# Supporting LGBTQ+ Students in California

June 2023

Introduction

At least 11% of California youth identify as LGBTQ+.[1] These youth have diverse backgrounds and identities, but one fact remains the same: LGBTQ+ youth continue to face alarming rates of systemic and interpersonal marginalization. In a 2020 national survey, the Trevor Project found that 60% of LGBTQ+ youth experienced discrimination at some point in their lifetime because of their gender or sexual identity.[2] In 2022, this rate increased to 73%.[3] A closer look at what California's youth are saying themselves shows that a renewed commitment from state leaders, schools, and communities is needed to provide proactive, identity-affirming support.

Nationally, there has been a steep rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation targeting youth over the past several years—from bills preventing access to gender affirming care for transgender youth to the exclusion of LGBTQ+ people in sex and health education curriculum. These political acts have resulted in increased targeting and a climate of fear that affects a multitude of children and youth – those who live in LGBTQ+ families, those who may be questioning their gender or sexual orientation, and especially those who identify as LGBTQ+ themselves. The 2023 Trevor Project National Survey also found that 33% of LGBTQ+ youth said that anti-LGBTQ legislation made their mental health worse, and 41% of LGBTQ+ youth experienced suicidal ideation.[4]

*There are approximately **140 LGTBQ+ students** at the average California high school.*[5]
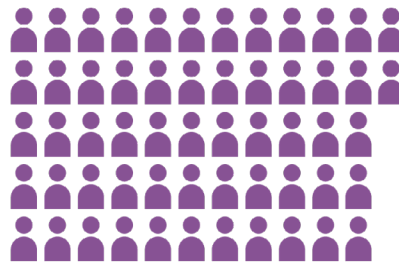
41% of LGBTQ+ youth *experience suicidal ideation.*

An average of at least 57 students are experiencing suicidal ideation on every high school campus.

Similarly upsetting findings are also seen in California's schools. Nearly 26% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students had attempted suicide in the 12 months prior to responding to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey.[6] While this is an alarming statistic on its own, it is also 4 times higher than that of straight students who reported the same. This disparity is reflective of California's conflicting sociopolitical landscape. On one hand, California has some of the strongest legal protections for LGBTQ+ children in the country—including a recently-signed law[7] that protects children moving to California in search of safe, gender-affirming resources. On the other hand, despite these legal protections, uneven implementation of policy, a lack of awareness and accountability from school leaders, and the tolerance of interpersonal discrimination in California schools, results in high rates of LGBTQ+ youth who continue to fear for their safety. Urgent work is needed to eliminate disparities in the wellbeing of California's LGBTQ+ youth.

LGBTQ+ youth do not experience higher rates of emotional instability because of their gender or sexual orientation. Rather, this correlation reflects the marginalization and lack of safety these youth experience in their daily lives.[8] Targeted discrimination – whether at home, schools, or via the public square from elected officials and public policies – impacts the well-being of millions of California's children.

Data Overview

Across the board, LGBTQ+ students fare worse in school environments than their non-transgender[9] and straight peers. The data show that LGBTQ+ youth report higher perceived danger in their schools, poorer mental health outcomes and worse educational outcomes at rates far higher than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. However, additional disparities are revealed when looking at intra-community groups. LGBTQ+ youth of different racial and ethnic identities, ages, and experiences with the foster care system report starkly divergent experiences. To highlight distinct levels of granularity, this brief will examine the experiences of gender minority youth, sexual minority youth, and various sub-communities, as reflected in two WestEd analyses[10, 11] of the 2017-19 California Healthy Kids Survey responses. This is the latest available statewide data and should be used as a baseline to compare with emerging post-pandemic data.

Alarming Outcomes Seen in Mental Health Domain

Understanding the experiences of LGBTQ High School Students in California by Race and Ethnicity, it is revealed that LGBTQ+ youth, across ages and races/ethnicities, are reporting negatively in various mental health outcomes. For example:

- Only 43% of transgender American Indian/Alaska Native students reported not experiencing suicidal ideation, compared to 83% of non-transgender American Indian/Alaska Native students.

- Only 25% of bisexual Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students reported not experiencing chronic sadness, compared to 65% of straight Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students.

These intra-racial disparities are seen across indicators, with transgender and sexual minority students across races tending to fare worse than their non-transgender and straight peers. In 2022, Governor Newsom announced the "Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health,"[12] with a $4.7 billion commitment to increasing mental health supports for youth. It is key that these resources be invested in youth who need it most, like LGBTQ+ youth.

Transgender Youth Lack School Supports

School climate factors, specifically the presence of caring adults can mitigate unsupportive school environments. For example, the presence of at least one caring adult was found to reduce the risk of a suicide attempt among LGBTQ+ youth by 40 percent.[13] However, transgender youth were far less likely than non-transgender youth in being able to identify a "caring adult" – defined as a school staff person who the student believed to care about their wellbeing and success.

Students Who Reported Having a Caring Adult in their School Environment by Gender Identity and Race/Ethnicity
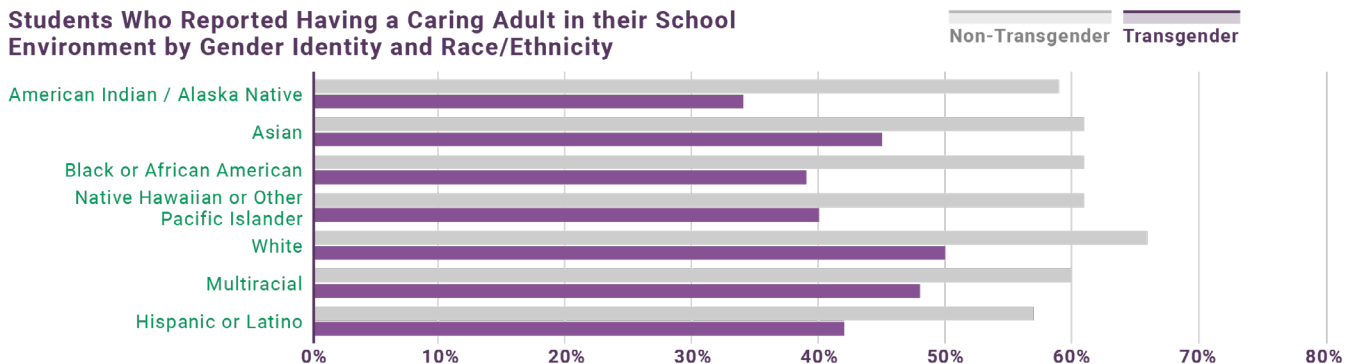
Racial and ethnic identity were also correlated with disparities in youth experience. Both white transgender and white non-transgender students were the most likely to be able to identify a caring adult, compared to their peers of color.

Out of all racial and ethnic subpopulations, Black/African American transgender youth reported the most negatively, with two-thirds not able to identify a caring adult within their school. American Indian/Alaska Native transgender youth had the most disparate experiences in comparison to their non-transgender counterparts, with a 25-percentage-point difference.

Students Who Reported Feeling a Sense of School Connectedness by Race/Ethnicity
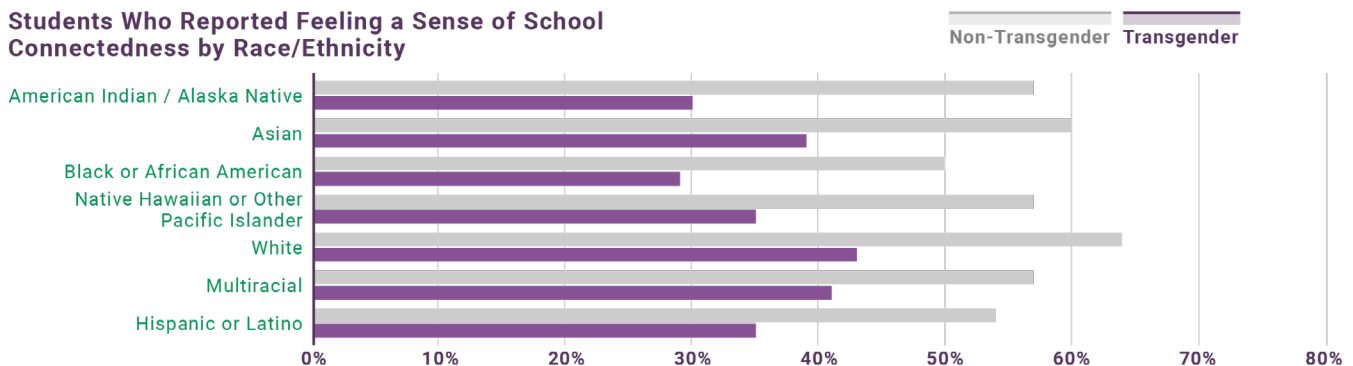
More generally, transgender students also reported a lack of school connectedness—students' belief that adults at school care about them as individual learners and people. Across all racial and ethnic identities, transgender students were less likely to report feeling close to others, like they belonged, and that they were happy in their school environment. Transgender students of color, and Black/African American transgender students especially, had the lowest positive response to the survey item.

**Addressing School Climate Will Likely Play an Important Role in Eliminating Disparities**

The 2019 WestEd report "Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ Students in California" found[14] that if the data were adjusted so that transgender and non-transgender students experienced the same level of school supports and safety at school:

- Disparities in school connectedness would be eliminated;
- Disparities in mental health, academic motivation, and middle school academic performance would be reduced by 50 percent;
- Disparities in school absence and high school academic performance would be reduced by 25 and 30%.

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Tend to Report Less School Supports

Lack of school supports was also reported by sexual minority youth. Typically, straight students reported having a caring adult at rates higher than those of lesbian, gay and, bisexual students.[15] Furthermore, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students tended to feel less connected to their school than straight students, with American Indian/ Alaska Native and Black/African American lesbian, gay, and bisexual students being especially at risk.

Students Who Reported Having a Caring Adult in their School Environment by Gender Identity and Race/Ethnicity

Straight   Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual
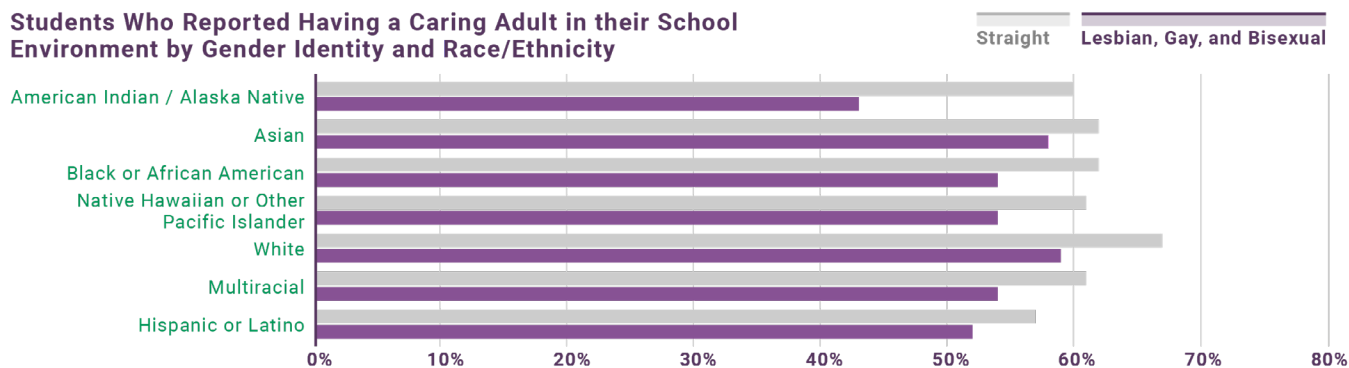
Students who Reported Feeling a Sense of School Connectedness by Sexual Identity and Race/Ethnicity

Straight   Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual
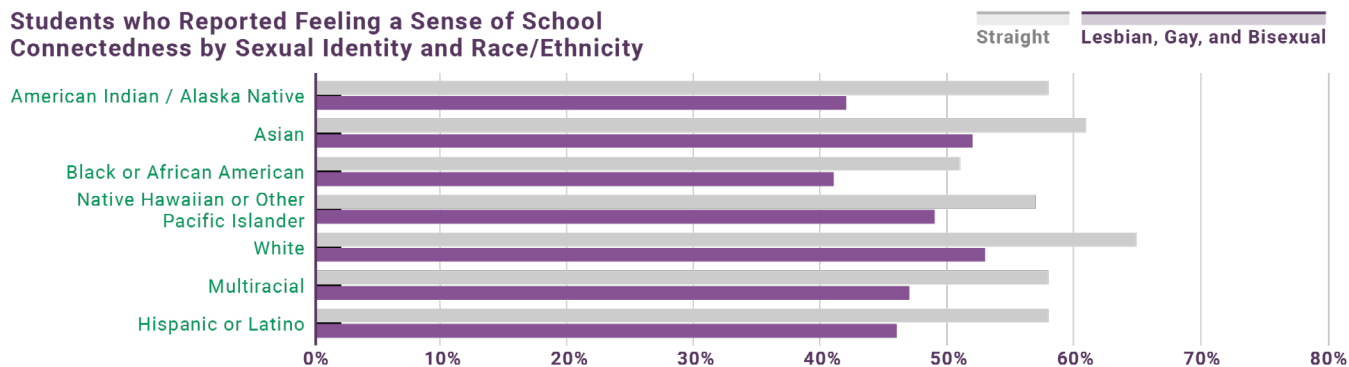
Disparate Experiences for Lesbian/Gay and Bisexual Youth

Across all indicators, straight students tended to fare better in school environments than lesbian, gay, and bisexual students.[16] However, schools and educators must take care to not collapse the experiences of youth along the sexuality spectrum into a singular sexual minority experience. When data on lesbian/gay youth are split from data on bisexual youth, richer detail on their disparate experiences is revealed.

- Within racial and ethnic groups, bisexual students reported experiencing chronic sadness more than lesbian/gay students, with an average disparity of 13 percentage points.
- Within racial and ethnic groups, lesbian/gay students reported fearing physical violence more than bisexual students, with an average disparity of 7 percentage points.

LGBTQ+ Youth Need Support as They Move Through the School System

As LGBTQ+ youth age and move through the school system, the negative experiences they report persist.[17] For example, only 44% of lesbian/gay middle schoolers reported feeling safe or very safe in their school environment. Similarly, only 47% of lesbian/gay high schoolers reported the same. It is imperative that schools continue to offer supports to LGBTQ+ students as they move from one grade to the next. Examining the disparate and intersectional experiences of LGBTQ+ youth is key in dismantling the systems that create worse mental, interpersonal, and academic outcomes.

District Spotlight: Sacramento City Unified School District – Connect Center

Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) serves over 40,000 students.[18] To address the needs of those students who identify as LGBTQ+, leaders within the district developed the LGBTQ Support Services program,[19] as a service of the Connect Center.[20] Since its formation in 2010, the LGBTQ Support Services program has served hundreds of students and families who need advocates.

Community-building is central to the work in SCUSD. Each month, the LGBTQ Support Services program hosts a taskforce meeting, where students, Genders and Sexuality Alliance clubs (GSAs), community partners, and staff within the district discuss what steps can be taken to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ youth and families. The program also hosts a free yearly Youth Leadership Conference for students in the district to meet one another and safely share their experiences. These opportunities can be transformative for LGBTQ+ students. "I know of students who have come from different school districts that didn't have (LGBTQ+ affirming) policies or where they didn't know who they could receive support from. It is nice to show community to these kids, what it looks like to ask for help, and the kind of treatment that they're deserving of," Daniel Buffington, Student and Family Support Specialist of the Connect Center, said.[21]

Conversations like these spurred the LGBTQ Support Services program's work to help develop the SCUSD Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Student policy.[22] For many transgender and gender diverse students, the lack of facility access and identity-affirming support is a significant barrier to school-connectedness. This policy enumerates the right to have non-legal documents reflect students' affirmed name and gender identity and the right to use facilities that align with their gender identity.

The work of the LGBTQ Support Services program also relies on the involvement of educators, many of whom are newly learning how to best support their LGBTQ+ students. In staff trainings, Buffington noticed, "Sometimes, people are unsure of where to start when it comes to supporting LGBTQ+ youth because they may not have a shared language surrounding identity. What's important is that the humanity of LGBTQ+ youth is honored and protected".[23]

For districts who want to better support their students, Laura Magana, School Social Worker, offered key advice —"I encourage people to reach out and start organizing within their own districts as well as consulting with people who are already doing this work. That is where the growth really happened in our program, centering the youth and building community with partner agencies that share the same values. The people that came before us and made our policy a reality were committed in hearing directly from students and lifting up their needs".[24]

While Protections for LGTBQ+ Youth Exist, More Reform is Needed

Since 1972 and the implementation of Title IX, numerous policies across the decades have strengthened the protection of California's LGBTQ+ students. Despite these protective policies, LGBTQ+ youth report exceedingly negative experiences in schools. Legislators, school administrators, and educators should consider the following recommendations when developing new policy and strengthening existing policy.

Develop a framework for LGBTQ+ inclusive classrooms. This could include several components such as:

1. Increase educators' knowledge related to the experiences of LGTBQ+ youth;
2. Create intentional interactions that demonstrate a commitment to LGBTQ+ youth;
3. Utilize instructional practices to develop awareness and understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences;
4. Create schoolwide policies that support LGBTQ+ youth, especially youth who may experience multiple forms of marginalization, like LGBTQ+ foster youth.

Research suggests that LGBTQ+ youth experience high rates of victimization and abuse from their families,[25] and as a result, are overrepresented in the foster care system. Around 30% of foster youth self-identified as LGBTQ+ in an analysis of the 2013-15 California Healthy Kids Survey.[26] LGBTQ+ youth in the child welfare system report high rates of mistreatment in both their home placements[27] and their schools. A report found that, "Compared with heterosexual youth in foster care and LGBTQ youth in stable housing, LGBTQ youth in foster care reported more fights in school…more victimization…(and) were also more likely to have been depressed or suicidal."[28] While the Foster Youth Bill of Rights in California[29] includes protections against discrimination that is both inclusive of gender and sexual orientation, schools must provide more support to eliminate the oppression LGTBQ+ youth in foster care experience in both the home and school realms.

Create support networks, such as the following:

1. Create clubs such as a Genders and Sexuality Alliance;
2. Establish networks/groups to engage and support families;
3. Join a network of other schools or districts;
4. Provide coordinated training for administration, teachers, faculty and staff on LGBTQ+ student needs and inclusive, affirming practices.
5. Create school board policies and procedures that clearly state that LGBTQ+ students will be supported and protected.

Seek and support training from outside organizations such as:

1. The Trevor Project
2. Gender Spectrum
3. Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)
4. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
5. The Human Rights Campaign
6. The Los Angeles LGBT Center, which hosts the annual Models of Pride Conference, the largest free youth LGBTQ+ conference in the world and includes learning tracks for school staff and parents.

Create safe environments for LGBTQ+ youth. This could include several components such as:

1. Having trustworthy adults who accept LGBTQ+ youth;
2. Creating an environment that affirms and supports LGBTQ+ youth;
3. Offering LGBTQ+ youth the ability to safely participate in extracurricular activities.

Credits and Acknowledgements

Children Now is on a mission to build power for kids. The organization conducts non-partisan research, policy development, and advocacy reflecting a whole-child approach to improving the lives of kids, especially kids of color and kids living in poverty, from prenatal through age 26.

Learn more at www.childrennow.org.

Endnotes

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Youth risk behavior surveillance system. https://www.cdc.gov/ healthyyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm
Note: Data provided by the California Department of Education, School Health Office through a special request. Please note that all numbers and percentages are only representative of California students grades 9-12 that are enrolled in traditional, public high schools. Charter, online/virtual, alternative, court-appointed, community-day, etc. schools and students are not included.

2. The Trevor Project. (2020). National survey on LGBTQ youth mental health. https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Trevor-Project-National-Survey-Results-2020.pdf

3. The Trevor Project. (2022). National survey on LGBTQ youth mental health.

4. The Trevor Project. (2023). National survey on LGBTQ youth mental health.

5. California Department of Education. (n.d.). Fingertip facts on education in California – Enrollment and number of public schools by type: 2022-23. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp. Retrieved April 2023.
Note: Figure was calculated by multiplying the average student enrollment per school (not including charter schools) by figure in endnote 1.

6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). 2019 California high school youth risk behavior survey data.   https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/app/Default.aspx

7. SB 107, Wiener https://sd11.senate.ca.gov/news/20220930-senator-wiener%E2%80%99s-historic-bill-provide-refuge-trans-kids-and-their-families-signed-law

8. Bouris, A., Everett, B. G., Heath, R. D., Elsaesser, C. E., & Neilands, T. B. (2016). Effects of victimization and violence on suicidal ideation and behaviors among sexual minority and heterosexual adolescents. LGBT Health, 3(2), 153–161.

9. "Non-transgender" can refer to individuals whose gender identity aligns with their sex at birth (cisgender) and those whose gender identity may not align with their sex at birth, but who feel that "transgender" does not accurately represent their identity.

10. Cerna, R., Stern, A., Austin, G., Betz, J., Zhang, G., & Hashmi, S. (2021, September). Understanding the experiences of lgbt high school students in California by race/ethnicity. WestEd.

11. Hanson, T., Zhang, G., Cerna, R., Stern, A., & Austin, G. (2019, October). Understanding the experiences of lgbt students in California. WestEd.

12. Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. (2022, August 18). Governor Newsom unveils new plan to transform kids' mental health. https://www.gov.ca.gov/2022/08/18/governor-newsom-unveils-new-plan-to-transform-kids-mental-health/

13. The Trevor Project. (2019, June 27). Accepting adults reduce suicide attempts among LGBTQ youth. https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/accepting-adults-reduce-suicide-attempts-among-lgbtq-youth/

14. WestEd recommends interpreting the link between school supports, safety, and other outcomes with caution. This link was correlational and not causal.

15. To get a figure for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, Children Now took a simple average of figures for lesbian/gay students and bisexual students. Therefore, the lesbian, gay, and, bisexual student average should be interpreted as an estimate that might differ from the true figure.

Endnotes (continued)

16. Cerna, R., Stern, A., Austin, G., Betz, J., Zhang, G., & Hashmi, S. (2021, September). Understanding the experiences of lgbt high school students in California by race/ethnicity. WestEd.

17. Hanson, T., Zhang, G., Cerna, R., Stern, A., & Austin, G. (2019, October). Understanding the experiences of lgbt students in California. WestEd.

18. California Department of Education, DataQuest. Enrollment data – annual enrollment data 2021-22. https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/

19. Sacramento City Unified School District. (n.d.). LGBTQ support services. https://www.scusd.edu/lgbtq-support-services

20. Sacramento City Unified School District. (n.d.). The connect center. https://www.scusd.edu/connect-center

21. Daniel Buffington, personal communication, October 20, 2022

22. Sacramento City Unified School District. (2018, June 7). Board policy: Transgender and gender non-conforming students. https://www.scusd.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/approved_-_bp_5145.31-_transgender_non-conforming.pdf?1571171893

23. Daniel Buffington, personal communication, October 20, 2022

24. Laura Magana, personal communication, October 20, 2022

25. Friedman, M.S., Marshal, M.P., Guadamuz, T. E., Wei, C., Wong, C.F., Saewyc, E. M., & Stall, R. (2011, October 20). A meta-analysis of disparities in childhood sexual abuse, parental physical abuse, and peer victimization among sexual minority and sexual nonminority individuals. American Journal of Public Health, 101(8), 1481-1494. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.190009

26. Baams, L., Wilson, B. D. M., & Russell, S. T. (2019, March 1). LGBTQ youth in unstable housing and foster care. Pediatrics 143(3). https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-4211

27. Wilson, B. D.M, Cooper, K., Kastanis, A., & Nezhad, S. (2014, August). Sexual and gender minority youth in foster care: Assessing disproportionality and disparities in Los Angeles. The Williams Institute. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/sgm-youth-la-foster-care/

28. A meta-analysis of disparities in childhood sexual abuse, parental physical abuse, and peer victimization among sexual minority and sexual nonminority individuals. American Journal of Public Health, 101(8), 1481-1494. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.190009

29. The California Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson. (n.d.). The foster youth bill of rights. https://fosteryouthhelp.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/276/2020/10/Foster-Youth-Bill-of-Rights-WIC-16001.9_ADAComplaint.pdf