

Fewer youth attempt suicide in states with hate crime laws

June 23 2022



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When states enact hate crime laws that protect LGBTQ populations, the rate of suicide attempts among high school students drops significantly, and not just among sexual and gender minority students, but among

heterosexual students as well, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Sexual [minority](#) youth are at increased risk for [suicide](#). Structural interventions, such as hate [crime](#) laws, that promote the rights and protections of [sexual minorities](#) provide opportunities to address these disparities, although research examining the effects of such legislation is limited," said Aaron Kivisto, Ph.D., of the University of Indianapolis, an author of the study. "In this study, we found the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected group in state hate crime laws is associated with reductions in the proportion of adolescents attempting suicide."

The research was published in the journal *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*.

To better understand the association of hate crime legislation and the prevalence of youth suicide, the researchers analyzed data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a national school-based survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The survey included questions on health-related behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death and disability among high school students in grades 9 through 12, including suicide attempts and [sexual behavior](#). It has been conducted every two years since 1991.

Researchers first analyzed all survey responses from 1991 to 2018, representing more than 697,000 [high school students](#). Suicide attempts were measured by asking, "During the past 12 months, how many times did you actually attempt suicide?" Response options included, "0 times," "1 time," "2 or 3 times," "4 or 5 times," or "6 or more times." For the entire survey period, approximately 8.6% of students reported one or more suicide attempts in the year prior to completing the survey.

Since 2015 was the first year that the survey asked students about [sexual](#)

[orientation](#), researchers also analyzed a subset of data collected from more than 83,000 students from 2015 to 2018. During that period, suicide attempt rates were significantly higher in students who identified as gay or lesbian (25.7%), bisexual (27.1%) or questioning (18.5%) than among their heterosexual counterparts (6.3%).

Researchers then looked at suicide attempt rates in states that enacted hate crime laws protecting sexual and gender minorities during the study period. They found, overall, suicide attempt rates decreased by 1.2 percentage points for all students in those states after the legislation was enacted. This translated into an overall decrease of 16% in the yearly number of suicide attempts in those states.

There was no decrease in states that enacted hate crime laws that excluded sexual minorities as a protected class.

Sexual minority youth did not experience larger reductions in suicide attempts than their heterosexual peers following the passage of hate crime laws protecting sexual minorities. There were, however, differences in rates of suicide among different sexual minority groups. Bisexual and questioning students experienced significantly larger reductions in suicide attempts compared with gay and lesbian students after the enactment of hate crime laws protecting sexual minorities.

The researchers said they were not surprised that hate crime laws were associated with decreased suicide attempts in all youth, according to Kivisto. "Multiple studies have illustrated this general effect, which we conceptualized as evidence of 'social spillover.' This essentially says that just as factors that contribute to health disparities are ultimately disadvantageous for all, factors that remedy health disparities are frequently beneficial for all," he said.

"Hate crime laws are associated with reductions in the proportion of

adolescents who attempt suicide, but this potential appears to be contingent on naming sexual minorities as a protected group," said Kivisto. "Our research found that enactment of hate crime laws specifically protecting sexual minorities is associated with a small but reliable 1.2 percentage point reduction in past-year suicide attempts among high school-aged adolescents. Given the prevalence of [suicide attempts](#) in this population, small reductions may nonetheless impact large numbers of youth."

More information: The Association Between Hate Crime Laws that Enumerate Sexual Orientation and Adolescent Suicide Attempts, *Psychology Public Policy and Law* (2022). [PDF](#).

Provided by American Psychological Association

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