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# Sexual Minority Youth are Over-represented and Have Worse Outcomes in the Child Welfare System

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## INTRODUCTION

Community-based samples of youth have found that sexual minority youth (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or same-sex attracted youth) are over-represented in child welfare systems. Their over-representation is probably the result of sexual minority youth being more likely than heterosexual youth to run away or be asked to leave their families of origin, frequently due to families' rejection of their sexual orientation.

Once in foster care and other out-of-home placements, sexual minority youth are also more likely to experience further mistreatment from foster parents, foster siblings, and social workers. Research shows that these youth are also more likely than their heterosexual peers to suffer emotional and physical abuse leading to hospitalization.

Until now, it was not clear if the over-representation of sexual minority youth in child welfare systems took place only in certain communities throughout the United States or nationwide.

This brief reports on a study that uses data from two nationally representative studies—the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) and a sample of youth involved with Child Protective Services—to explore the prevalence of foster care or out-of-home placements for sexual minority and heterosexual youth for the nation as a whole. In a companion study, the authors examine data from the California Healthy Kids Survey, a large statewide school-based survey, to explore disparities in psychological and school outcomes for sexual minority versus heterosexual youth.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Nationally representative data demonstrate that the over-representation of sexual minority youth in child welfare systems is a national phenomenon (see Figure 1, next page).
- ▶ Sexual minority youth in foster care or out-of-home placement experience more victimization, poorer school functioning, more substance use, and poorer mental health compared with heterosexual youth (see Figure 2, next page).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Institutional guidelines in child welfare systems, such as policies and professional development related to assessing needs, placement, family support, and group home settings, are needed to provide safe and affirming care of sexual minority youth. (See [existing guidelines](#) for more information.) In addition, evidence-based practices, including mandated family counseling with a sexuality-affirming therapist before reunification efforts are attempted and better training for child welfare staff and social workers, must also be fostered to provide a better quality of care to these youth.

FIGURE 1

### Compared to youth with different-sex attractions, youth with same sex attractions are more likely to be in foster care

Nationally representative data show that compared to youth with different-sex attractions, youth with same sex attractions are more likely to be in foster care. In contrast, youth with no attractions are not more likely to be in foster care compared to youth with same sex attractions.

\*This figure<sup>1</sup> shows adjusted odds ratios (circles) and 95% confidence intervals (lines). A lines that crosses 1 is no different than the comparison group (youth with different-sex attractions).

Source: Add Health

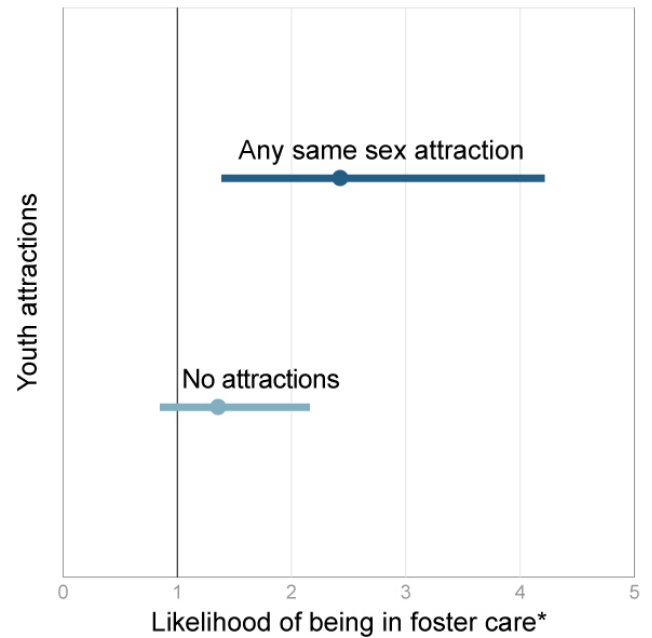
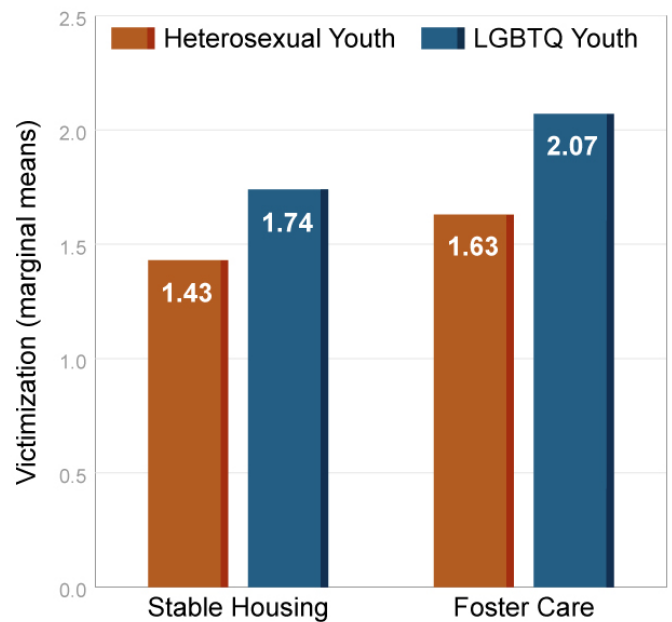


FIGURE 2

### Sexual minority youth in foster care have higher rates of victimization than heterosexual youth in foster care and sexual minority youth in stable housing

This figure<sup>2</sup> shows that compared with heterosexual youth in foster care and sexual minority youth in stable housing, sexual minority youth in foster care report more victimization.

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey



## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Fish, J.N., Baams, L., Wojciak, A.S., & Russell, S.T. (2019). Are sexual minority youth overrepresented in foster care, child welfare, and out-of-home placement? Findings from nationally representative data. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 89:203-211.
- <sup>2</sup> Baams, L., Wilson, B.D.M., Russell, S.T. (2019). LGBTQ youth in unstable housing and foster care. *Pediatrics* 143(3).

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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