive religious organizations, reframing and ignoring homonegative messages, while others have been fortunate to grow up within religions that are now fully accepting of LGBT people. While young people are continually describing religion as out of step with their personal beliefs, they are increasingly willing to remain within it and advocate for change. Just like the movement against prohibition of female clergy in the past, or the churches support for slavery, some young religious SSAGQ youth in Australia today, appear to be heading towards a new era of LGBTI affirming religion.

Rurality

In March I am moving to Brisbane, from my regional town. I don't know what is going to happen, but in a few months time I will have something other than a few books, two mates, a gay ex-teacher and the internet, in order to be a part of the 'gay community'. In an earlier question I answered that the gay community did not supply me with any useful information. That's because I have never being A PART of the gay community! Longreach just doesn't have one. (Jackie, 18 years)

Key findings

- 20% of young people came from rural and remote areas.
- Young people living in rural, regional and remote areas were less likely to have access to the internet compared to their urban counterparts.
- Rural young people were felt less safe on the internet.
- Young people expressed concern about their lives as SSAGQ young people living in rural and remote towns due to the isolation, discrimination and lack of appropriate services and support.
- Self harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were higher in rural areas.
- There were higher rates of use of some drugs in remote areas.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, The Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification (RRMA) was used to divide young people into categories of remoteness. According to the RRMA index, 67% (n=1975) of young people came from metropolitan zones (including major cities), 18% (n=662) came from rural zones and 2% (n=49) from remote zones. This represents a slight increase in the percentage of participants from rural zones compared to the 2004 survey.

In this report we have defined rural as outside of the metropolitan zone and include remote as part of rurality. There are many reasons to believe that life may be different for SSAGQ young people in rural areas, not the least because of a greater level of surveillance, more conservative attitudes and fewer services in these areas. We once again looked for any significant differences between rural and urban young people on a range of factors, including how they felt about their sexuality, internet access, self harm and suicide attempts, sexual behaviour and attraction, STIs, drug and alcohol use, general health and support networks.

As mentioned in the above quote the internet assists many SSAGQ youth in finding community, especially those who are living in rural and remote zones. Interestingly young people who live in rural and remote areas were more likely to feel unsafe on the internet, despite the internet been mentioned numerous times as a place to find gay community.

As in the previous reports, throughout the survey many young people expressed concern about their lives as SSAGQ young people living in rural and remote towns due to the isolation, discrimination and lack of appropriate services and support. In many cases these young people were looking forward to moving to urban areas to attend university.

My hopes are to finish year 12. Leave [this town]and not return. I FUCKING HATE IT HERE!.. so really I just want to leave and I cannot be happy until I do (Fin, 17 years)

It is well known that specific services for SSAGQ young people in regional and remote areas are difficult to access, if they exist. Privacy can be an issue in small towns where everyone knows everyone, therefore making accessing available services difficult. Despite no differences in support of family, friends or professionals between urban, rural, regional and remote areas, there were, however , differences in rates of self harm and attempted suicides in young people in some of the RMMA categories. Suicidal ideation and attempts were higher in rural areas. This could be a reflection of the lack of access to support services and feelings of isolation and is in line with higher rates of suicide in general in rural areas.

In regards to sexual health, pregnancy rates and sexual behaviours there were no differences between urban young people and their rural, regional and remote counterparts.

The excessive use of some drugs by young people in remote areas compared to their urban and rural counterparts was significant. This is a worrying trend however the findings should be considered with caution because numbers of young people in the study who lived in remote areas were small (n=49). It may just be that isolation leads to a more painful situation for which drug taking is seen as the remedy.

According to their stories, growing up in regional and remote areas appears to be another layer added to the difficulties that SSAGQ young people often face. There are few support services most particularly in remote regions and no visible gay culture to affirm who they are. There remains an air of secrecy about one's sexuality in rural, regional and remote areas for fear of discrimination and violence and many stories documented these concerns.

All I can say from coming from a big city such as Melbourne where same sex couples are well common and you see a lot of us around and coming to a rural town where most same sex couples 'hide and live in fear' is hard to believe that we live in the same country!! There isn't anything around here unless we travel to (regional centre) nearly 1.5 hours away!! There has been a few suicides here lately where the guy/ girls have spoke about their sexuality and become victims of abuse and ignorance from the community!! Narrow minded people in this town (Harriet, 19 years)

It was pleasing to see one exception to the many negative stories about living in rural and remote areas:

My town is very open towards the gay community (in fact we have a remarkably large gay community, almost 1 in 7 people in the town, which is amazing for country town – Armidale NSW) (Honora, 18 years)

Gender questioning young people

What I hope for most is acceptance of all queer and non-standard people in the mainstream; to not only have diverse people present and represented, but to have any form of oppression or exclusion denounced and condemned.

More directly affecting me, I would like to see a broadening view of the gay and lesbian community. For a group that commonly uses the GLBT label, the community is remarkably hostile towards transgendered people [most often excluding or abusing us] and even bisexual people [by ignoring or pressuring to 'make their minds up']. I wouldn't mind so much if the 'GLBT' community just focussed on homosexuality - after all, being trans and being same sex-attracted are very different things, despite often overlapping. But the fact is that gay and lesbian groups so often tack on the B and T, and sometimes even an I - which most people don't even know about - and then provide no services or support, or even use language to directly exclude us.

Also, the whole push for same sex marriage kinda obfuscates the fact that intersex children are still systematically being subjected to genital mutilation, transgendered people are refused medical treatment and legal recognition, and there are a still vast legal inequalities in many other areas for same sex couples. It seems like the whole lack-of-human-rights thing gets lost in the marriage discussion. (Quinn, 20 years)

Key findings

- Ninety-one young people (3%) described their gender identity as gender queer, transgender or other.
- While they were more likely to be out than other SSAY, they were less likely to get support. They were also at greater risk of homelessness, physical abuse, self harm and suicide.

- GQ young people were more likely to have moved schools or dropped out of school as a result of homophobia, and to have had difficulties at school such as in concentrating , lower marks and hiding at recess and lunchtime.
- Many of these young people aspired to make a difference in the world despite the extra difficulties they faced, and felt pride in their diversity. This group was twice as likely to get involved in activism in response to the discrimination they faced.

The *Writing Themselves **In*** surveys have always been open to young people with diverse gender identities. We have ensured we included their stories in the previous reports. However, this year, we wanted to be more active in accommodating this group within the survey.

In 2010 around 3% of young people participating in the survey were neither male nor female but identified their gender in a range of other ways including transgender, gender queer, androgynous and hermaphrodite.

More of the survey participants from this group were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. They were less likely to be at school and less likely to live in their family home than SSAY.

I'm out of home and living in Melbourne now and I live in a strong and supportive community of queer, trans and feminist people who provide safe spaces for me to live my life and learn how to take care of myself. But this community isn't supported by society at large, it has to support itself. I'm happy with myself but I'm angry at the way I'm made to live my life within the world. I'm marginalised, discriminated against and made second class by the law. (Jo, 21 years)

GQ young people were generally as likely to see themselves as having attraction to more than one sex, as they were to see themselves as attracted exclusively to a same sex. But their visions of same sex and sexes generally were variable and highly personalised.

This group was more evenly divided in their identifications than young men and young women. They were twice as likely to have had penetrative sex under the age of 13 than SSAY. It was concerning to discover that two thirds did not use a condom the last time they had penetrative sex and that 9% had been diagnosed with an STI.

I'm in a same sex relationship but attracted to all people regardless of gender. I identify as pansexual and gender queer and refuse to accept that there are only two sexes. My mum is a lesbian and my family is my friends and friends of my mums who are all queer or queer friendly. To be honest my sexuality was never really an issue because I was lucky enough to be raised by parents that had many queer fiends and relatives. It was a bigger deal for me to come out about my mum's sexuality when I was 14 than it was for me to come out about my own sexuality when I was 17. I've used the internet to explore my gender identity more than I have to explore my sexual identity as that was more of a complex process. I wouldn't be me if I wasn't Queer!(Al, 18 years)

Experiences of abuse and discrimination

GQ young people were more likely to have been physically abused and to have been discriminated against in the form of being socially excluded, graffiti written about them and written abuse. They were at more risk of abuse on the street, at home and at work. Considering their experiences of abuse and discrimination, it is unsurprising that these young people felt less safe at many locations.

Self harm, suicide and wellbeing

GQ young people were at increased risk of self harm and suicide attempts with almost half having self harmed and 28% having attempted suicide. They were also twice as likely to have injected drugs than SSAY.

When i got beat up i went to the police because i had been put in hospital over it, other times nothing, just tried to ignore it as it seems like nothing would ever get done about it. At school they werent exactly the most supportive and turned a pretty big blind eye to it all. There is a point when you can only handle so much of not being okay, and i had/have reached that point. We arent given a choice about how we feel (sexuality wise) its just the way it is, and it gets really difficult when your constantly told it is wrong or not okay. It is also really really unsettling waking up knowing your a female but wishing with every ounce of you that one day u'll wake up and be a male. It really screws with your head when you know exactly how you are feeling but there is not really anyone you can talk to about it. (Skyler, 21 years)

Support Needs

GQ young people were more likely to disclose their sexual identity than SSAY. This may be because it is more difficult to hide gender non-conformity, or these young people may need more support in their daily experiences and were reaching out. However, we found that this group was less supported in their disclosures than SSAY.

Sexuality Education

These young people reported a different experience of Sexuality Education overall to SSAY, and were less likely to report receiving a number of messages. It is also possible that teachers may be more nervous about delivering this message with a transgender student in the class if they are unclear of their school's stance on the issue, or under confident about their knowledge of the issues. These data highlight several gaps in the Sexuality Education of GQ young people and the need for schools, teachers and sexuality educators to highlight messages that include gender diversity more directly and strongly. It also points to the possibility that Australian students generally miss out on learning about transsexual, intersex, gender queer and other perspectives.

School Experience

These students were more than twice as likely to feel very unsafe at school and twice as likely to classify their school as very homophobic overall. The data also revealed that homophobia has affected their schooling even more than SSAY. Twice as many of this student group reported that as a result of homophobia, they had moved schools (22%), left school altogether (22%), been unable to use the toilet (24%) and been unable to use the change rooms (35%). A greater portion of these students than other SSAY had difficulty concentrating in class (42%), dropped their marks (34%), missed classes (36%), missed days (35%), hid at recess and lunch (32%), and dropped out of extra-curricular activities (23%).

However, a positive finding for this group was that they were also over twice as likely as SSAY to become involved in activism as a result of the homophobia they suffered at school. This shows that while many in this group were suffering at school, some are also making attempts at changing their own circumstances and school cultures generally. Several of the young people in this group took the opportunity provided by the survey to call for schools to start tackling homophobia and transphobia more directly.

While their resources are there, I feel that teachers took a biased stance with my problems especially. While I understand that transsexualism is uncommon, it's their responsibility to be educated about an issue that arises among students, especially if it has effects as severe as the ones I suffered (Reagan, 17 years).

While the numbers of these young people in this study are still small these findings are indicative of an emerging group with urgent needs which are not at present on the health and education agenda.

Skyler's story, 21 years

Its just really hard to begin something like this, its like where do i start. DO i start with when i was a kid and all i wanted to play with the boys, get dirty, ride bikes, play football, play with cars, climb trees. I refused to wear dresses, play with barbies, wear anything that wasnt from the 'boys' section, and when puberty hit, buy a bra, as much as mum tried it was sports bras or nothing. So now looking back on that i really wonder if all along i was trying to speak out to mum and dad that i wanted to be a boy...i was a boy..i was just trapped in a female body. Until now i never really took the time to understand it though, i was just a tom boy that liked doing those things.

2010 and my life is still going, i have just come out as trans (FtM) and am dealing with the emotions that come with that, loosing friends left, right and centre, and generally not being okay or having the support i need to get through each day. I am gettin abused for things beyond my control, i have lost the respect from people i hold closest. And that is hard. But i have learnt that some people dont make it to your future and that is totally okay with me, theres a reason they dont.

My family: Dad- struggles with loosing his little girl, the white wedding, the big family. He was brought up in a highly religous family and finds it really hard accepting me, and thats without coming out as trans to him. Mum- Amazing. Although she struggled to begin with aswell she has come around, her struggles where quite different, she was worried about my safety and mental health as she knows how hard it is to live in such a judgemental community. Sister- More then i could ever ask. With every decision i make she is right there, beside me offering me a hand up when i need it. Brother- Drug addict. He is never around to understand or spend any time with. To him i do not exist.

Friends: I have had more people walk in and out of my life then i can count. I'm not exactly sure why but it is something i have just got use to over the years. i have a amazing support network around me now and thats all that matters. The people that love me for me have stuck around through thick and thin and will continue to do so. And to me, thats all that truly matters.

My past holds alot of hurt, and is something i have run away from for a really long time. After having to have an abortion at 14 after being sexually assaulted by a guy i was seeing to prove to people i wasnt gay, my life just seemed to go downhill, spirally out of control. I was outed by my principal to my father and youth worker. I was outed by my year adviser to my whole grade. I actually didnt come out to anyone...it was done for me. I have been bullied. I have been beat up. I have been sexually assaulted. and i have been kicked out of home. All because of something people had assumed. I hadnt even thought about who i was yet, let alone coming out as gay. Above all. Because of something i have no control over.

My experience of growing up as same sex was not enjoyable, even in the slightest, i self harmed, i drank, i did drugs, all to deal with my emotions and how i was feelings. I did not in anyway want to wake up in the morning any given day. Although it seems that bad times have been a large part of my life, it also make me see the good days in amazing light. I am still alive and i am who i want to be. I have created change. I have made people think. I have helped people understand. I have made people smile and laugh, and that is something that is priceless. Now that my future ahead of me is unknown, i am excited. I am working a full time job, and i am living a full time life. I am no way okay but i will be.

There is a hell of a long journey ahead of me. Maybe one day i'll sit down and write out my whole story. But right now, that is all i have. My life is going to be what i make of it, no more, no less. I can do whatever i want if you i put my head to it, so maybe i'll make some change to something i dislike. who knows where my feet are going to take me next.

Conclusion – "I love my life"

When i first realised i was gay, i didnt want to accept it. I struggled with this for years, as well as peer pressures etc. I struggled under strong depression, causing difficulties studying, sleeping, which let to further depression, in a vicious cycle which also led to self harm. At about 15 i underwent a change. Its a difficult thing to explain but i just got sick of it. I had to use willpower i didnt know i had, and faced my demons. I took control of my own mind for the first time in years and just accepted i was gay, and i had life and what a rare beautiful thing it was and i was wasting it. From that point i came to love who i am and since then i have changed so much and while i still have difficulties with homophobia, i love my life and myself and am proud of where i am today. (Denny, 17 years)

It has been a privilege doing research with same sex attracted young people over the last twelve years, and in that time have seen many changes, most of which are positive ones, occurring in the worlds of these young people. One of the largest changes is in their visibility and in the expanding numbers we have been able to access each time. Greater numbers have made a more robust analysis possible, and this has also confirmed the essential verity of those first tentative findings in 1998. Homophobia has always been a problem and SSAGQ young people are forced to negotiate lives in environments which subject them to rejection, threats and abuse. This will clearly take some time to change.

On the good side, however, the most encouraging of all our findings is the degree to which, over the twelve years, this picture has begun to change. This is largely due to the efforts of the young people themselves, but also to the many advocates for their cause creating change, and to a progressive shift in social attitudes towards a more relaxed and appreciative view of sexual and gender diversity.

While we remain disappointed to see the amount of verbal and physical abuse escalate every time we conduct the survey, we also see this as a response to fewer young people being prepared to be in hiding. There has been a marked change in the number of young people who have told someone about their sexuality. In 1998 one in five participants had told nobody, in 2010 a tiny percentage had spoken to no one at all.

In speaking every one of them has taken a risk, however well they may have planned their approach and scanned the environment to prepare for the moment. It is about this moment of risk that we have our most significant findings so far. What happens when they disclose, irrespective of who the chosen person is, becomes critical for the health and wellbeing of the young person, for their mental health and safety and for their immediate future. Either they will be supported and get a response which is, on balance, more positive than negative, or they will be rejected. Those young people who take the risk of telling and are met with condemnation and rejection are more likely to feel bad about their sexuality, to self harm and attempt suicide than those who have had a positive response. Young people disclose to a wide range of people – family members, friends and professionals, all of whom have a unique opportunity to make a

critical difference to a young life. It is clear that everyone in the community is on the team that can save a life if the opportunity presents, and we must look at ways to ensure that we are well prepared to take it.

While homophobia in schools (as in other places) has increased over the twelve years, we have seen some remarkable changes in the capacity of schools to support and protect the SSAGQ young people in their care. School personnel are more widely used for disclosure and young people feel safer at school. The 2010 data give us substantial evidence of the impact of these changes. Schools that have policies in place to support SSAGQ students go some way towards protecting them from harm. Schools which were perceived by students to be supportive in all respects have a strong and significant influence on the mental health and safety of the SSAGQ young people who attend.

Young people themselves are fighting back in ways we have not seen before. Their voices are stronger and they are often angry about what homophobia is doing to them. In much greater numbers than before they are finding information on the internet to fill the gaps that school and family will not fill. They are finding other SSAGQ young people on social networking sites and getting the support and advice from peers that heterosexual young people take for granted. They are forming or joining groups for activism on *Facebook* and other sites, aspiring to help other SSAGQ youth to live in a kinder world. They are fighting back in the real world by demanding change at school, starting their own gay/straight alliances and initiating community projects for change.

Most of all they are taking advantage of the social shifts which give them more legitimacy and the opportunity to draw on more positive discourses to plan their lives. They see a future where equality is possible, where belonging to a religion and being gay is not out of the question. They plan to marry and have families like everyone else, they plan to work for change because they believe it is an achievable goal.

In greater numbers than ever before they communicate to us about a love of life. Sometimes this is a narrative of recovery from the sense of worthlessness homophobic abuse can bring:

I love my life! There was a time a year or two ago when i was not very happy or healthy, but i overcame that with the support of my friends and family. Now, i am proud to be who i am, and i believe that sexuality has no boundaries. There is no right or wrong way to love someone, so i am just enjoying getting out there and meeting awesome LGBT and people and having a good time. I would like other people to know that homosexuality is not a bad thing or a curse, as i'm sure many close-minded people believe. If anything, i prefer having fluid sexuality, and if i could choose to be straight, gay, bisexual, whatever, i would choose to be a lesbian, over and over (Allegra, 17 years)

Others write simply of the joy in their lives right at this moment:

I love loving girls. There's so much to like. I don't have a problem with homosexuality even with my religious beliefs. Who has time for hate? I don't. It's a wasted emotion. I love my life, and I love that I love girls (Saskia, 20 years)

My life as a gay man is mostly fine. I love being gay, I love my life. (Mickey, 18 years)

I dont care what others say and I love my life. I would never want it any other way. (Penny, 17 years)

For others it is the hopes and dreams around what the future holds and the prospect of helping others that creates happiness and optimism:

When I am older I hope to join the police force to help crack down on hate crimes against gay people and to follow my dream of becoming a forensic scientist. I also want to work with teenagers though and help them through life. I also want to have children and maybe even a wife (Misty, 16 years)

I'm currently working my way towards a Law degree, so I can eventually one day become a prosecutor, fight for gay rights, and one day become a High Court Judge, just like Michael Kirby. I want to help make Australia a better place for gay people, and I know I will.(Mickey, 18 years)

The young people who love their lives right now are an inspiration and show us that celebration can be integral to same sex attraction and gender questioning. We dedicate this report to these young people, as well as to those who are still struggling. We admire their courage, energy, aspirations and dreams and hope we can make some contribution to their work in the future.

Recommendations

The biggest issue emerging from this research is the ongoing and persistent damage done by homophobia in the lives of SSAGQ young people. The all pervading nature of homophobia is a public health issue and should be addressed by government funded public education campaigns designed to alert the public to its dangers and challenge those who promulgate it.

Public safety

SSAGQ young people continue to experience high levels of homophobic violence and abuse not just at school but also on the street, in sport and at public and private events.

Much of this goes unreported by young people for fear of exposure of their sexual identity. Police programs which liaise with the gay community and seek to make reporting easier should be protected and expanded.

Cyber-safety

Use of the internet plays a very particular role in the lives of SSAGQ young people providing them with safety and support which may be superior to that available to them in the real world. With this in mind, cyber-safety programs should incorporate a particular understanding of the needs of SSAGQ young people and their considerable skills and experience at managing safe internet use.

Education

There is clear evidence in this report that schools can make a major contribution to the health and safety of SSAGQ students by effectively addressing homophobia. All education authorities should show leadership in this area with clear policies and adequate resourcing to ensure all Australian schools are legitimised and supported in this work.

Schools should have a specific policy on homophobic bullying which offers well-publicised protection to SSAGQ students.

Such policies should be implemented as part of a whole school approach to ensuring a supportive environment for SSAGQ students. For more information see www.safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au. Those who offer one to one counselling and support to young people in schools should be trained to receive and work with a disclosure about sexual orientation or gender identity in a positive, non-judgemental and constructive manner.

Sexuality Education

A significant number of SSAGQ young people find the Sexuality Education at their school not at all useful, or only moderately useful. It is recommended that schools continue to incorporate material inclusive of SSAGQ young people into their Sexuality Education programs.

The higher rate of pregnancy amongst SSA young women is indicative of the need for all schools to ensure they have sexuality education programs which give clear messages about sexual behaviours rather than make assumptions based on identity.

At least half SSAGQ young people realise they are same sex attracted while they are still in primary school. It is recommended that attention be paid to the use of inclusive and representative materials throughout the primary school curriculum, as well as throughout all secondary school years.

This study has found particular gaps in the Sexuality Education of students questioning their gender. Sexuality education should fully address issues of gender expectations and stereotyping as well covering gender diversity more directly and strongly.

Health services

Personnel in health services are respected by young people and could play a greater role in supporting those who are SSAGQ young people through the process of disclosure if they were more trusted. It is recommended that health services undertake training in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) sensitive service delivery and actively signal to SSAGQ young people through waiting room posters and service promotion that they are welcome.

It is clear from this research that sexuality labels do not predict sexual attraction or behaviours in a simplistic fashion, particularly for young people. Health professionals need training to take sexual histories in a non-judgemental manner with young people, and to understand the best options for information and referrals.

The access of rural young people to appropriate and supportive services is an ongoing concern.

- Programs which work with SSAGQ young people in rural areas should be continued as a means of linking these young people into mainstream health services

- Rural health services should be particularly targeted for training around GLBT sensitivity and support

Parents

Parents play an essential role in determining how resilient SSAGQ young people can be according to how they respond to a disclosure. Parents need both education and support to be prepared for a possible disclosure and sometimes to manage their own feelings of disappointment or apprehension.

- P-Flag organisations in all states and territories should be fostered and supported with government funding to ensure their availability and viability.
- Information about same sex attraction and gender diversity should be included in all mainstream material about adolescent health that may be accessed by parents.

Parents of CALD backgrounds appear from this research to require special attention and this area warrants further investigation to see what the best means of meeting these information needs might be.

Further research

Gender questioning young people are an emerging group which have not been the major focus of this research but their increased visibility indicates that as a group they warrant further investigation to better understand their health and support needs.

Little is known about the means to best prepare parents for a disclosure from a SSAGQ son or daughter, or how best to offer them with information and support should it be necessary after a disclosure. This is an area for further investigation.

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Appendix 1. The questionnaire

Who pushes your buttons?

Someone of your own sex?
Are you aged 14-21?
Be part of the third national
Writing Themselves In survey (WTI3)

www.wti3.org.au

Who pushes your buttons?

Are you attracted to people of the same sex? Aged between 14 and 21 years? Living in Australia? Interested in having a say about the issues affecting your life? If you have sexual feelings for people of the same sex, whether or not you have ever acted on those feelings, we are interested in finding out about your family and friends, school, relationships, how people treat you, sexual health and the fun things about your life. The results of this research will be used to improve education and services and focus more attention on how to make Australia a more inclusive place regarding sexual diversity.

This is the 3rd national Writing Themselves In questionnaire. It has been put together by a team of researchers from the Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society (La Trobe University), Melbourne, with the help of a number of young people and youth workers from a range of different organisations. It is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging. This survey will take about 20 minutes to complete and is anonymous. This means there will be no information which can identify you on any of the publications which come out of the research, including perhaps, a collection of your stories. For this reason, we ask that you don't write your name anywhere on the survey. By sending us your stories you will be assigning copyright for them to La Trobe University.

Please answer the questions as honestly as possible and if you don't feel comfortable with a particular question, just leave it blank.

if you find any of the questions upsetting and you would like to speak with someone, you can contact KIDSHELPLINE if you are 18 years or under (call toll free 1800 55 1800 or email kidshelpline@boystown.org.au), or Lifeline if you are over 18 years (call on 13 11 14).

The report of this research will be published on www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay in September 2010. Any questions regarding this project may be directed to Dr Lynne Hillier at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society at La Trobe University on, ph: (03) 9285 5360 or email l.hillier@latrobe.edu.au.

If you have any complaints of queries that the researcher has not been able to answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the Ethics Liason Officer, Human Ethics Committee, La Trobe University, Victoria, 3086, ph: (03) 94791443 or email humanethics@latrobe.edu.au.

Your consent:
(VALIDATED QUESTION)
☐ I hereby consent to take part in this research, and have read the above information

About you

1A. Please write the postcode of the town /city in which you live. _____

1B. Please write your age in years and months._____

1C. Are you?
1. ☐ Male
2. ☐ Female
3. ☐ Transgender m-f
4. ☐ Transgender f-m
5. ☐ Gender Queer
6. ☐ Other

If other, please specify_____

1D. In which country were you born?_____

1E. Are you of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent?
1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No

1F. In which countries were your parents born? e.g. Australia, Greece
_____

1G. What are you mainly doing at the moment? (*please tick all boxes that apply*)
1. ☐ I am at school
2. ☐ I am at University
3. ☐ I am at TAFE
4. ☐ I am unemployed
5. ☐ I am working full-time
6. ☐ I am working part-time
7. ☐ Other

If other, please specify_____

1H. Where did you first hear about this survey?
1. ☐ Heard on the radio
2. ☐ Saw it on the internet
3. ☐ Read about it in a magazine
4. ☐ At the sexual diversity group I belong to
5. ☐ A youth worker told me about it
6. ☐ Through peer-group/friends
7. ☐ Other _____

If other, please specify _____

1I. Where do you currently live?
1. ☐ In the family home
2. ☐ With relatives in their home
3. ☐ At my girlfriend/boyfriend's house
4. ☐ Shared flat/house
5. ☐ Boarding house/hotel/dormitory
6. ☐ Refuge
7. ☐ Streets/car/squat/caravan
8. ☐ On your own (rented or own place)
9. ☐ Other

If other, please specify_____

About your sexual feelings

2A. Which one of these statements best describes your sexual feelings at the moment?
1. ☐ I am attracted only to people of my own sex
2. ☐ I am attracted to people of both sexes
3. ☐ I am attracted only to people of the opposite sex
4. ☐ I am not sure to whom I am attracted

2B. Please tell us more about your answer to 2A.
_____
_____

2C. At what age did you first know about these sexual feelings?
1. ☐ Always knew
2. ☐ Unsure
3. ☐ State age here _____

2D. Please tell us what happened to help you realise.
_____
_____
_____
_____

2E. Do you think of yourself as:
1. ☐ Gay, homosexual, lesbian?
2. ☐ Bisexual?
3. ☐ Heterosexual (straight)?
4. ☐ Queer?
5. ☐ Questioning?
6. ☐ Other?

If other, please specify_____

2F. Please tell us more about your answer to 2E.
_____
_____

2G. On the whole, how do you feel about being attracted to people of the same sex?
1. ☐ Great
2. ☐ Pretty good
3. ☐ OK
4. ☐ Pretty bad
5. ☐ Really bad

2H. Please tell us more about your answer to 2G
_____
_____

About Your Internet Use

3A. Do you have internet access at home?
1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No

3B. When thinking about internet sites you belong to or visit often, which of the following statements are true for you? The site/s are a place where I… (*please tick all boxes that apply*)
1. ☐…feel accepted
2. ☐…feel safe
3. ☐…can find others like me
4. ☐…can find friends I can trust
5. ☐…can disclose my sexuality
6. ☐…can get help from others
7. ☐…can help others
8. ☐…can work for change around homophobia
9. ☐…can feel proud about my sexuality
10 ☐Other?

If other, please specify_____

3C. Have you used the internet to explore your sexual identity?
1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No

3D. Please tell us more about your answers to 3B and 3C, including which Internet sites have been most helpful and how you have used them (e.g. finding community, finding information, reading stories, chatting to others).
_____
_____

How Do People Treat You?

The following questions deal with homophobic abuse. Abuse can make you feel uncomfortable or even fearful. It cam be verbal or physical. We have also included a question about other kinds of homophobia.

4A. Has anyone ever been abusive to you because of your sexuality?
1. ☐ Yes verbally (eg, called names)
2. ☐ Yes, physically (eg, bashed up)
3. ☐ Yes, other types of homophobia
4. ☐ No. If no, go to question 4H

4B. If you were verbally abused, can you give an example of what was said?
_____
_____

4C. If you were physically abused, can you give an example of what happened?
_____
_____

4D. Have you experienced other forms of homophobia? (*please tick all boxes that apply*)
1. ☐ Social exclusion (eg, being "left out")
2. ☐ Rumours spread about you
3. ☐ Graffiti
4. ☐ Cyber bullying
5. ☐ Written abuse (eg, letters or notes)
6. ☐ Being humiliated
7. ☐ Tolerating homophobic language from friends
8. ☐ Other (please specify)_____
_____

4E. Where did this (from 4B, C and D) happen?
1. ☐ At school
2. ☐ On the street
3. ☐ At home
4. ☐ At a social occasion (party etc.)
5. ☐ At a sporting event (eg, Football)
6. ☐ At work
7. ☐ Other (please specify)_____
_____

4F. Who did it to you? _____

4G. What, if anything, did you do about it? _____
_____

4H. In what ways, if at all, has homophobia impacted on your schooling? (*please tick all boxes that apply*)
1. ☐ I couldn't concentrate in class.
2. ☐ My marks dropped.
3. ☐ I moved schools.
4. ☐ I left school altogether.
5. ☐ I missed classes.
6. ☐ I missed days.
7. ☐ I hid at recess/ lunch.
8. ☐ I couldn't go to the toilet.
9. ☐ I couldn't use the change-rooms.
10. ☐ I dropped out of a sport/extra-curricular activity.
11. ☐ I became involved in activism.
12. ☐ It hasn't affected me at all.
13. ☐ Other (please specify) _____
_____

Most people have times when they worry about their physical and emotional safety. To feel safe is to feel protected from harm, to feel comfortable, relaxed and happy. In this question we want to know how safe you feel in different places where you spend your time.

4I. How safe do you feel...

	Very safe	Safe	Ok	Unsafe	Very unsafe
1. At school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.On the street?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. At home?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. At social occasions?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. At sporting events?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. At work?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. On the internet?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

The following questions deal with self-harm and suicide. Self-harm is when someone tries to hurt their own body. Suicide is when someone tries to end their own life. For support around any of these issues, you can contact KIDSHELPLINE if you are 18 years or under (call toll free 1800 55 1800 or email kidshelpline@boystown.org.au), or Lifeline if you are over 18 years (call on 13 11 14).

4J. As a result of homophobia, have you ever... (*please tick all boxes that apply*)
1. ☐ Thought about self-harm?
2. ☐ Harmed yourself?
3. ☐ Thought about suicide?
4. ☐ Attempted suicide?
5. ☐ None of the above?

4K. Please tell us more about your answer to 4J.
_____
_____

About Your Sexual Behaviours

5A. Which of the following best describes your sexual behaviour over the past 2 years?
1. ☐ I have never had sex
2. ☐ I've had sex with both guys & girls
3. ☐ I've only had sex with guys
4. ☐ I've only had sex with girls

5B.How old were you when you first had an experience of...

	Under 13	14	15	16	17	18	+18	Never
Deep kissing?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Touching a partner's genitals with your hand?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Being touched on your genitals by a partner's hand?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Giving oral sex?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Receiving oral sex?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Had penetrative sex ? (includes girl with girl, boy with boy)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5C. The last time you had penetrative sex - if it was penis/vagina or penis/anus sex - was a condom used?
1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No

5D. Have you ever been pregnant?
1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No

5E. If you answered yes to 5D what happened with the pregnancy?
_____
_____

5F. Have you ever been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection?
1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No

For support around any of these issues, you can contact KIDSHELPLINE if you are 18 years or under (call toll free 1800 551800 or email kidshelpline@boystown.org.au), or Lifeline if you are over 18 years (call on 13 11 14).

About Your Drug Use

6A. How many times, if ever, have you used or taken the following?

	Daily	Weekly	Weekends Only	Monthly	Less than monthly	A few times a year	Never
1. Alcohol	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Marijuana	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Cigarettes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Amphetamines (Speed, Crystal Meth, Ice, Dexies)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Cocaine (Coke, Crack-Cocaine, Crack)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Ecstasy (Pills, Biccies, MDMA, E)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Inhalants (Poppers, Amyl, Petrol, Paint, Glues)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. Sedatives (Xanax, Valium, Sleeping Pills)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Hallucinogens (Special K, K, Shrooms, Mushies, Acid, PCP)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Non-prescribed Stimulants (Ritalin, Methylin, Concerta, Provigil)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Heroin	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6B. Have you ever injected drugs?
1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No

About Your Family And Friends

7A. Have you told the people below about your feelings of being attracted to people of your own sex? How supportive were they?

	No haven't told	Yes & was supportive	Yes but was NOT supportive
1. Mum	☐	☐	☐
2. Dad	☐	☐	☐
3. Female friend	☐	☐	☐
4. Male friend	☐	☐	☐
5. Brother	☐	☐	☐
6. Sister	☐	☐	☐
7. Doctor	☐	☐	☐
8. Teacher	☐	☐	☐
9. Worker with young people	☐	☐	☐
10. Student welfare coordinator/ student counsellor	☐	☐	☐
11. Counsellor (outside of school)	☐	☐	☐
12. Boyfriend/girlfriend	☐	☐	☐
13. School chaplain	☐	☐	☐
14. Gay or lesbian adult	☐	☐	☐
15. School nurse	☐	☐	☐
16. Someone on the internet	☐	☐	☐
17. Other	☐	☐	☐

Your General Well-Being

8A. How do you feel about your life as a whole?

1. ☐ Extremely happy
2. ☐ Pleased
3. ☐ Mostly satisfied
4. ☐ Mixed feelings
5. ☐ Mostly dissatisfied
6. ☐ Unhappy
7. ☐ Terrible

8B. How do you feel about yourself most of the time?

1. ☐ Extremely happy
2. ☐ Pleased
3. ☐ Mostly satisfied
4. ☐ Mixed
5. ☐ Mostly dissatisfied
6. ☐ Unhappy
7. ☐ Terrible

8C. I seem to get sick a little easier than other people

1. ☐ Definitely true
2. ☐ Mostly true
3. ☐ Don't know
4. ☐ Mostly false
5. ☐ Definitely false

8D. I am as healthy as anybody I know

1. ☐ Definitely true
2. ☐ Mostly true
3. ☐ Don't know
4. ☐ Mostly false
5. ☐ Definitely false

8E. I expect my health to get worse

1. ☐ Definitely true
2. ☐ Mostly true
3. ☐ Don't know
4. ☐ Mostly false
5. ☐ Definitely false

8F. My health is excellent

1. ☐ Definitely true
2. ☐ Mostly true
3. ☐ Don't know
4. ☐ Mostly false
5. ☐ Definitely false

8G. In general, would you say your health is..

1. ☐ Poor
2. ☐ Fair
3. ☐ Good
4. ☐ Very good
5. ☐ Excellent

8H. In regard to being same sex attracted, name three things that would make a positive difference in your life

_____

_____

Sex Education Information

9A. Have you received any useful information about the topics below from these sources

	School	Media	Gay Media	Internet	Friends (hetero-sexual)	Friends (SSA)	Family	Gay Community
1. Homophobia and discrimination	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Gay relationships	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Lesbian relationships	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Heterosexual relationships	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Gay safe sex	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Lesbian safe sex	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Heterosexual safe sex	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

About Your Secondary School Experience

10A. For my secondary schooling, I attend or most recently attended a:

1. ☐ Government School
2. ☐ Catholic School
3. ☐ Other Christian School
4. ☐ Islamic School
5. ☐ Jewish School
6. ☐ Steiner School
7. ☐ Other (please specify) _____

10B. My school (or most recent school) has policies that protect me against homophobia

1. ☐ Yes
2. ☐ No
3. ☐ Don't know

10C. The sex education classes at my school teaches students: (*please tick all that apply*)

1. ☐ Nothing: my school doesn't provide it
2. ☐ How the body changes at puberty
3. ☐ How humans mate and reproduce
4. ☐ That sex before marriage is wrong
5. ☐ That gay people should become straight
6. ☐ About sexual rights and responsibilities
7. ☐ About protecting against sexual dangers (STDs, pregnancy)
8. ☐ About creating healthy and good relationships
9. ☐ About making your own choices on sexual issues
10. ☐ About women's rights
11. ☐ That experimenting with sexualities and pleasures is okay
12. ☐ That homophobia is wrong
13. ☐ That males don't have to be 'manly' and females don't have to be 'girly'
14. ☐ That different cultures have different views on sex

10D. How useful has this sex education been and why?

_____

_____

10E. At my school there are/is:

1. ☐ Posters about sexual diversity
2. ☐ Students who speak up against homophobia
3. ☐ Friendliness towards same sex attracted people
4. ☐ Equal treatment of same sex partners at events (parents/ kids/ staff)
5. ☐ Links with sexual diversity support groups/ services
6. ☐ Library resources/ books about sexual diversity
7. ☐ None of the above

10F. Overall, I feel my school is:

1. ☐ Very homophobic
2. ☐ Homophobic
3. ☐ Neutral
4. ☐ Supportive
5. ☐ Very supportive

10G. My school could better support my sexuality by:_____

_____

Final Request

We are interested in reading more about your experiences of growing up knowing that you are sexually attracted to people of your own sex, how your life is going, your experiences with friends and family, your good times and your bad, and your hopes for the future. If you would like to share this with us, please include this information here or on another piece of paper.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Do you feel that you would like support around any of the issues you have been thinking about while completing questionnaire? If you are 18years or under you can contact KIDSHELPLINE on their 24 hour toll free number 1800 55 1800 or email kidshelpline@boystown.org.au. If you are over 18years, you can call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Also, there are many links on www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay/ to organisations that might be useful to you. Thank you for completing the questionnaire. We value your contribution.

I hope in the future, I'll find a beautiful woman to share my life with, and when the time comes, we can marry with ALL my family there and start a family of our own and our family can live in safety and in happiness.
If my child is straight, okay, if my child is homosexual, okay! If my child is gender queer, okay!
I love my life right now, it's a matter of ignoring the dreadful things said.
That's about it. Thanks for the opportunity!

Since I first kissed a girl I know for sure that the girls are my passion and I wouldn't change my life with some heterosexual even if I could choose. I love being gay, I love fighting for gay rights. I love the company of other people like me. I'm proud. Proud of who I am, who we are. We don't love different then heterosexuals do, and it's sad that so many people don't realise that. But I hope that will change.

At about 15 i underwent a change. Its a difficult thing to explain but i just got sick of it. I had to use willpower i didn't know i had, and faced my demons. I took control of my own mind for the first time in years and just accepted i was gay, and i had a life and what a rare and beautiful thing it was and i was wasting it. From that point i came to love who i am and since then i have changed so much and while i still have difficulties with homophobia. i love my life and myself and am proud of where i am today.

Love it! Best realisation of my life, I feel very comfortable with my gender and sexuality but that has taken many years to come to this point in my life, even though it is still very hard at times, I love being part of the LGBTI community .